

*The greatest of loves are
worth overcoming the most
difficult of obstacles.*

LIPS ON MY

A MERCY RAVENS MC NOVEL

SOUL

BOOK TWO

M.J. MARINO

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ART AND EDITING

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A SPECIAL THANKS TO THOSE WHO HELPED
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Cover Design: Amy Queau of qcoverdesign.com

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tesseraeditorial.com and yasedits.com

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DEDICATION

For Evelyn.

I hold you forever in my heart.

May you live on through my stories.

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THANK YOU

Hello Lovely Reader,

I wanted to personally thank you for purchasing my second self-published novel. It means so much to me that you're reading something of mine, and I appreciate it from the bottom of my heart.

I've come a long way from the mousey hobby writer I once was, to self-published author I am today. Needless to say, the journey has been well worth all the work. Every step has been a learning experience—some good, some bad—but every stride has made my dream a reality. Writing sensual romances for readers like you, is totally worth the sleepless nights, emotional-overloads, and the love/hate relationship which I have with my computer.

What's the best part? When I hear how much you enjoyed the book. Gets me in the feels every time. Knowing I've written something you love as much as I do...there's no greater feeling as an author.

If you haven't read Lips on my Heart, I would strongly encourage you to start from the beginning. Is it mandatory? No, but like every good book series, the base is important, and book 1 gives you the fundamentals to understanding the complexity of Josephine and Maceo's relationship.

Josephine and Maceo are near and dear to my heart. When I started this project, I knew that I would dedicate the first three novels in the series to them before writing about the other characters in the Mercy Ravens MC. With the second book complete, and the third underway, I get a little misty-

eyed. It will be hard moving on, but the other MC members' stories are screaming at me to be written and shared.

My wish for you, dear reader, is that you get lost in the fantasy, place yourself in the characters' shoes, and live a different life, if only for a moment.

Enjoy!

— M.J. Marino

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Their love story continues...

Maceo and Josephine have overcome so much in their new romance, but their challenges are far from over—if anything, their troubles are only starting.

The headstrong and independent, Josephine Holland, is a former shell of herself after surviving her stalker, plagued by night terrors and an uneasiness of something—*someone*—lurking in the shadows. Josephine can't help but feel she is losing her grip on sanity, fearing the worst is yet to come.

The love of her life and president of the Mercy Ravens MC, Maceo Tabares, refuses to sit back and watch her shrink inside the recesses of her mind. He takes command and helps her to remember the woman she was before her abduction, and stands by her side as she rebuilds herself into someone stronger than she could have ever imagined.

However, Maceo has not made it this long in his life without listening to his instincts. Taking a page out of Josephine's book, Maceo follows the illogical route, taking Josephine's fears seriously, and digs to discover the root of her worries is far more serious than her imagination.

With Josephine's estranged family back in the picture, wedding preparations going amuck, unplanned construction projects, Mercy Ravens missions, spies creeping, leaked personal files, and a hacker causing all kinds of mayhem, life throws Maceo and Josephine lots of hilarious curveballs and heart-shattering moments. And of course, there's always Esteban Moreno to worry about.

But a threat closer to home may be their biggest obstacle—mafioso Don, Lorenzo Bianchi. Lorenzo's unhealthy attachment to Josephine is only growing by the day, and he has no intentions on backing off, no matter how many threats Maceo makes.

Will Josephine be able to overcome her personal fears and use the safety techniques that Maceo has taught her to protect herself from all those who wish to harm her? Will Maceo be able to help Josephine to heal emotionally from her past trauma so she can move forward? Are they doomed to fall apart at the hands of their enemies, or will love, once again, triumph?

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PROLOGUE

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Lorenzo strains his eyes to find the little vixen who stole his heart a little over a year ago. Men muddle about, covered in dirt and sweat from their grueling construction work, but the five-foot-nothing slip of a woman is nowhere in sight.

He grinds his teeth. He's completely off his game, utterly out of sorts, all because a woman told him *no*.

Josephine Holland flipped his switch the moment she walked into his restaurant with her drafting program detailing his new casino. Lorenzo remembers sitting there awestruck by her beauty, and wondering where the fuck the man he hired for the job was. Undoubtedly, the designer he had been communicating with through emails and texts had sent this *bellezza* to sweeten the deal and win him the contract. Still, Lorenzo was a businessman and didn't appreciate working with someone who hadn't shown his face.

Lorenzo raised a hand to stop the woman mid-speech. "Excuse me? You're doing a fine job, Signorina..."

"Josephine," she reminded him with a gorgeous smile.

His cock twitched in his slacks at the notion of having those rosy lips around his cock. "Giuseppina," he said like a caress. "Why is Signore Holland not presenting? I don't like doing business with faceless names. It's a waste of my time."

Her gorgeous smile morphed into a tight line, and her eyes flared. "Mister Bianchi—"

"Lorenzo," he interrupted, giving her a charming smirk.

The *bellezza's* jaw ticked. “Lorenzo, Mister Holland will not be joining because Mister Holland isn’t a mister but a miss.”

Lorenzo’s eyes bulged with surprise. “You’re Jo?”

Giuseppina shrugged her shoulders, cocking an attitude. “The one and only.”

Astounded, he stared at her. This vixen bamboozled him—not something which had happened before.

Typically, after projects like this were completed, he’d empty a round into the engineer to ensure his secret gambling rings would remain undisclosed. However, this woman would be the exception. It wasn’t because she was a woman—heavens no—he had killed his fair share of men and women without blinking an eye.

But, this woman seemed to be completely on board with the project, realizing the risk it could mean for her career. She never once stated what he requested was illegal or showed concern for herself. No, this mysterious stranger was all about the business: How much square footage? How many craps tables? Will there be slots?

While messaging his wishes for the casino, Lorenzo had a hunch he’d finally found his forever engineer. The designer seemed to grasp every desire he requested. Now, a woman—a sinfully, sexy woman—revealed she was the faceless name making his dreams a reality, and he knew instantly she would be his partner in crime.

Lorenzo’s eyes trailed longingly over her fit body, perk and luscious in all the right places. He had bedded many women—countless—but he had yet to meet a woman who could handle his line of work. But before him stood a goddess who didn’t blink an eye when he revealed who he was and what illegal activity would take place in his new business development. Either she was extremely desperate to land the job, or she was...

A slow smile crept across his face. “*Dove sei stato tutta la mia vita?*”

Her brows pulled together. “I’m sorry. I don’t speak Italian.”

“I said, ‘how soon can you start, Pina?’” he lied smoothly.

Lorenzo chuckles at the memory, recalling how Pina worked tirelessly on the build, creating a casino straight out of the golden age of Las Vegas, *The Rat Pack*. As a mafia Don, this was the start of Lorenzo’s golden goose era. He already had casinos in Aspen, Denver, and Colorado Springs, but with Giuseppina and her ingenious engineering architectural designs, he could take over Colorado and force his competition out.

Smitten, he asked her to dinner and nearly rocked backed on his heels when she flat out said no. No one had turned him down before. Figuring she was playing hard to get, he asked her the next day, and again he was told no. Every time he asked, the answer was the same and never in his favor.

When Lorenzo’s charms failed, he showered her with gifts. What woman didn’t like having a man spend money on her? He sent her flowers—she told him not to. He sent her candy—she shared it with her construction crew. He sent her clothes and jewelry—she returned them. Lorenzo got pissed and started a reoccurring order for red roses to be sent to her home weekly with a card asking for a date. She said *no* way more than he cared to admit. He sent her one last card stating his offer was on the table for whenever she was ready—she never responded, and he still sent her flowers.

He couldn’t understand it. Why wouldn’t she take a chance on him? He’s an attractive man—extremely, some would say. Yes, he’s older by ten years, and he lived a playboy lifestyle, but he’s in the prime of his life, in tip-top shape, and willing to commit to her. He’s wealthy, successful, and feared by his enemies—he’s the total package.

What fucking gives?

Toward the completion of the project, Lorenzo bombarded her one night as she was leaving the site. He demanded to know what her reservations were. Her fiery blue eyes told him she didn’t want to get into it, but he was relentless.

“One,” she snapped, raising a finger in his face. “I don’t date clients. Two, I don’t have to say yes because you ask or give gifts. Three, I recently got out of an eight-year relationship, and I’m not looking to get involved with anyone. Don’t get in my face demanding shit you’re not entitled to. I work for you—it’s not going to happen.”

What the fuck?! Was she actually speaking to him this way? No one had the gall to put him in his place, but this woman...*whoa*. She was fire and brimstone, and it was desirable. He must have her.

The rejection stung, and though she listed her reasons, Lorenzo wasn’t easily swayed. For the remainder of the project, he supervised her progress. She was an enigma, and he needed to understand what made her tick and use it to his advantage. She was not amused, but Lorenzo needed to wear her down and strike when the iron was hot. Of course, he continued to send her flowers—she needed reminders he was still interested, *very* interested. But as the project wrapped up, Lorenzo still was at a loss as to how to win her over.

In a moment of desperation, he approached her general contractor, Jared. He noted the two coworkers were close, going out on Fridays after work for happy hour and such. Jared was his best bet for getting answers. He asked her friend why she wouldn’t give him a shot, and Jared’s response was a sucker punch to the gut.

“Because you remind her of her ex.”

Fanculo! “Can you elaborate?”

Jared answered with a deadpan face. “You’re a man of power who uses it to your advantage, and you don’t care who you step on to rise to the top.”

Lorenzo scratched his jaw, mulling it over. What Jared said was true, but Lorenzo wasn’t following. Was she scared he was a mob boss? By how fast she snatched up the job and openly communicated with him on the project, he found it hard to believe. He looked at her coworker, deciding there must be a backstory. “What did the *coglione* do to her?”

“They worked in the same design firm. Jo did all the work, and Jacob swiped it out from under her. He got the promotion, expecting Jo to work under him after his betrayal.”

Jared braved a step closer to him. “Jo’s not a pretty thing you use to your advantage and keep under your thumb. She could give a rat’s ass about how much you have in your accounts. She has more respect for a man who works with his hands, than a man calling the shot wearing the fancy suit. Jo’s her own woman and doesn’t need anyone in her life dictating her decisions. If you’re looking for arm candy, she’s not your girl.”

Annoyance festered in Lorenzo. How could this beautiful woman prefer blue-collar? If she were given the opportunity to be more, why wouldn’t she?

Of course, she would because that’s smart business. If she had the right man to guide her and set her path, she would surely be running her own firm and not this start-up company.

But between Pina and Jared, one thing was made clear. She needed time to get over her ex. Her relating Lorenzo to her past boyfriend would never bode well for him. Time would lessen the comparison, he hoped.

Lorenzo sighs as he comes out of his daydreaming. He blames himself for not keeping a closer eye on her—he was too focused on his new business endeavors, assuming she would come to him when she was ready. Perhaps he could have prevented the relationship from forming between her and the biker swine had he paid more attention.

Pina didn’t date clients, but he claimed her anyways, like a Neanderthal. *Filthy bastard!* There’s no doubt in Lorenzo’s mind Atlas forced his way into her life, giving her no escape but to yield.

His poor sweet Pina, subjected to the likes of Atlas’s lot—president of a motorcycle gang consisting of vigilante rebels. It made Lorenzo irate.

Lorenzo could kill the dirty biker for putting his hands on his woman. He certainly strategized all the ways to end Atlas’s

life, practically salivating over it. However, Atlas has deep connections to the military and the FBI. There would be no way of ending him without it coming back to bite Lorenzo in the ass.

Giuseppina may wear Atlas's ring, but she is all Lorenzo's. The sooner he could convince her to choose him, the sooner he'd be able to lock her away and keep her safe—preferably to his bed where he can stuff her full of his cock every hour of the day.

He could take her, it would be easy, but Lorenzo is not a man who needs to force a woman. He isn't her ex, nor will he give her reason to assume he is anything like the vile man. It's pertinent she comes to him willingly. *She has to.*

Lorenzo winces, recalling how she was abducted while under the care of one of his bodyguards. What could drive a man to such measures to take a woman against her will?

Pina's face flashes in his mind, and the answer is obvious. A man desperate to possess her could be driven to do anything—a man like him.

It's difficult for Lorenzo to not feel guilty for what happened. It's not an emotion he thought he possessed. He sacked Tiny Tony for his incompetence in protecting Pina, but refrained from following through with a hit. Had Giuseppina not shown an attachment to the brute, he would be floating down the Cache la Poudre River.

Instead, Lorenzo banished Tony from the family. In mob life, it's the biggest disgrace for a member, but oddly, Tony looked relieved, which made no sense to Lorenzo.

As big of a failure as Tony was, Atlas was equally at fault. He was there, present for the whole fucking show, and he still let her bastard ex nab her. Atlas should have watched her closer. He should have done more.

Atlas is the most at fault and the reason for her current mental state. Lorenzo's sources informed him that her counseling sessions had not been helping lately. Had Atlas done his damn job, Pina wouldn't be suffering like this.

Lorenzo clenches his fist, his nails cutting into his skin. The woman needs to be kept in a gilded cage; only let out when extreme precautions are taken. He knows he can do a better job of protecting her than the asshole she's engaged to. Shit, if she were any tinier, he would've tucked her in his coat pocket and carry her around with him at all times.

His eyes catch the sight of a long ashen braid and skinny jean-clad legs. Why she insists on slumming with her workers, he'll never understand. A woman like her should be wearing the finest silks and polished to perfection—not dressed in tattered rags and doing manual labor.

Did she honestly prefer blue-collar? Is this why she chose Atlas? Does the biker truly accept her the way she is when she could be so much more?

Pina moves around the site, shouting over the noise, and giving instructions. Lorenzo's heart races from seeing her hard at work, doing what she can to make her business flourish. He admires her dedication. Jared said she's not to be used for his advancing, but he'll make sure to utilize her talents while she stands by his side expanding his empire—*their* empire.

A roar of a hideous Harley Davidson approaching the property catches Lorenzo's attention. There's no mistaking who sits upon it. Atlas has returned from wherever he disappeared. He's been gone three nights, and it appears Pina isn't pleased to see him.

Where was he the last few days? It's not like Atlas to stay away from Giuseppina for any length of time, especially after her attack. Lorenzo's sources informed him Esteban Moreno is in South America and not in his safe house in the state, meaning Atlas wasn't tracking him. What could have possibly been so important to have him leave the *bellezza* in the hands of his men?

He's not sure, but he'll find out. He wraps his knuckles on the partition in the back of the semi cab where he sits, informing the delivery driver to roll out. With one last look at the woman who will share his future, he smirks.

A man in his position always enjoys a good challenge.

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CHAPTER ONE

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“Where the hell have you been?!”

It's not the homecoming welcome I had hoped for, but it's the one I expected from my feisty, independent bride-to-be. I was gone for four days—one more day than I planned—and my Pixie is pissed.

Not any kind of pissed—we're talking mega, flip her braid, hand on hip, you're not getting sex tonight kind of pissed. Her attitude is adorable, and I find it irresistible.

I get her anger. I left shortly after the Jacob fiasco. I didn't want to go, but I felt compelled to start reconciling the feud between Josephine and her family. They're remorseful and love their daughter. After everything that happened with her ex, Jo needs extra love and support. She fucking deserves it.

Josephine and I have pretty much been inseparable for weeks, more so since the abduction. The extra day away added stress she didn't need, but I couldn't explain why I needed the additional time without her becoming suspicious. I sent her a vague text saying we would be one more day and didn't elaborate why.

Of course, this upset her because I had already promised my trip would be three days tops. And now she's letting me see exactly how angry she is.

The alpha asshole in me doesn't give a shit if she's going to rip me a new one. I'm going to love on my woman. We both need it.

How do I know this? We both have the same tells, rubbing our chest where our hearts ache to reconnect. She's upset, yes, but she needs me.

I climb off my hog and swagger toward Josephine, taking in her alluring form. She's looking sexy as fuck standing there in her tight construction clothes and messy French braid.

When I get within reach, I gently grab her by the waistband of her jeans, drag her small frame against mine, hold her in place, and bend to claim her rosy lips. More than once, she has told me not to treat her with kid gloves post-Jacob, but it's still difficult to revert to my typical domineering behavior with her. She was assaulted. How can I not proceed with caution?

When I sense her stiffening, I break contact and look into her eyes. I need to assess if she's okay with this or if I need to back the fuck off. Josephine responds by wrapping one arm around my neck, pulling me back in.

Game on! I slant my mouth over hers and start devouring her. It's not long 'till she's gripping my shirt in her tiny fist and kissing me back with as much gusto.

All too quickly, the kiss ends, and she pushes away from my chest, recalling she's an angry sprite.

Damn. I was hoping for more cuddles before having to face her wrath.

I bite back a growl building in my throat, not because I'm angry she shoved me, but because her aggression turns me on, and I want her to take it all out on me. The woman could slap me across the face if she wanted, and my cock would go rock hard, I swear.

I'm trying so hard to behave right now for her, and she's making it fucking difficult when she's like this. Feisty Josephine is hot as hell, and seeing my woman sporting her pre-Jacob-attack temperament makes my heart swell with hope.

Maybe she's serious about picking up where our relationship left off, leaving what happened in the past. Too

bad, I'm too scared to test the theory this soon after everything.

“You don't get the right to any more kisses without explaining yourself. I asked you where you have been, Maceo! You promised me you'd be gone for three days—not four. You role your tardy ass in here, acting like you're fashionably late, and believe you can kiss your way into my good graces? Well, fuck that and fuck you!”

She turns on her heels to stomp away, but I snatch her by her slender waist and sweep her up in a threshold carry.

Typically, I would throw her over my shoulder and slap her hard on her fabulous round bottom. However, she's still recovering from broken ribs, and I don't want to investigate smacking her peach anytime soon. My girl survived a beating from a predator, for crying out loud. I don't want to give her any reason to be alarmed.

She scowls and folds her arms. “Put me down, you beast.”

“Never, Pixie.” I have a proud smile on my mug, nodding at the guys around the site. They all snigger, shaking their heads, and watch me carry off their boss. Jared, the general contractor, rolls his eyes but gives me a little salute when I stroll past.

At my hog, I put her on her dainty feet and swing my leg over the seat. “Get on,” I command.

She gives me a huff and plants her steel-toed boots firmly in the dirt. She has no intention of doing anything I ask—*defiant little hellcat*.

Chuckling, I lift her under her arms, hoisting her onto the front of my motorcycle, and make her straddle my lap. Quickly, I rev the engine, coasting us out of the work zone, and onto the open highway.

Hitting the throttle, Josephine squeals when the bike opens up. Her grip tightens around me in this new position, making her perky breasts press flush against my chest. My cocky grin spreads.

Gauge, my second-in-command and best friend, split once we reached home in Fort Collins, Colorado. He went to the club rental to get his hands on his girl, Opal. And I headed to the new location of the Mercy Ravens MC Security headquarters, where Josephine is my architectural engineer.

Mine and Josephine's destination isn't the rental. There's one place I can ravage my fiancée without interruption, and we're heading there now.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrive at Josephine's condo where a *for sale* sign is posted in the front yard. I hoist Josephine from my lap and climb off, carrying her around my waist to the front door. Using the key she gave me, I let us in and close the door with my boot. I press her against the door and breathe in her citrus scent, letting her fragrance assault my senses.

God, how I crave her. I instantly chastise myself. I need to put my woman's needs first and not lead with the head between my legs.

Oh, she's still salty, glaring at me, but her body betrays her. Her hot sex grinds against my growing erection hidden behind my jeans, and her arms circle my neck to pull me closer. I lean forward and trail soft kisses along her neck, reveling in her shivers of pleasure.

My lips press to her ear. "I'm sorry I ran behind." She quivers, her skin pebbling in goosebumps.

She pouts. "You better be."

"Are you more angry or annoyed?"

"It's equal."

I pull back, raising my eyebrow at her in a challenge. I know what her angry body language looks like, and this ain't it.

"Fine," she says with an eye roll. "I'm more annoyed, but I'm pissed too. Going an extra day was...difficult for me."

Aw! She missed me, and it's so damn cute. I can't help but nip at her puckered lips. She yelps in surprise and smashes her lips to mine.

Damn, how I've missed the taste of her lemony lip balm. I groan and she takes advantage of my open mouth, swiping her tongue against mine, making my needy cock strain harder against the zipper of my pants.

Grabbing her luscious ass, I carry her in my arms and walk us to the bedroom, navigating around all the packed boxes the MC bunnies have been working dutifully on. I reach the bedroom and—*hallelujah*—the bed is still up, sans the sheets, but it will work for what I've got planned.

I gently lay her on the mattress, removing her work clothes and boots. Sprawled out naked across the bed, slender and curvy in all the right places, she fulfills my wildest dreams. I pull my shirt over my head, and I hear a moan of pleasure escape her lips.

Christ, she's good for my ego. I know it makes me sound like a narcissistic asshole, but my woman makes me feel like a goddamn king when we're together. And every king needs a queen to cherish.

My eyes return to her, and I'm rewarded by the sight of her slender fingers working her clit in tight circles. Her eyes lock onto mine and her mouth is open, panting.

Fuck, I'm going to nut in my jeans.

I practically rip off the rest of my clothes like the Incredible Hulk, eager to join her. A growl rumbles from my lungs when I climb over her body, yanking her hand away from her mound. "That's my job."

She giggles and arches her back, coaxing me into position. I trace kisses along her body, nipping at her narrow hips, before parting her glistening lips to her delectable wet pussy. Her musky arousal hits my nose and I inhale deeply, savoring her intimate and rich bouquet—it's enough to make a man feral.

"Don't go easy on me because I don't plan on going easy on you," she purrs.

Fuuuck! She doesn't know what she's asking. Why is she tempting me this way? No, I need to tame myself and let

Josephine's actions guide me.

I need to taste her, to have her on my taste buds.

Using my tongue, I rim her entrance before forking it and diving in. Josephine gasps and practically levitates off the bed, sending my tongue deeper into her warm apex.

God, she tastes delicious.

“Mmm. Sugar and cream,” I groan against her with pleasure, my tongue swiping at her pearl. “My favorite dessert.”

Josephine mewls with enjoyment, making me chuckle until she pulls away.

The fuck she going?

Displeased, I'm about to ask her why she's pulling away, but she spins around 'till she's lying sideways with her head by my crotch. My heart goes into overdrive when her tongue snakes out and swipes at the tip of my stiff cock.

“Aw, shit, baby!” I choke with lust. I dive my tongue back into her pussy to complete the sixty-nine position.

Her skilled tongue circles around the head of my engorged penis, lapping up my precome. She moans when she tastes me, driving me wild with need. My eyes widen once I take stock of her juices dripping from her tight pussy. I absolutely love how Josephine gets off on tasting my spunk. She does a man proud.

After torturing my frenum piercing with several quick flicks of her tongue—making my cock weep with excitement—she takes all nine-inches of me in her mouth, and down her hot throat where I bottom out.

“Fucking hell, Pixie!” I won't last long with her working my dick this way.

Thankfully, I know how to get her into a tizzy quickly. I point my long tongue and flick the tip of her precious nub frenziedly, my tongue piercing hitting her clit precisely in the center.

Josephine screams like I shocked her sex with a live wire. With my cock buried deep in her throat, her cries send heavenly vibrations along my shaft.

Jesus, this woman is trying to kill me.

Eager to get her over the edge, I hollow my cheeks, sucking her clit into my mouth. Josephine's legs jerk wildly as she comes, her cream gushing from her sweet pussy all over my mouth. I work to slurp up all her delicious juices with my keen tongue.

Her orgasm triggers my release, shooting my thick load into her mouth. She swallows every last drop before slowly pulling my dick back 'till only my bulbous tip is left in her mouth. Our languid tongues continue to tease our sexes as we come down from the orgasmic high.

Spent, I roll on my back. My dick pulls out of Josephine's hot mouth with a wet pop. She turns around and snuggles into my side, and I wrap her in my arms. Her slender hand cups my cheek and I lean in to claim her lips in a long, unhurried kiss. We sigh, sated.

We've only been together not quite twelve weeks, and each time we have sex, I become more certain this woman was explicitly designed for me. Josephine is the only woman I've had more than a one night stand with, and the only one to whom I've given my heart. I love her with every fiber of my being and can't imagine my life without her by my side.

From the moment my eyes locked on her at the running trail, I knew she was mine. It wasn't the first touch, or kiss, or fuck which told me, but the first eye contact. Some call it love at first sight, and I have to agree to some extent, but it was more. It was this overwhelming sense of *knowing* we were destined for each other, overtaking every notion I'd had about never tying myself to a woman.

Josephine was the one who needed to be convinced to give us a shot. She was the more cautious one, balancing my yin with her yang, my dark with her light.

I'd always been a level headed person until she entered my life. She tends to make me unhinged, but I wouldn't have it any other way. In all areas of my life, I'm still in control, but in our relationship, Josephine is the voice of reason.

We've hit some bumps in the road in our budding relationship, but we walked away from all of it, stronger together. There are several hills we still need to conquer, but we'll make it.

Being away from her for four days was torture. It makes me concerned with how I'll handle being away for longer periods of time when on assignment.

Recently, I've been handling more of the local recon and security gigs, while the majority of my crew has been taking on more of the hired-gun missions. I prefer to lead my team on the more dangerous jobs, it's my job to watch out for all my brothers, but I hate being away from Josephine while she's at work for the day.

How the hell am I going to handle days, weeks, and months away on missions? I need to work, and I need to lead my men. It's something I'll need to sort out internally, and soon.

Josephine purrs before kissing my tattoo of her lips over my heart. "I've missed you."

My heart leaps. "Oh, baby, I've *missed* you, too."

She tilts her beautiful oval face to look into my eyes. "Why did you need an extra day?"

Aw, hell. I knew the conversation was inevitable, but I hoped to put it off a little bit longer, giving me more time to love on Josephine before she goes all banshee—not that it isn't deserved.

Josephine believes Gauge and I were meeting with a client when I told her I was heading to Los Angeles for a meeting – I didn't lie, but I didn't correct her either.

The real reason I went to L.A. was to confront her estranged parents, feel them out to see if they were worthy of coming back into her life. I learned quickly they fell for

Jacob's conniving lies, and were truly ashamed for their behavior toward their youngest daughter.

Next thing I knew, I was asking them properly for their daughter's hand and their blessing, inviting them to our wedding six weeks from now. To anyone else, this would be reasonable, but with the year-long feud between Josephine and her parents, it's going to be nothing less than a betrayal in her eyes.

I sincerely hope there's still a wedding after I confess what I've done.

Gulping, I sit up in the bed and rest my back against the headboard. Josephine sits up slowly, her aqua-blue eyes doubling in size.

"You look scared," she assesses aloud, a slight tremble in her voice. "Is it bad?"

I clear the thickness from my throat. "No, it's not bad. It's good, but it may be difficult for you to understand right away. Before I tell you, I want you to remember you love me and I love you."

"Maceo, you're making me nervous," she whispers.

Ha! She has no idea how nervous I am. I'm practically sweating. I kiss her hard before I rip off the band-aid.

"Iwentyvisityourparents," I spit out all at once.

Nothing.

Not one sound or movement from Josephine as she stares blankly at me.

My heart races and my palms grow moist, waiting for her to respond, but she does nothing. "Please say something, Pixie."

Slowly, her sun-kissed skin turns beet-red, and her costal eyes grow dark. *Oh, fuck.*

"You. Did. What?" She jumps off the bed and glares at me.

My hands rise in surrender. "Let me explain," I plead.

“Get out!” she squawks, pointing to the door.

I climb off the bed and try to reach for her, but she takes a giant step back. “I cannot believe you! You have *waaay* overstepped.” She bends to sweep up my clothes.

“Baby, please. I was only trying to help,” I beg. She thrusts my clothes into my gut, making me grunt.

Angry tears roll down her elfin face when she addresses me. “Help? Help! And going to my parents’ house to win them over helps me how? They treated me like shit after Jacob fucked me over, making me feel like it was entirely my fault, and telling me I was irrational for walking away from him and my job. I want nothing to do with them, Maceo!”

Distressed, I drop my clothes and try to pull her back in my arms. She slaps my hands away. “Don’t fucking touch me, you asshole!”

I should honor her request and back the hell off, but I can’t help myself. I’m desperate to make her realize I didn’t do this to hurt her intentionally.

As tenderly as I can without hurting her, I wrap Josephine in my iron-clad arms, holding her thrashing body against mine. It’s not the first time I’ve upset her and had to restrain her against me, but this is by far the most severe offense I’ve committed—well, aside from the time I hacked into her phone and accessed all her data. I take her fist poundings and shin kicks in stride, knowing they’re deserved because, in her eyes, I not only lied but betrayed her trust.

When she finally wears out, she slumps against me. I lower us back on the bed and cradle her in my arms.

Her face is puckered, still stewing. “Why?”

She deserves answers, and now with her exhausted, I can finally explain my actions.

“Pixie,” I coo. My fingers brush the flyaways from her face. “Family is important. Everyone in my immediate family is gone. I don’t want the same for you. I’d do anything to have my parents and *abuela* back. It’s the reason I formed my crew and latched on to you.

“You have every right to be angry with your parents and sister for how they treated you. I’m not asking you to forgive them. I only ask you to give them a chance to show you how sorry they are. They should apologize for their actions, and you deserve it, but the only way to get it is if you hear them out. Please, baby. You deserve peace. I don’t want you carrying around this resentment towards them—it’s dark and toxic, and you’re my light. I need you to try, please.”

She closes her eyes and shakes her head slowly. “I hate you right now.”

I understand. It hurts like hell to hear her say those words, but I accept them. I take peace in knowing she still loves me. Hate is not the opposite of love—indifference is. Her feeling ‘hate’ is only an emotion she’s having to the situation and nothing more. I hold her tighter and kiss her forehead.

We sit in silence for several minutes before Josephine stands to gather her clothes. I do the same and get dressed with her.

The air is still thick with the scent of our earlier lovemaking. I want nothing more than to bury myself deep inside of her, but the mood has sobered, and I can bet on not getting lucky with her again.

Once dressed, I follow Josephine from the bedroom to the living room, my eyes glued to the natural sway of her hips. I’m a perv because I can’t help myself, and I’m seriously freaking out with how she’s going to handle everything I dumped on her. I need the distraction to settle my nerves.

My eyes stay focused on her bottom all the way ‘till her grabbable ass plants itself on the couch. I groan internally and adjust myself through my jeans.

Josephine doesn’t say anything while she sits there, contemplating. I’ve learned my Pixie needs to internalize her stronger emotions and then express how she feels in a more productive manner.

I hate it. I want to know everything and anything she’s thinking, regardless if it’s nasty toward me or not. I do what I

usually do when she gets quiet—I pace.

Back and forth, I go.

I pace in front of her ‘till she can’t handle it anymore.

“Maceo, stop. You’re going to wear a hole in the carpet, and it won’t help my condo’s resale value,” Josephine mutters, still not looking at me.

My hands run through my hair. “I can’t help it, Pixie. I don’t like it when you go all quiet on me. Makes me nervous.” *And I hate it.* I hate how it puts me on edge, doubting myself and my ability to care for her the way she deserves.

Josephine closes her eyes and sighs heavily. “I need to work through my feelings without saying something I may regret.”

My Pixie does have a sharp tongue, but I’d take it over the silence treatment. Flustered, I groan. “Gah, I don’t want you to be mad at me.”

“Well, you should have considered my feelings before lying to me and going behind my back,” she seethes.

“I didn’t lie! I omitted. I told you I was meeting with some people in Los Angeles. You assumed it was work-related.”

Josephine throws a glare in my direction, which screams ‘Oh, please.’

“It’s not the same,” I argue, but Josephine doesn’t care about the technicality. I roll my eyes to the ceiling. “And I did think about you. The more I considered your feelings, the more certain I became about seeing this through. They owe you an apology for being shitty.”

“I deserve an apology from *you*,” she retorts.

I shake my head. “I’m not sorry I did it. I’m aware it sucks for you right now, but I did the right thing for everyone. I only regret hurting you in the process. But it will be worth it in the end, I promise.”

“Well, I guess you’ll have to live with my silent treatment ‘till I’m over it,” she chides.

Goddamn, this woman is extraordinarily stubborn! Yes, her anger is well deserved, and I accept it, but I hate it all the same.

I fall to my knees in front of her. “Baby, please don’t be angry with me.”

She glowers at me but doesn’t pull away when I reach for her hands. If she’s letting me touch her, it’s a good sign. Her wrath towards me may be coming to an end. *Thank fuck.*

“What did you say when you saw them?” she asks quietly, squeezing my hands.

I squeeze her right back, grateful for any attention she gives. “I introduced myself as your fiancé, and they let me in. They were aware of what happened with Jacob and tried to call you, but you blocked them,” I say, giving her a pointed look. I’ve been on her blocked call list before and understand how traumatizing it can be.

She shrugs. “They pissed me off the last time they called.”

I nod, remembering our engagement party when she went off on her dad over the phone. He asked if I was isolating her from her family, and my girl went savage. Josephine saying they pissed her off is an understatement. It was an epic bitch fest—one-sided of course, since Josephine dominated the argument.

“They asked what happened with Jacob and I told them.”

It’s not something I dwell on. Josephine goes to her counseling sessions and relives the moment when he kidnapped her, beat her, and nearly raped her often enough. She doesn’t need to be reminded of it any more than need be. I hate mentioning his name to her now.

Josephine shivers. I join her on the couch, wrapping my arms around her protectively. “What else?” she asks.

I kiss the end of her elfin nose. “I told them you were the love of my life, and I wanted their permission and blessing to marry you.”

Josephine rolls her blue eyes. “We already agreed you didn’t need to follow tradition.”

“Traditions are important,” I defend. “When we start our own family, I hope to make more traditions.”

Josephine looks away with a sigh. “What did they say when you asked them to marry me?”

I smirk. “Gave me their blessing and called me ‘son.’ Then they invited Gauge and me for dinner.”

Josephine’s head whips back to me so fast that I’m afraid she might snap her neck. “Nu-uh!”

My smile grows wider. “They insisted we stay the night before making the trip back home.”

Josephine’s pupils widen. “I don’t believe you.”

I chuckle, watching her tweak out. “Your dad makes a mean brisket and your mom’s cornbread is to die for.”

Josephine jumps to her feet. “Holy shit!”

“They love me, baby,” I say with a laugh. “And they’re excited about the wedding. I invited them and Simone. Now you can go ahead and order the invitations since we have our final count.”

Josephine’s hands fly to her head. “Oh. My. God!”

Smiling, I heave myself off the couch and pull her back into my arms. “You may want to ask your sister to be your maid of honor.”

“Don’t push your luck right now, Maceo,” she says with a grimace. “I don’t even know if I want my dad to give me away. And besides, I asked Jared to stand in as my man of honor and he accepted.”

I throw my head back and laugh, picturing my best friend standing up with a dude. “Not sure what Gauge will think about it, but he’ll deal.”

Josephine gnaws on her lower lip. “Do you believe I should be asking my sister to be in the wedding party?”

“I’m not telling you what to do. I only suggested it.”

“If—and this is a very big if—if Simone and I resolve our issues and I ask her to stand in as my maid of honor, you need to find a best lady for Jared.”

Chuckling, I kiss the top of her light brown hair. “I have no lady in my life I would want to ask to be in my wedding party, but if you want even numbers, I can ask one of the other guys to stand up.”

“Who would you ask?”

“Probably Ziggy,” I say with a wink. “He was the next to join our team. Plus, it won’t bother him to stand up with Jared—he prefers men.”

“Really?” Josephine asks with bright eyes.

Hesitantly, I nod, seeing the wheels working in her head. “Why? Does it bother you?”

Josephine gives me a mischievous smile. “Not at all. Jared will love him.”

I do a double-take. *Say whaaat?* “Isn’t Jared into you?”

Josephine snorts. “I’ve already told you, we’re besties. He’s been crushing on Ziggy for a while.”

I smirk. “Well, look at us playing matchmaker.”

Josephine seems to contemplate. “Is Ziggy’s name Ziggy or is it his club name?”

“His real name is Flynn Steeples. We call him Ziggy after Ziggy Stardust. The guy’s a real Bowie nut.”

“A man after my own heart,” she sings. “You know, I don’t know any of the guys’ real names.”

“Well, let’s start small. Gauge’s name is Clint Roberts. I nicknamed him Gauge because he’s good at reading people, estimating their behavior. Chase’s real name is Shawn Brighton. We call him Chase because he’s good at hunting people down through the web, and he loves the chase. I guess his nickname has a double meaning since he likes to chase tail,

too. And Punk's real name is Easton Cunningham Junior. And he's Punk, well, because he's a punk."

Josephine giggles, and my heart swells with joy to hear it. I was afraid tonight was going to be a struggle after revealing my betrayal.

"Do you want me to ask Ziggy to stand up?" I inquire.

Josephine goes silent, and I'm afraid I may have killed the buzz. "I need to think about it?"

"Sure," I say. "But we need to decide soon. We need to order the dresses and tuxes and shit."

Josephine's nose wrinkles. "I don't want to rent tuxes. It's too much money for one night. I already suggested tailored suits or your Navy uniforms."

"What's Jared going to wear if we go with Navy uniforms?"

"A nice tailored suit," Josephine reiterates.

I rub the back of my neck, unsure. "I don't know if I want us wearing different stuff. Shouldn't it all match?"

What the fuck is wrong with me? Since when do I care about shit being all matchy-matchy? It dawns on me I want it all to be perfect for Josephine. My woman deserves the best.

"Then it's nice tailored suits," she repeats.

Well, okay. I guess it's settled. "Tell me what you want, and I'll make sure the guys and I get it."

Josephine shakes her index finger. "Nu-uh-uh. You're choosing your own suit and what you want the guys to wear. You're the one wearing it, not me. If you're not comfortable or happy with it, it's all on you."

Sweat builds on my temples. "Me? You want me to pick it out?"

Josephine stares at me like, 'duh.'

"I'm not entirely comfortable with this much freedom," I admit. Aren't most women very particular about this sort of

thing? I feel like this could be a trap to see if I pick correctly. I'm already on Josephine's shit list—I don't want to screw this up. "Can I at least have a color scheme or something?"

Josephine laughs but shows some mercy. "Sure, babe. The colors are emerald, pale pink, gold, and gray. Bridesmaids are in emerald. Flowers are pink. Gold accents. And your suits will be gray. I'll let you hash out what tie or bowtie color you want from the three remaining colors."

I repeat the four colors in my head, committing them to memory. *Okay, I can do this.* I'll grab a *GQ* magazine, pick out a suit, and have my brothers and I go in for fittings.

Easy peasy.

"That's it? No more planning?" I ask, hopefully.

My Pixie rolls her blue eyes and shakes her head. "I know I did the bulk of the planning, but there's a shit ton left."

Trepidation creeps into my voice. "Like what?" I could have sworn we were done. For Christ's sake, we have a binder full of everything already taken care of for the wedding. What more could there be?

"For starters, we need two ushers."

Easy. "Brass and Reaper. Next."

"We need to pick poems, bible verses, or music for the ceremony."

Huh?

"We need a song for our first dance as husband and wife."

Shit.

"We have to decide if we're taking a honeymoon, and where and when."

AHHH!

"There's a lot of little things too, like buying champagne flutes for the toasts, what color napkins to layout during dinner. Are we going with two entrees or three? Brass or silver

for our knife and server for the cake? Do we bring in heaters, or do we light the fire pit? Or both?”

“Okay! I get it,” I say with exasperation, falling back against the couch.

“You asked,” she reminds me.

I give her a brooding look. The sad part is I should have expected this. Opal told me a wedding typically takes a year to plan, and here Jo was trying to throw it all together in less than three months.

“This would have been way easier had we gone to the courthouse or eloped,” I mumble to myself.

But I can't be upset. Josephine is my queen and she deserves a royal wedding. Fuck if this isn't frustrating though.

I sigh. “What can I do to help?”

“Well...” Josephine walks over to the kitchen island and grabs what looks like a rolled poster. “You could tell me which blueprints you prefer.”

“Blueprints?” I watch as she unrolls the paper in front of me, revealing plans for a house. Suddenly it hits me. “Holy shit, you finished our house plans?!”

Josephine nods with enthusiasm. “When you leave me alone for four days, I have to do something to keep myself occupied. I stuck with the same midcentury modern vibe, much like the headquarters. If you want four kids, I get six bedrooms. Everyone has their own space, plus room for guests, and I keep my sanity.

“With a ranch, we're all on one level, but I have us on the other side of the house, away from all the ruckus. My office will be on our side as well, to ensure I get my work done. Each bedroom has its own en suite bathroom, which will be good as the kids get older.

“The basement will be a designated kid zone and storage. There will be room downstairs to add a gym if you would prefer to stay at home instead of going to the headquarters, it's

your choice. I wouldn't mind having a small gym for a stationary bike and treadmill if nothing else."

I look closely at the blueprints and point to the laundry/mudroom combo. "What this?"

Josephine smiles triumphantly. "It's a grooming shower for Hades. It's designed to keep him in place while he's being washed. No more hefty groomers bills for him."

I look at my Pixie in awe. "You thought of everything."

She gives me a cocky smirk. "It's kind of my job. If you don't like the ranch, I do have a two-story option, but I'm partial to this layout. We're at a point on the MC build where I can take my first crew and break ground next week. We only need to decide on where we want to build on the property. Depending on what elevation we pick, we could have a walkout basement."

"If you want the ranch, I want it, too." I pull her into my lap and kiss her.

"I'm still upset with you," she mumbles against my lips.

"I know. It's okay," I answer back. "I love you, Josephine.

"I love you too, Maceo," she coos back, leaning her forehead against mine.

Our tranquil moment is interrupted by the doorbell. I look at Josephine with my brows pulled together, and I notice her facial expression mimics mine. No one knows we came here, and neither of us was expecting anyone.

I lift her from my lap and set her on the couch before reaching for my ankle holster to remove my Glock 19. This may seem like an extreme action, but in my line of work, unannounced guests never lead to anything good—always better to be prepared. I stalk to the door and peer through the peephole.

"Shit," I mutter, tucking my gun into the back of my waistband and hiding it underneath my shirt. I unlock and open the door.

“Jim. Stella. What are you doing here? I told you guys not to come ‘till I calmed her down,” I whisper in a clipped tone. Now is not the time for these two to drop in unannounced.

Stella gives me one of her big hugs, which I reciprocate before shaking Jim’s hand.

“Hello, dear. I know you said to wait, but we wanted to see our little girl. It’s been far too long,” Stella explains with an unabashed smile. “Is she here?”

Fuck. I look over my shoulder at Josephine, sitting like a spooked cat on the couch, wide-eyed and teeth bared.

I raise my face to the ceiling and hold the door wide for them to come inside. Stella marches right on in. Jim gives me an apologetic look before stepping over the threshold. Yeah, a little warning would have been appreciated, but there’s not a fucking thing I can do about it now.

“Sweetheart?” Stella says cautiously when she enters the living room with Jim.

Josephine doesn’t stand to greet them. She stares at her estranged parents with hostility radiating off of her like a smoke bomb, her tension flooding the room with a general sense of uneasiness.

“Why are you here?” Josephine asks in the coldest tone imaginable.

Internally, I curse Jim and Stella for jumping the gun.

Shits gonna get ugly.

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CHAPTER TWO

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Have you ever been angry to the point all you see is red? Yeah, my vision isn't red—I've bypassed red. No, my vision is crystal-fucking-clear, like lethally accurate, assessing all the weak points on all three of the traitors standing in front of me.

My heart has slowed dramatically, and I'm unnaturally quiet. There's a high pitch buzzing in my ears, and I feel like I'm experiencing the calm before the storm.

Maceo steps around my parents to come and sit next to me on the couch. He reaches for my hand, and I pull it away. I can tell he's worried by the crease forming between his dark brows. He runs a hand down his face like he always does when he's overwhelmed.

My anger is not misdirected. If anything, it's renewed by my parents' arrival. Maceo may not have invited them here today, but he did go behind my back and invite them to our wedding.

My parents stand side by side, creating a barrier between me and the front door. Clearly, they know me well enough to know when I'm not happy and can't deal with a situation, I run away from it. Apparently, I'm giving them the vibe that I'll bounce.

Damn my transparent emotions! I'm angry enough to walk away, but I'm also curious as to how my parents are going to attempt to smooth things over between us.

My mom makes the first move and sits on the other side of the couch next to me.

Nope. Not ready for this kind of closeness. I slide away from my mom only to scoot closer to Maceo. His arms encircle me with a strong sense of sanctuary. As angry as I am with him, I need his support right now while I deal with my parents.

My dad sits in my favorite high-back mid-century modern armchair and waits patiently. He appears to be as uncomfortable as me, and he looks to Maceo for cues on whether it's okay to talk to me or not.

“Stella,” Maceo begins, “I know you’re anxious to clear the air, but today isn’t the best day to tackle it. I just got home and told Josephine I came to visit you, which is enough for her to process in one sitting without being bombarded with your being here.”

My mom sighs loudly and looks at me with pleading eyes. “We’ve come all this way to see you, Jo. I wish you’d listen to us.”

My bitterness toward my parents and how they broke my heart has me lashing out. “That’s rich. Should I listen to you as well as you listened to me?” I say with a sneer.

Maceo squeezes me—not sure if it’s to comfort or warn me. Doesn’t matter because I’m going to act the way I damn well please.

My dad clears his throat. “There’s no good way to say it, Jo. We were wrong and we’re sorry.”

I fold my arms with a huff. I typically appreciate my dad’s straight-to-the-point demeanor, but his admission of guilt sounds more like a copout.

I’m not a saint—I don’t give grace easily. Is it wrong of me to expect them to grovel after the verbal shaming they inflicted on me during one of the most difficult moments of my life? I don’t believe so.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my mom reach out to me. The move is sudden, and I didn’t expect the violent response I have from her fingers brushing over the fading bruises along my arm, still tender from Jacob’s vicious attack.

I'm instantly thrown back in the past, reliving the most painful and emotionally traumatizing experience of my life.

It's like I can feel every blow again in vivid detail. The snapping of my fingernails as I clawed at Jacob. The force of his foot when he kicked me in the ribs and the audible cracking noise of them splintering. The pinch of his fingers digging into my flesh as he tried to pull my thighs apart. And the steel grip of Jacob's hand when he tried to crush my throat.

My mom's touch has me yelping. Maceo yanks me into his lap and presses my face to his firm chest, where I bury my screams as one of my panic attacks takes hold of me.

Typically, I wake from a night terror hyperventilating, triggering a panic attack. This is only the second time I've had one while awake—the first being when Esteban sent me a flower arrangement of orchids. Maceo knew what was happening immediately and went right into protector mode.

My mom shrieks in terror. "What's happening to her?"

My dad is equally alarmed, and I feel him move closer to me, but unable to see him or my mom with my head buried against Maceo's chest. "Jo? Sweetheart, are you okay?"

"Back off and give her a moment. She's having a panic attack. This is how it's been since Jacob attacked her," Maceo explains calmly, rubbing my back in comforting circles. I gulp in more air than my body needs.

"Oh, my God!" My mom whimpers helplessly.

I feel another hand rubbing my back and know it's my mother trying to mimic Maceo's touch. This time it doesn't scare me. It's soothing to feel her after so much time has passed.

Begrudgingly, I realize I've missed her, but I'm not emotionally ready to admit it. Maceo keeps on rubbing me, letting me know I'm safe, and he's got me.

"Does this happen often?" my father croaks.

Maceo sighs heavily. "At least every other night. The first week it was nightly and sometimes multiples in one night.

This is only the second time I've seen it while she's fully awake. I've been going with her to a PTSD counselor regularly, and it's helping, but it's a process. There's no quick fix for what she went through. All the intense emotions probably sent her spiraling into one."

My mom snuffles. "She had one because I touched her?"

Maceo shakes his head. "No. I bet it was already building, and when you brushed her bruises, it was the catalyst. Usually, Hades can sense when she's about to have one and alerts me."

"Hades?" my dad questions.

"Our Cane Corso. Well, Josephine's dog, my dog by association—he loves her more."

Shameful tears threaten to breakthrough, but I will them away. I'm not brave enough to admit to Maceo while he was gone I had multiple night terrors every night, to the point Punk and Reaper, Maceo's brothers, had to restrain me. Hades would lay awake all night long, whimpering when he sensed one coming on. The guys would spring into action and hold me as the attack would seize my body. I'd scream and thrash before gasping for air to the point I would pass out.

Opal offered to fill in one night for the guys, and apparently, during my attack, I punched her in the boob and gave her a welt. Afterward, the guys decided it would only be them who would take my unintentional beatings.

Punk, Maceo's fourth-in-command, has been a supportive friend and has gone with me to my counseling appointments while Maceo was gone, but I know the only reason I'm having them is because it feel like I'm being watched. I'd get these chills for no reason and uneasiness settles in my gut like I'm hyperaware of my surroundings. It's bad enough knowing Maceo will lose his shit once he hears Punk and Reaper restrained me, but he's going to fly off the handle knowing it's because I feel I'm being followed.

Maceo's job requires him to travel for extensive periods. I can't be freaking out like I've been when he's gone. I'm completely torn on if I should tell him how bad it's been,

especially now since he told my parents I'm getting better. I'm also afraid he may suspect I'm unhinged if I tell him I have the creepy sensation of being watched, or he, himself, will go mad thinking its Esteban Moreno—his arch-nemesis—is coming after me.

Eventually, I'm able to calm down. I slide off Maceo's lap, embarrassed my parents witnessed it. Maceo gives me a tender look and kisses my temple. "You better, Josephine?"

I want to laugh in his face. I'm definitely not better with my parents sitting here on pins and needles, praying I hear them out. This is not something I want to deal with at the moment, but I know my mom and her relentless manner will not back off until she speaks her peace.

"No," I answer him honestly. If I'm going to suffer because he opened the door to my parents, he's going to suffer right along with me. The long sigh he gives in response lets me know he's well aware.

My mom tries again to engage me. "Jo, honey? You don't need to say anything to us today, but can we at least tell you how sorry we are?"

Eager to get this shit over with, I nod curtly.

"How we treated you after splitting from Jacob is inexcusable. You were vulnerable and wanted to come back home where you felt safe. I can't tell you how many times I curse myself about our mistreatment of you.

"Yes, we liked Jacob, but clearly, we didn't know him. We were caught off guard, much like you had been, and acted irrationally—similar to how you quit your job. You're such a levelheaded person, and it scared us how emotional you were behaving. The whole situation was handled poorly by everyone involved, and I don't blame you for hating our guts. I hate myself enough for the both of us," my mom admits.

I know they feel bad because my parents don't apologize for anything unless they're truly in the wrong. It feels sincere, but fuck them if they think I'm going to roll over and suddenly be okay with the whole situation.

I clear my throat. “Are you guys planning on staying here in Fort Collins?”

My dad answers. “We plan on staying through the wedding and moving here.”

Come again? “Um, what about Simone?”

My mom waves her hand dismissively. “We hardly see your sister. She’s busy with her job and traveling all the time. Us moving isn’t going to affect her. She can travel here to visit all of us the two times a year we see her.”

“I plan on coming out of retirement and finding a welding job around town,” Dad continues. “Stella told the high school she’s retiring to help take care of our grandbabies.”

My head snaps to Maceo. He pales.

“Maceooo!” I growl. I know he’s eager for kids, but this is over the top. I’m not ready to forgive my parents, much less having them move here to help raise our future kids.

He looks at me with wide eyes and bites his bottom lip. “I may have mentioned something about you building a cottage for them here on the property.”

“For Christ’s sake, Maceo!” I get off the couch, needing some distance.

He’s on his feet too. “Baby—”

“Don’t you ‘baby’ me! I’m fucking burning the candle at both ends between finishing the MC headquarters, planning our wedding, working on our plans for our own house, preparing to start Lloyd’s new barbershop, and going to counseling daily. Now I have to start plans for a cottage for my parents who want to watch our nonexistent children?!”

Mom gasps. “You’re not pregnant?”

My head whips to her. “No, I’m not!”

Maceo’s hands fly up in surrender. “Stella, I said we wanted to give you guys grandkids. I never said there were buns in the oven.”

My mom's face crumbles. "You made it sound like we were going to be grandparents."

Maceo gives my mom an apologetic look.

My mom turns her attention back to me. "Why aren't you pregnant?" she demands.

"Because I'm fucking responsible and on birth control," I fire back.

Jesus! I'm surrounded by kid-crazy people.

My mom bursts into tears, and my dad rushes to her side to comfort her. "We kind of assumed with the wedding happening quickly and Maceo mentioning starting a family, that maybe you were expecting," my dad explains. "We both were excited to be grandparents."

Great. Now I feel like the bad guy for bursting their bubble. My fingers fists into my braid, and I start gulping air. I can tell another panic attack is building, and Maceo can tell too. He moves around the coffee table to reach me.

I raise my hand in warning. "Stop. Don't come near me right now."

He halts in his tracks, defeat written all over him.

"Give me your phone." I'd use mine, but I didn't have it on me when he snatched me away from the build site.

He frowns and folds his arms over his massive chest. "Josephine, you're not running."

"I will do exactly that, now give me your phone. I'm calling Jared to come and take me back to work." I don't want to bother my best friend while he's working at the site, but I know Maceo would freak if I called an Uber and had a stranger drive me. "I have to sort through my shit on my own. You will stay here, make the bed for my parents, and put fresh towels in the bathroom for them."

Maceo curses but gives me his phone. I grab it from him and dial Jared. He answers on the first ring. "Pick me up at my condo, please."

Jared sighs. “Are you two love birds still fighting?”

“Jared, I’m not in the mood. Please, come get me. I’ll be making my way down the road.” I disconnect before he can refuse.

Maceo shakes his head when I hand him his cell. “You’re not walking on the highway. It’s too dangerous.”

My condo is north of the new MC headquarters with nothing but nature and the surrounding complexes in the area. No one is going to be on the road in the middle of a business day.

“You’re not the boss of me!” Maceo can dominate me in the bedroom, but outside of it, I’m my own master.

I go for the door and he’s on me instantly. “Pixie, please,” he begs.

“Maceo, I need space. You owe me this much after everything,” I snap.

His eyes flint between mine, judging how serious I am. “I’ll give you five minutes, and then I’m coming after you. Don’t veer from the road.”

I step back from him and open the door before storming out. I knew he wouldn’t leave me alone for long—worried about my safety. It makes me hustle my ass to get as far away from him as possible to sort through my emotions.

Angrier than I’ve been in a long time, I stomp my feet as I walk. My actions are utterly irrational for a twenty-seven-year-old, but I don’t care.

I cannot believe this shit!

When I saw Maceo pull onto the build site earlier, the only thing I was upset about was him coming home a day later than he initially told me. Now, I have a bucket-full of shit to be furious about—him making nice with my parents behind my back, my parents dropping in unexpectedly, forcing me into a confrontation I wasn’t ready for, and now everyone pushing babies on me.

“Aaahhh!” I march down the road, kicking stones in my wake, and unaware of the car rolling up beside me.

“Giuseppina, what are you doing?” a silky accent asks from the open window of a yellow Lamborghini.

I shriek and take off running like an escaped convict fleeing for my life. In my experience, unknown voices beckoning me from expensive sport cars are never a good thing.

The car revs and flies past me before fishtailing at a sharp angle and stopping in front of me.

I skid to halt and about-face in the opposite direction. My condo is right over the crest of the hill—so close, yet so far. *Fuck me!*

“Pina! Pina, wait!” The car door slams and feet hit the pavement racing after me.

I slow, realizing who it is. Only one person calls me Pina.

Gasping for air, I turn to see Lorenzo Bianchi running toward me in his expensive Italian suit. As soon as he’s close enough, I slam my hands against his chest, making him gasp in shock.

“What the hell is the matter with you? You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

He rubs at the spot where I hit him but smiles radiantly. Lorenzo is the Italian mob boss of Denver and the surrounding areas. Back when I was still trying to break into the construction design business as a solo architectural designer, Lorenzo had come to me asking me to design the little underground casino of his Italian restaurant downtown.

Clearly, I made an impression because the guy hasn’t left me alone since. Had I been in a better position with my business and finances, I would have turned down the job, but I didn’t have the luxury to be picky.

Lorenzo is your classic *mafioso*. He’s in his late thirties, with a thick head of dark hair, dark-brown eyes, long, lean

muscle, dressed to the nines, and overconfident. By all standards, he's hot, but he doesn't do it for me.

I have my Mister Perfect, and as far as I'm concern, there's nothing that can compare to Maceo and his tenderness. He may have an unapproachable look to outsiders, but once you get to know him, you see how loyal and caring he is. The man would jump in front of a train to save the people he loves.

Yes, Maceo can be way too domineering at times, but it's not done to control me. It's my safety and the safety of our family which motivates him to act out as he does.

Maceo's rugged good looks, giant size, and bulging muscles are only icing on the cake.

Looking at Lorenzo now, I notice a slight tweak in his nose. I had overheard Gauge saying Maceo had broken his nose when he wouldn't stop sending me flowers and date requests. It nearly got Maceo taken out by the mob, but the police got involved. Lorenzo's bruised ego was pushed to the backburner when Detective Quire pointed out his behavior toward me was harassment. I happen to think the blemish gives him a more attractive edge—I'm not a fan of polished men.

Everything about Lorenzo screams power. But it's not the same kind of superpower Maceo exudes. Maceo's authority is inherent, not the kind you can buy like the man before me. It makes Lorenzo look like a cheap substitute next to my man.

Unfortunately, circumstances forced Maceo to ask Lorenzo for help six weeks ago after Esteban, the Colombian drug lord, approached me, and all hell was breaking loose with my ex-boyfriend, Jacob. Lorenzo lent his guards to protect me, and protect me they did. Tiny Tony nearly lost his life when Jacob's accomplice bashed him in the head with a baseball bat. Due to our shared experience, Tony and I have become friends and talk daily.

Maceo has since told Lorenzo we no longer need his help after Jacob was taken out by the local police, but apparently, Lorenzo isn't getting the message as he's standing in front of me now.

“Pina, forgive me. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I was driving by and saw you walking, *no*, trudging down the road. Why are you upset?” he says, smiling.

He seems smug, like he knows I had a confrontation with Maceo. But that’s impossible. He would have had to have been in the condo with us.

That same uneasiness I get when I feel I’m being watched settles deep in my bones with Lorenzo being so close. I absorb the shiver crawling over my skin. I cannot afford to show weakness in front of this guy. Lorenzo’s the type of man who feeds off others’ fears and attacks when you’re at your most vulnerable. I don’t need to give him any more ammunition to move in on me.

I will my body to breathe normally and not hyperventilate. I don’t want to be stricken with a panic attack while I’m alone with this man. I focus on my anger instead.

“Cut the bullshit, Lorenzo!” I wasn’t a fan of his sweet talk when I worked for him, and I’m definitely not a fan of it now as Maceo’s fiancée. I honestly believe Lorenzo took an interest in me because I was the only woman who turned him down repeatedly. My constant rejection has turned into a conquest for him.

Lorenzo sighs heavily. “You’re still hell bent on marrying Atlas, I see. But I don’t see a ring on your finger, at least not a proper ring. What are you wearing?”

His dark eyes scrutinize my hand, and his eyebrows shoot to his hairline. “Is that silicone? He bought you a silicone engagement ring! *Oh, mio Dio! Bella ragazza*, I would treat you like a queen and give you a proper ring, not this Cracker Jack prize. Give me a chance to prove my utter devotion to you.”

Ugh! This guy is over the top.

Folding my arms over my small chest, I glare at him. Lorenzo has some nerve. Who cares if my white silicone band is my engagement ring? It came from Maceo—therefore, I love it.

I don't need diamonds or gold. It's supposed to be symbolic—not flashy. All I need is Maceo's love and I have it in spades. But the bitch in me doesn't like how Lorenzo is bad-mouthing my man, calling him cheap when he sure as fuck is not.

I pull out the chain, tucked between my barely-there cleavage, and reveal my beautiful engagement ring from Maceo. It's in the shape of a flower—clear and black diamonds symbolizing us and our love.

“No, thanks. I'm already Maceo's queen. This is my ring and it's beautiful.” I raise my left hand. “I wear silicone rings when I work because I'd like to keep my fingers, thank you very much. Maceo bought me these to avoid injuring myself when working. He gets me to a capital T.”

Lorenzo's nostrils flare with annoyance. He collects himself and gives me a charming smile, which I notice is dull compared to Maceo's pearly whites. “Oh, how I wish to tame your stubbornness in the bedroom,” he coos.

Jeez, this guy is bold! I roll my eyes. Lorenzo needs to move on. I swear he takes my refusals like challenges to try harder. It reminds me of Jacob and how he hounded me after we broke up, and that thought makes me edgy. Some men don't know how to deal with rejection.

“Maceo does that too,” I say honestly, hoping it pisses him off enough to never bother with me again.

Lorenzo's eyes flash angrily, but he smiles, his eyes roaming over my body hungrily. It makes me uncomfortable—and I'm used to men ogling me in my line of work. Perhaps I went too far, seeing as it looks like he's imagines himself in Maceo's shoes.

His smile is vile. “Can I offer you a ride?”

The sexual innuendo is not lost on me. I glower at him.

His smile grows wider. “A ride to wherever it is you're storming off to then? You shouldn't be alone. Atlas's feud with Esteban Moreno puts you at risk by simply knowing him.”

“No thanks,” I mutter, walking past him. I sure as hell won’t climb in a car with him, I don’t care if Esteban is watching me or not.

Lorenzo hurries to keep up with me. “But Pina, you look exhausted. I know you’re not sleeping. If you were in my bed, I would chase all those bad dreams away and keep you safe. Speaking of keeping you safe, where’s Atlas? I hope he still has you guarded with some sort of security detail? Esteban is still on the loose. It’s too dangerous for you to be alone.”

I shiver at the mention of Esteban, but I’m all too aware the only threat to me at this moment is Lorenzo. I’ve mentioned my fear to Maceo of Lorenzo possibly developing an unhealthy attachment to me, and Maceo said he would handle the mob boss.

As if sensing I’m in danger, I hear the roar of Maceo’s bike drawing near. I give Lorenzo a confident smile. “He’s never far from me.”

Lorenzo sneers as Maceo’s black motorcycle comes to a stop in front of us. Maceo’s eyes gleam as he stares down Lorenzo. Obediently, I walk to my man. Maceo climbs off his bike and wraps both his muscled arms around me, caging me in. He holds me against his broad body, his six-five stature casting a dark shadow over Lorenzo.

“Why the fuck you anywhere near my woman, Bianchi?” Maceo snarls.

Lorenzo’s brown eyes spark with hatred, refusing to back off from a challenge. “You let Pina walk off by herself when you damn well know she should be protected at all times. Esteban could be anywhere waiting to grab her. I stopped when I saw her walking alone on the fucking road. You honestly think I would keep driving and leave her to fate?”

Neither Maceo nor I will admit to Lorenzo we had been arguing, and Maceo was giving me breathing room. Showing any sign of weakness in our relationship would only be kindling for Lorenzo to pursue me.

“Watch yourself,” Maceo spits. “I’ll break your nose again if I have to.”

“Touch me, and I’ll kill you,” Lorenzo threatens menacingly.

“Enough!” I shout. I turn my attention toward Lorenzo. “Thank you for your continued concern for my welfare, but please understand I’m going through some very traumatic shit right now, and Maceo is good enough to give me the room to internalize my emotions when I ask for it.”

Lorenzo actually has the decency to look ashamed. “Giuseppina, I’m sorry for failing you when I promised to help protect you from Jacob. Tiny Tony was a poor choice, and I take full responsibility.”

I shake my head angrily. “Tony nearly died protecting me. No one could have done better. He deserves praise for his bravery.”

Lorenzo’s eyes narrow. “He failed in the one task I gave him, protecting *il mio amore*.”

Maceo releases his hold on me and storms toward him with his hands balled in fists. Lorenzo gives Maceo a chilling smile, almost like he wants Maceo to start a fight.

Oh boy! This isn’t going to end well.

“Call her your *love* again, and I’ll end you,” Maceo says darkly.

I yank hard on his arm to stop him from advancing, but Lorenzo’s smile only grows wider, antagonizing Maceo to push closer.

Jared’s truck pulls alongside us, and I blow out a huge fucking sigh of relief. He will be able to help me restrain Maceo.

As if he can see the altercation about to take place, Jared is out of his truck, running in front of Maceo, pushing against him, stopping him from advancing.

“Maceo, look at me. Leash your beast up,” Jared demands. Maceo growls but looks at my friend. Jared is not short at six-

foot, but everyone compared to Maceo is small.

Jared tries to reason with Maceo. “He’s not worth it.”

Maceo radiates anger. “The fucker is hitting on my woman.”

My best friend rolls his eyes. “Every guy hits on Jo. Honestly, you think you need to worry? Jo’s not going anywhere. Let him say whatever he wants—it means shit as long as it means nothing to Jo.”

Maceo relaxes, realizing Jared’s right, and he steps away from Lorenzo.

Jared gives Maceo a pointed look. “Jo and I are going back to work, and you’re going to follow us.” He’s not willing to leave Maceo alone with Lorenzo, knowing if he does, one of the two will not be walking away.

Maceo grumbles but returns to his bike. I head for Jared’s truck, but I can feel Lorenzo’s piercing glare on me the whole way. I don’t look back, afraid of tempting him further.

Once we’re on the road, with Maceo tailing us, Jared turns to me. “What the fuck was that about?”

“Get ready for this shit.” I explain everything that’s happened since Maceo came home.

Jared’s mouth hangs open. “Holy shit!”

“No kidding, right?!”

“Well, I hope you don’t expect me to be nice to your parents. I’m as pissed at them as you are,” he admits.

I laugh. “You hold grudges like a teenager.”

Jared shrugs and smiles. “Whatever. I only hope Maceo doesn’t come after me since you’re sitting in my truck.”

I shake my head. “I hope you don’t mind, but I told him you’re gay.”

Jared chuckles. “Great. Now I have to worry about him thinking I’m hitting on him too.”

“It came up when we were talking about the wedding party. He suggested asking my sister to be my maid of honor.”

Jared pouts. “You want me to back out?”

“Fuck, no! Maceo has no problem with you standing in as my man of honor, but if I ask Simone to stand up too, he’s planning on asking Ziggy to stand up with you, instead of Gauge.”

At the mention of Ziggy’s name, Jared stiffens, white-knuckling the steering wheel. “Oh.”

I give him a knowing smirk. “Remember when the trailer was destroyed? You came to me and swore Ziggy was flirting with you when he was helping us sort through everything, but we both poopooed it because we assumed he was straight. Well, apparently, we were wrong.”

His grip tightens on the wheel, looking at me with big hopeful eyes. “Don’t fuck with me, Jo.”

My smile widens. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Jared’s brown eyes crinkle in the corners as he smiles, returning his attention back to the road. “Have you seen his dirty-blond curls and the muscles on him? He’s totally hot.”

“You are too. I think you two would look good standing up with each other.”

“I think the two of us would look good lying down with each other,” Jared mumbles to himself, but I overhear and bust out laughing.

“Well, then it’s settled. I’ll tell Maceo to ask Ziggy to stand up with you while I mull over asking my sister.” We’re both snickering as we pull onto the build site.

Maceo is off his bike and opening my door in a nanosecond. “I’m not talking to you right now,” I tell him flatly.

“I want to know what the *mafioso* bastard said to you,” he demands.

“More of the same shit he always does,” I say, irritated. “Be prepared when a giant bouquet of flowers is delivered tomorrow because you know it will.”

“We’re donating them to the hospital,” Maceo grouches. He would probably throw them away, but I had once mentioned we should give them to others who would appreciate them.

Talking of Lorenzo reminds me of what he said about Tiny Tony. I’m worried about him. “You don’t think he would’ve hurt Tony, do you?”

Maceo runs a hand over his face. “I was wondering the same thing. I’ll go over to his place and check on him later.”

I give Maceo a pleading look.

“My mistake. I’ll go check on him now,” he amends, reading the duress on my face.

Relieved, I get on my tippy toes, and he bends to kiss me on the lips. “Thank you,” I whisper.

“Anything for you, Pixie,” he whispers back. He grips my chin and gives me a chaste pec on the lips. He releases me and climbs back on his bike.

I’m about to wave goodbye when I recall our guests. “My parents?”

“Are settling in.” He starts his motorcycle and coasts out of the lot. I watch him ‘till I no longer see his retreating form. With a sigh, I get back to work.

I spend the next few hours walking around the headquarters’ site, overseeing projects in various stages. This new headquarters is more of an apartment/dormitory system with separate sleeping quarters and communal living spaces. It’s a massive step up from the tiny house they’re currently renting. Not having to share a bunk room is going to go a long way for everyone’s morale.

Mercy Ravens isn't your typical biker club; they're a family and prefer compound living. Plus, with the security company Maceo owns and they all work for, having the men on site is beneficial when emergency jobs come in.

I cover a lot of ground, but my mind keeps drifting to today's events. I also mull over how I'm going to broach the subject of my sleeping arrangements to Maceo. It feels like I'm keeping a secret from him, and I'm not comfortable with it.

I'm distracted when one of my workers tries to talk me out of adding energy rubber tiles as flooring in the basement gym, but I know what I want, and my crew member isn't going to sway my opinion. Leaving the concrete floors exposed will add acoustics to the room, making it echo.

"Nate, it's happening. Gyms are loud enough as is. I don't want the noise traveling throughout the entire house. Rubber tiles will buffer the sound. Plus, it's a safety element. I want this done today."

"Okay, boss," Nate surrenders before heading back into the basement.

A long, lean, tatted arm is thrown haphazardly around my shoulder. Punk chuckles. "You're not playing hooky after Atlas ambushed you?"

Punk is one of Maceo's brothers, and out of the twelve members of the MC, he's my favorite guy outside of Maceo. He's the annoying little brother I never had. He's also my bodyguard.

Ever since Maceo and I started dating, Punk has led my security detail when Maceo's not present. When it first happened, I thought it was overkill, but after the events with Jacob and having Esteban pop up, I accept it.

I give him a warning glare. "Don't fuck with me right now, Junior."

Punk looks offended. "Who told you I was a Junior? Was it Atlas? Confidential shit is supposed to stay between brothers."

“Not now, Punk. I need to figure out how I’m going to break the news to Maceo about my out of control panic attacks, and you and Reaper sleeping next to me,” I say with genuine worry.

Punk grips me the shoulders. “Whoa there, Nelly! Reaper and I already agreed we ain’t saying shit to Atlas. Neither of us has a death wish.”

“Punk, I can’t keep it from him, and my counselor agrees with my decision. If I don’t tell him, you know someone else will. More like Candy will. She may have conceded with the idea of me being Maceo’s old lady, but I don’t put it past her to go squealing to him.”

Candy is one of the MC bunnies who believed she had a shot at being Maceo’s woman until I came along and set her in her place. She has been decent with me—to my face—but behind my back, she runs to Maceo with every little thing to cast me in a bad light.

The tattling started a few days after Jacob attacked me and hasn’t stopped. *‘Atlas, Jo went to the bathroom this morning, only wearing her tank top and panties. Atlas, your old lady gave Chase a hug when she got back from work. Atlas, Miss Pencil Skirt was looking cozy with Punk on the couch.’*

Gah! The woman has it out for me. It’s one thing to fuck with me, but when she fucks with Maceo’s jealousy...no one is safe.

Punk curses. “Candy needs to mind her own damn business, but you’re right about her ratting on us. How do you want to tackle this?”

“I honestly have no idea. I only know I have to do it, and soon.”

“You want me to be there when the shit goes down, sis?”

“It may be best if you and Reaper are there. He’s going to have questions for you both. Plus, two on one are better odds if Maceo decides to kick both your asses.”

Punk groans but nods, conceding.

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CHAPTER THREE

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I knock on the apartment door and wait anxiously for Tiny Tony to answer. I hear him on the other side before I hear the cock of gun I can't see.

“Tony, it's me, Atlas,” I say. “Open up, man. My woman is worried sick about you.”

Several deadbolts turn before the door opens. Tony stands there in jeans and a black tee-shirt with a Glock at his side. Aside from expensive suits and the hospital gown I last saw him in, I've never seen him dressed casually. He actually could pass for Mercy Raven MC.

Tony ushers for me to enter before tucking his gun in the waistband of his pants.

I come in and lock his door behind me. The apartment is small but neat. On a quick inspection of Tony and his environment, I get the sense he likes order.

Tony scratches his head and lowers himself into one of two recliners. He flips the Colorado Rockies baseball game on before looking back at me. “Sorry about that. You would answer the door with a gun drawn too if you knew Bianchi was pissed at you.”

I recall how I answered the door at the condo today when Josephine's parents showed up unexpectedly, and I understand him completely. “No worries.”

“How's Little Jo, and why is she worried about me? I haven't called her yet today, but she's usually busy 'till six at least.”

Tony nearly died protecting Josephine. Because he laid his life on the line, I've been cool with their friendship.

Honestly, I'm fine with any of the male relationships she has. My jealousy is reserved only for those I find to be a threat to our relationship. Tony isn't one in my book.

I sink into the other recliner. "We ran into Bianchi today. He made it clear he was not pleased with how her protection detail went down at the bridal store."

Tony raises his eyebrow at me. "One does not simply run into Lorenzo. Either you go looking for him, or he comes looking for you. I took a baseball bat to the head. What the fuck else could I do?"

"I get it, and Josephine does too. What the fuck happened between you and Bianchi after you left the hospital?"

Tony lithely lifts himself from the chair, which is impressive since the dude is bigger than me, *and* he's recovering from broken ribs and a concussion. "You want a beer?"

I blink. "Yeah, I'll take a beer. You drink the stuff?"

He laughs as he swiftly walks into the kitchen, his moves mimicking one who has served in the military. He returns with two beers and hands me one. "Why? Because I'm Italian? I can only drink Chianti or some shit?" He laughs and settles back into his recliner.

I take a pull from my beer and frown at him. "Should you be drinking after a concussion?"

Tony snorts before taking a big gulp. "Probably not, but I don't give a fuck. It's not my first rodeo. I'm not going to wait a month before having an alcoholic beverage. I did enough abstaining while I was on tour."

"What branch did you serve?"

"Marines. Eight years. I tried to get away from the... *family business*. My goal was to be a lifer, but I couldn't do it anymore. Decided the shit I dealt with in the mob was a hell of a lot less horrific if you can believe it. It would take a million

bats to the head to convince me otherwise. I've been out for nearly two years."

"The desert?"

Tony nods. "Syria."

"Fuck," I mutter. He doesn't need to say anymore.

I did one tour in Syria myself, and it was beyond hellish. Those poor people stuck in the crossfires...that was when I began contemplating leaving the SEALs and becoming a mercenary, or 'foreign volunteer.' As a SEAL, my hands were tied, but as a hired gun, I can cut through all the red tape.

"Bianchi didn't wait until I left the hospital to have it out with me. When you guys came to visit me, Lucky Luca apparently saw Jo with me and reported back to Bianchi. The fact Jo showed an attachment is the only reason Lorenzo called off the hit. He said something about not wanting to upset his *'amore'* by killing me. Instead, I've been banished from the family."

"The fucker better watch himself," I growl. It's not like I didn't know Bianchi had an unhealthy infatuation with Jo, but hearing him call her his 'love' today on the road, and learning he refers to her as such in front of his men, makes me boil.

Tony gives me a hard look. "Atlas, I respect you a hell of a lot, and I know you don't take shit, but you can't underestimate Bianchi. The man has been obsessed with Jo since he first met her. When all hell was breaking loose a couple of weeks ago, Lorenzo wasn't only interested in offering his assistance to guard Jo. He wanted intel on her—where she ran, when she slept, who her friends were, everything. All of it had to be reported, regardless of how private. I started to hold shit back because I worried how he was going to use the info against her."

My eyes narrow. "You're lucky you're concussed right now, else I'd be beating the shit out of you."

Tony barks a laugh. "Not that it wouldn't be fun to go a couple of rounds with you, but you're not going to hurt me for

the same reason why Bianchi won't hurt me. Jo would skin you alive."

With a grimace, I look away from him and back at the game on the television. He's right. I'm not going to hurt anyone Josephine cares about.

"Now, are you going to tell me how you 'ran' into Lorenzo?" he asks inquisitively.

Again, I grimace. "I'd rather not."

Tony cell pings and he scrolls through his text messages. His eyes grow wider as he reads a fucking long ass text. I groan because there's only one person I know who sends fucking book-long messages—my Pixie.

Tony's eyebrows are to his hairline when he looks over at me. "What in the hell possessed you to go and invite her parents to the wedding?"

"Why the fuck is she telling you any of this?" I sulk. "You two gossip like high school chicks."

"We text every day." Tony laughs as he reads more. "Oh, man! Your ass is toast."

I'm not surprised the two have gotten close, especially after the Jacob fiasco. "Well, since she's filled you in on the details, I can tell you she ran off on me and was walking her sweet little ass back to work when Bianchi stopped her. I came right behind them on my hog, and you can imagine the rest."

Tony types a text back to Josephine—*LOL* it looks like from where I'm sitting—before he looks back at me. "It's no coincidence Bianchi was driving by and happen to spot Jo. My guess is he's still having your girl watched. If you leave her alone for a minute, he'll be all over her like flies on shit. He's a sleaze who is used to getting what he wants. It bothers him to high hell he can't seal the deal with Jo.

"Look, I don't know what the fucker has planned, but I can tell you his end game is to have her on his arm. It's a good thing you're packing. Watch your back because he's definitely waiting for an opportunity to take you out of the equation. If I were you, I'd put protection detail on Jo again, pronto."

“I had Punk and Reaper with her at all times when I was gone,” I snap.

“And it’s the only reason why he didn’t confront her while you were away,” he fires back, setting down his empty beer bottle. “I know you’re keen on grabbing this Esteban drug lord and all, but the real threat is the one who’s close to home. Jo turning Bianchi down has made this his favorite game. The more she refuses him, the more compelled he becomes on winning her. The cocksucker won’t stop ‘till he gets what he wants—it’s not in his nature to back down.”

“I knew it was a shit idea when Gauge suggested we take Bianchi up on his offer to help with guard duty,” I mutter before downing the rest of my beer.

“Don’t blame Gauge. Bianchi’s a smooth talker. I’ve seen him talk his way out of trouble with the law and talk his way into a poor victim’s house right before offing them.” He rises from the recliner to grab more beers.

“What are you going to do for work?”

Tony hands me another beer and sighs. “Not a fucking clue. I can easily get a security job working at one of the clubs downtown or back in Denver, but I don’t know.”

An idea dawns on me. I want to expand my company and planned to hire more men. “How about working security detail for me?”

Tony does a double-take. “You want me to work for you? Me—ex-mafioso?”

“Why not? You already know what I expect. Jo will have no problem hanging with you when I’m not available. You know my crew and what my MC represents. My company deals with security, which specializes in a gun for hire and recon. You check all the boxes—retired military who specializes in security.”

“I’m not a SEAL,” he reminds me.

“You’re a brother in arms,” I counter.

“I don’t own a hog,” he points out.

I shrug. “It’s not a requirement. But do you know how to ride one?”

“Yes.”

“Would you ride one or get your own?”

Tony scratches his jaw. “Yes. I mean, I like to ride.”

“Well, you’ll fit in fine.” I take a pull from my beer, sitting back to watch the game as I give him time to mull it over.

Tony stares at his hands. “You’d really hire me on?”

“Tony, do you want the job or not?” I ask, mildly irritated.

Tony hesitates. “Yeah, I want the job.”

“Good. Now shut up, finish your beer with me, and watch the damn game. You start tomorrow. Come out to the build site and dress like fucking MC. No more suits and shit unless the job calls for it.”

Tony grins back at me before reclining his chair to watch the game.

A couple of hours later, I leave Tony’s and return to the build site. Josephine is making her last rounds for the day and Punk trails behind like a good watchdog.

Talking with each construction worker is not something most architectural engineers typically do, but it’s standard practice for her. Josephine’s team adores her, and it’s a lot to do with her caring about all of them, not only with the work they do but in their personal lives too.

The second crew whom she hired has quickly fallen in love with her as well. There have been whispers amongst the workers, hoping she’ll take them out of temporary help and making them permanent fixtures.

With all the contract jobs she has scheduled between finishing the MC headquarters, our new home, Lloyd’s barbershop, and now a cottage for her parents, it’s safe to say

she will be offering all of them full-time positions with Holland Build and Design Solutions.

I match my pace with hers as she approaches her last worker for the day. Cliff is overseeing the landscaping, which will be going in next week. The two of them talk shop while going over the upcoming deliveries of trees, shrubs, flowers, dirt, and mulch. They grow giddy the more they brainstorm about the project. It's cute watching my woman geek out over her work.

Punk seems uneasy, watching me out of the corner of his eye, and I have no fucking clue why. I'm about to ask him what gives when Cliff walks away, but Josephine turns to me.

Reaper approaches us, cracking his neck, and acting like he's about to go into battle. "Let's do this," he says, jacked up.

"Do what?" I ask, eyeing the three of them curiously.

Josephine scowls at my brother. "Reaper, you jackass, I wanted to do this at home in private."

Reaper throws her a desperate look. "Or we could not do anything."

Say what?! Something's up and I want to know now. Waiting 'till we get somewhere private is only going to make me more anxious and temperamental.

Josephine looks resigned as she does her meditative breathing. She's obviously the spokesperson. Reaper is bouncing back and forth on his toes like he does when he's about to get in the boxing ring. He must be the muscle to stop me going off the rails, seeing as he's the closest to my size. And Punk stands there with his arms across his lean chest, his face skyward, completely uncomfortable.

I pop my own neck and knuckles in preparation for battle. What has them all worked up, I have no clue, but I'm about to find out.

I eye my gorgeous Pixie. "All right, spill."

She looks at me, tentatively. "You know the night terrors I was having the first week after, well, after 'the incident?'"

Josephine refers to Jacob attacking her as ‘the incident’ since it’s difficult for her to say his name.

Confused, I nod but say nothing.

Josephine blows out a big whoosh of air. “Well, after you left for Los Angeles, I started having more of them, a lot more, sometimes two or three in a short span of time.”

Shit. Here I was telling Josephine’s parents she was improving and I come to find out things have regressed.

“Aw, Jo,” I coo, pulling her into my arms. “I’m glad you told me, but seriously, you never have to be worried about telling me anything. Having my brothers as your back up isn’t necessary.”

Punk and Reaper exchange a look. Obviously, I only know half the story. I side-eye my men. “What else?”

Punk shakes his head adamantly, and Reaper cracks his knuckles.

“They did everything they could to calm me, but each night terror was followed with me going into a panic attack. The two of them took turns restraining me and were awake all night. Hades was guarding all night, too—the first alert system.

“I went to counseling the next day and talked at length with my therapist. That night Opal offered to sleep with me in the bed, and I accepted. My night terror was bad, and I struck out and hit Opal,” Josephine says against my chest, shame lacing her voice.

Jesus. I know she can get violent during a night terror, but I’m used to taking a beating—Opal is not.

Reaper starts chuckling. “Gauge is going to be pissed once he sees you bruised her perfect fucking globes.”

Josephine glowers at Reaper. “I’m relieved I didn’t punch her in the face.”

“The point is we tried everything to help combat the attacks. We weren’t going to risk Opal getting beat again or any of the other bunnies. We got scared later that night after

she woke from another night terror, and her panic attack following it was off the charts, to the point she passed out. After it happened for the third time, I crawled in bed with her and held her. It was the only thing that helped.

“When Hades sensed one coming on, he would start whimpering and wake me up. I would hold her tight and rock her as she went through the motions. The attacks were less severe, and at least she wasn’t passing out anymore,” Punk says quickly.

Come again? Punk spooned my Pixie? Tension builds in my body and I lock up, holding Josephine against me in a possessive hug. I open my mouth to speak, but Josephine is already rambling.

“I went back to counseling the next day, hoping more treatment was all I needed,” Josephine defends. “But it wasn’t enough. And the third night started out worse than the other two.”

Reaper pipes in. “So, I slept with her instead and gave Punk the night off.”

Josephine, Punk, and I glare at him before he grasps what he said.

“I mean, I slept next to her, not *with* her,” he amends quickly with a look of horror.

“I was at counseling again this morning, but it’s not helping with this current issue,” Josephine pacifies.

And now I know what’s been going on while I was gone. Two different men—my brothers—slept in the same bed with my half-naked angel...OH MY GOD!

I pinch the bridge of my nose and squeeze my eyes tight, crushing Josephine against me. “Please tell me you wore clothes while you slept.”

Josephine likes to only sleep in her panties. It was a nightmare for the first few weeks when she stayed with me in the rental with all my crew. I share a room with three of my brothers, and more than once, they got a good eyeful of her exposed butt cheeks while she only wore a thong.

It was a struggle to get her to keep her tank top on the first few nights, but she seemed to work it out without stripping in her sleep. Usually, the compromise is no covers. Hence, why Gauge, Chase, and Punk are nearly as familiar with her *derrière* as I am.

“Of course, I did!” she squawks. I open my eyes to look at my upset fiancée.

“I actually slept in one of your tee shirts every night, along with bed shorts,” she says softly.

“It was like she was in a giant muumuu,” Reaper adds

Josephine shrugs against me. “I wanted to wear something that smelled like you.”

Aw! My woman wearing my clothes to bed gets me right in the heart. I raise an eyebrow and look at both my brothers. “And you?”

“I wore gym shorts. Scouts’ honor,” Punk says, crisscrossing his heart.

Reaper rubs his stubbly beard. “I wore my boxers.”

My jaw ticks back and forth, and I glower at him murderously.

“And a tee-shirt,” he adds with a smirk. He just has to fuck with me. “At least I had my pecs covered.”

Punk’s nostrils flare, shooting daggers at Reaper. “I hopped in the bed with her on instinct. It wasn’t like I had the forethought to throw a shirt on beforehand.”

Reaper laughs his ass off at Punk’s discomfort.

“I swear, Atlas. There was nothing sexual about it. I’m not saying it’s not fucked up because it is, but you’re my brother, and she’s my sister,” Punk defends. “And in Jo’s defense, she was unyielding about telling you all of this because there’s nothing to hide.”

With a heavy sigh, I nod my head. I may not like what happened, but I believe everything they’re saying, especially

after witnessing Josephine having a full-blown panic attack back at the condo.

Looking at my beautiful woman, I rub my hands along her back. “What’s going on, Josephine?”

She shakes her head. “You’ll say I’m letting my imagination run wild. I’m pretty sure my counselor is ready to call the psych ward.”

I bend to look her in the eyes. “Josephine, there’s nothing wrong with you. You went through some heavy shit when Jacob kidnapped you.”

Josephine straightens her shoulders. “This isn’t about what *he* did to me. I have no proof, and it’s only a feeling. But I swear to God, I feel like I’m being watched, constantly.”

Punk and Reaper hiss in unison. “You never mentioned shit to us,” Punk says angrily.

“I mentioned it to my counselor after the first night Maceo was gone. She said it was normal to feel anxious after an attack, and what I was likely feeling was residual from my encounter with Jacob and nothing more.”

Punk and Reaper grumble but say nothing else.

My mind recalls my conversation with Tony. “When did you start feeling like you were being watched?”

Josephine looks at me sheepishly. “Since Jacob attacked me, but it seemed to magnify when you left with Gauge to go see my parents.”

“Whoa! What?” Punk asks, dumbfounded. “You went to see Jo’s parents?”

“Can we talk about it later?” I chide. “I’m more concerned about Jo at the moment.”

“I don’t want you to fly into a rage and assume this is Esteban when I have no proof,” Josephine says quickly. She’s probably nervous about me retaliating out of emotion rather than using commonsense.

Holding her close. “I don’t think you’re overreacting, and I don’t believe it’s Esteban who’s watching you.”

“You don’t?” all three of them say at once.

I tell them about my conversation with Tony and what he mentioned about Bianchi. Punk and Reaper both curse, and Josephine goes silent.

“It makes sense if the activity picked up right after I left Josephine. He was waiting for a moment he could ambush her like he did today on the road.”

“Again, what the fuck am I missing? Why was Josephine alone on the road? Weren’t you with her?” Punk sputters in disbelief, pissed. I would be all over any of my brothers if they let her out of their sights, and here she was under my care, and I let her run off.

Josephine and I give each other a look before giving in and telling them how Bianchi came across Josephine unguarded.

“If we’ve been fucking tailed this whole time, I’m going to lose my shit,” Punk says angrily.

“There’s no way. We totally would have caught someone peeping on us,” Reaper says defiantly, folding his thick muscled arms over his barrel chest.

I nod. “I agree with you, but what if it wasn’t an actual person following you?”

Reaper looks confused. “What? You mean like a drone?”

“Or someone who flies a drone,” Punk says, catching on.

“Exactly,” I say.

“Huh?” Reaper scratches his head, clearly not following.

“Bianchi has his very own Chase,” Punk elaborates.

Reaper finally understands. “He has a cyber hacker.”

“Bianchi probably still has eyes and ears on the ground, but I’m willing to bet he has been monitoring Josephine’s every move through the city cameras. He took a special interest in Chase and his hacking abilities. I’m going to have

Chase's team do a sweep of the build site and rental to make sure there are no bugs or hidden cameras," I say.

Josephine's brows pull together. "You don't suppose it's my imagination?"

"No, I don't," I say reassuringly. "I do believe this has *everything* to do with Bianchi. Grab your cell and computer. I'm going to have Chase check everything for bugs."

Punk runs a hand over his shaved head. "Ah, shit. You think we have one planted on us?"

"Only one way to find out," Reaper says. "Most of the guys will be back from the Florida mission tomorrow. We can start with everyone here and see if anyone has been bugged. Do you believe the rental has been compromised?"

"God, I hope not," I mutter.

"How would anyone gain access to the rental?" Josephine asks. "Chase has it locked up like Guantanamo Bay."

"It would have to be an inside job," Punk says, and we all curse.

"There's no way any of the crew would have turned," Josephine says defiantly, making my heart swell with pride. She loves my brothers as much as I do.

"Don't worry, we'll sort it out," I reassure her with a wink.

We pull up to the MC rental around five. It won't be long until we move out of this micro-size dump and in the new spacious headquarters.

I can't wait for our own room, with a giant bed, and no bunkmates. Josephine doesn't let me fuck her in the rental, aside from the shower, and honestly, I'm glad. I can tolerate a lot of things, but having one of my brothers watching me ravish her in bed is not one of them.

I've barely helped Josephine off my bike when Hades comes barreling out of the garage and leaps into my arms. The dog clearly missed me while I was away. I bring him to the ground and let him lick me all over before playing with him. He barks happily before making a beeline to his *mamá*. She bends and plants a big kiss on his black velvet snout. He whines with happiness and bounds back into the garage, where he flops next to Chase.

I look at my watch and grimace. We have a short window to get showered and meet her parents for dinner. I have yet to break the lovely news to Josephine. I didn't want to agree to dinner, but Stella insisted. I said yes to keep the peace, but I'm kicking myself for caving. Josephine could really use a night away from her parents to calm down, but I'm the schmuck who couldn't tell her mother no.

I lean in to kiss Josephine. "Can you get a shower going for us? I need to have a quick word with Chase." She kisses me again before sashaying her delectable ass all the way into the house.

On my way to the garage, Candy rushes out the rental side door by the kitchen and intercepts me. I groan because I already know what she wants to talk about.

"Atlas, I'm glad you're home. You wouldn't believe the shit going on behind your back. I'm sorry to break it to you, but your fiancée is cheating on you with Punk and Reaper. Even Opal got in on it. You don't deserve this," she rambles frantically, rushing to get it all out before anyone can stop her.

I fold my arms over my chest. If I had never heard the truth come from Josephine, I still would have been able to detect Candy's lie, with her shifty eyes and dilating pupils.

"Candy," I say, "first of all, I know you're lying, and Jo's not cheating on me." I go on to run down all the reasons why I know Candy's lying and watch her face grow beet-red with each word. "Lastly, they all beat you to the punch. This news is old as fuck."

Candy stares at me in shock. I guess she's surprised Josephine confessed what the sleeping arrangements were.

I give her a hard look. “Candy, it seems to me, you have a problem with my fiancée.”

“I’m only looking out for you,” she whispers, shame lacing her tone.

“By badmouthing my woman and lying to my face?”

Candy gulps.

“I told you once before if I heard you talking shit about her again, I would throw you out,” I remind her.

“Please, no, Atlas. I’m sorry I exaggerated, but I wanted you to know what happened,” she pleads.

My eyebrows narrow. “Josephine has been nothing but sweet to you after you both had it out, and this is how you repay her? Trying to drive a wedge between my future wife and me? Your excuse is weak, and I’m tired of your bullshit. Between the crap you pull with my woman and Opal, and attempting to sabotage the brotherhood I have with two of my men, I’ve had enough.”

Candy’s eyes widen with horror. “Atlas, I beg of you, don’t kick me out. I have nowhere to go. I can’t go back to the streets.”

“No more insubordination will be tolerated. Do I make myself clear?” I warn, glaring at her shrinking figure.

Candy whimpers. “I’m sorry, Atlas. It won’t happen again.”

I grumble before moving past her to the garage where Chase, my third-in-command, is working. Gauge sits on one of the stools with Opal perched on his knee. From the look on his face, I can guess Candy tried painting Opal as a cheater too.

Opal, pretty as a picture, has tears running down her cheeks. I have a sudden urge to make good on my threat to Candy. Opal is gentle and needs defending from jealous bitches. If Josephine saw Opal in this state, she would gouge out Candy’s eyes with her bare hands.

I look Gauge square in the eye. “Your woman did nothing wrong. Punk and Reaper never touched her or Josephine.”

Gauge looks at me and back to his woman. He tucks her rainbow streaked blond hair behind her ear and gives her a kiss on her temple. “I know Candy’s lying. My girl would never go behind my back, but she hurt Opal’s feelings. You know my girl is soft—never says a bad thing about anyone. She’s upset and doesn’t understand why Candy would do that.”

“There’s no fucking reason for it other than Candy’s a conniving *puta*,” I hiss. I bend over and kiss the top of Opal’s head, letting her know she’s loved and protected. She gives me a sad smile and leans into Gauge.

Chase, my third in command, glares at me from where he sits at his temporary control center. “Candy has to go. Conspiring to get not only Jo and Opal into trouble, but two of *our* brothers is an attack on the club.”

I agree. “She says she has nowhere to go.”

Chase shakes his head, frustrated. “I can’t fucking stand her, Prez. She’s been all over me lately, in my business, and pretending she’s interested in what I’m doing. I can’t go anywhere without her popping up. She’s only looking for the next highest-ranked club member to fuck her, and you know I don’t want an old lady.”

I know exactly what Chase means. I was the same way, loving my freedom and the joy of a casual hook-up when the need arose until Josephine ran into my world and changed my mind.

Chase shudders. “It creeps me out. I’m afraid one day I’ll wake up to her standing over me in a wedding dress. That’s how bad she’s been. Now she’s pulling this shit on Jo, Opal, and two of our crew—fucking treacherous witch.”

Opal snuffles, and Gauge is quick to tilt her chin and give her a kiss. She melts in his embrace. Watching the two of them makes me eager to get inside and kiss my own beautiful woman.

“Candy will be dealt with later. We have a bigger issue.” I fill them in on everything that transpired today.

Chase tugs his hair out of his bun, something he does when he's frustrated. "How the fuck am I supposed to keep track of all of this? I don't have the equipment or manpower to tackle everything. Plus, I'm doing the books for the company on top of all this shit—I'm drowning here, Prez."

I lay a reassuring hand on Chase's shoulder. "I'm giving you Butch and Ziggy fulltime. We have another man joining our crew tomorrow who will be part of our security detail. Josephine is nearly done with the headquarters, and your state of the art tech room will be available by next week. I suppose it's time we start looking for an accountant for our company too."

Both Chase and Gauge look surprised. It's rare if I make a presidential decision without seeking their opinions, especially Gauge. "Who's joining the team?" Gauge asks while Chase asks, "I seriously get to move in next week?"

"Yes, you get to move in after Josephine's crew goes through and cleans it first. It's still pretty dusty from the construction," I say to Chase before looking over at Gauge. "And Tiny Tony has been banished from Bianchi's family. He's a former Marine and has the security experience. I offered him the job, but we'll decide as a crew if we want him to patch into the Mercy Ravens' family."

Gauge's eyes narrow. "I don't mind Tony. He's more than qualified for the job, but is it wise to hire him? Are we sure he isn't an inside man who Lorenzo is planting?"

I completely understand Gauge's concern. "You weren't there when Bianchi spoke of his displeasure for the guy. Josephine will validate my account of the confrontation. Tony took a bat to the head for her. The least I can do is give him a job."

Gauge nods. "Alright. Will he only be working security, or do recon and missions too?"

"I offered him a security position, but I'll let you handle getting the details on his military background. Offer it to him if he has the qualifications, but if he's not interested, don't

push it. He left the Marines after eight years because he couldn't handle the aftermath.”

Gauge gives the thumbs-up and returns his attention back to Opal, whispering sweet nothings in her ear. She leans into him as he swallows her up in his arms. I'm glad he's finally acknowledging his relationship with her, even though he had good reasons for pushing her away.

I look back at Chase. “I want a sweep done of our rental and the build site. Hell, do one at Josephine's condo too. If what Tiny Tony told me is true, I wouldn't put it past Bianchi's sleazy ass to spy on us. And I want you to hack his hacker.”

Chase rolls his brown eyes. “Sweeps are no problem, but hacking a hacker...I'd have better luck breaching the CIA's cyber walls. Most hackers cover their tracks to avoid being caught. This isn't me poking around and seeing what I can find. This is dark web shit you want.”

I give him a smile, confident in his ability. “And if there is a guy for the job, it's you. Find the bastard responsible, and I'll get you another bottle of Pappy. Can you do it?”

Chase's eyes shine. “I didn't say it was impossible.”

“Good,” I say and head out of the garage to the house where a hot shower and my steamy fiancée wait for me.

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CHAPTER FOUR

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I've waited over ten minutes for Maceo to join me in the shower, and I'm done scrubbing myself. I'm nearly ready to give up on shower sex when the curtain is pulled back, and Maceo's glorious naked form climbs in beside me. His fully engorged staff stands proudly on display.

I bite my lower lip, heat flooding my veins, clenching low in my belly.

Yes! This is what I wanted. Gimmie, gimmie, gimmie!

Shower sex with Maceo is definitely one of the best ways to get clean while getting dirty. My pussy is already wet with anticipation for this homecoming.

His black eyes smolder as he steps closer to me, making me instantly gush between my thighs. He wraps his heavily muscled arms around me and crushes his full, velvet lips on mine, bruising my mouth with his unrelenting assault.

I gasp when his rough, calloused fingers tug on one of my pert nibbles. He takes advantage of my open mouth by slanting his, swiping his tongue along with mine. Our tongues clash in a frenzied battle, sucking and caressing each other.

I rise on my toes and throw my arms around his thick neck to deepen our kiss, my breasts leaning harder into his palms. There's nothing quite like his wandering hands on my flesh—it triggers my heart to pump faster.

My hands slip from his neck and slide over his perfectly sculpted back, exploring his muscles, and settle on the two

dimples on both sides of his spine, right above his firm ass cheeks.

A growl of approval rumbles in his throat, and the sound sends shivers of pleasure along my spine, making me moan into his mouth.

His fingers release my overly sensitized nipples before his hands take me by the waist, spin me around, and push my chest gently into the wall of the shower. My body thrums with excitement when he nudges my legs apart.

“You know what your little sounds do to me,” he croons, nipping my earlobe.

I moan again because I can’t help myself. I need to feel more of him. “Maceo, stop teasing and take me.”

He gives a primal snarl before ramming his steel cock into my hot, deprived sex.

I cry out as he sinks himself to the hilt. We remain unmoving, letting his iron shaft stretch my tight sheath—Maceo’s cock is larger than life, and I need time to adjust around him before he goes to work. He rumbles against my neck causing my skin to pucker into goosebumps. “Christ, you’re tight.”

I whimper when he pulls nearly all the way out and slams back home, but this time he doesn’t stop to give me time to adjust. This time he starts a fast pace, fucking me into the wall of the shower.

Finally! I’ve missed this side of Maceo.

His frenum piercing drags back and forth along my G-spot, making me nearly combust after a few strokes. I mewl with pleasure, never wanting this to end. Greedily, I reach between my legs and take hold of his heavy balls, tugging down gently to delay his release.

“Uh-uh.” He releases my hips, grabs both my hands, and plants them flat against the tile wall. “You will not stop me from claiming what’s mine. I won’t be denied my orgasm. You will take my cock like a good girl and not stop me.”

Oooh, I love it when he gets all domineering. “You love claiming me, don’t you?”

“Absolutely.” He purrs against my neck, and my pussy instantly pulses against his thick pipe. He yanks himself out and raises his head to the ceiling, trying hard to stop himself from blowing his load.

Maceo groans but, thankfully, is able to control his release. “You she-devil with your wicked pussy—you undo me.” He bucks into me once again and increases the tempo.

The harder he pumps, the higher I get on my toes. Suddenly, his arms circle around my waist, lifting me ‘till my feet dangle from the ground. I’m completely impaled on his gloriously hard shaft as he fucks me ragged. The slapping of our thighs meeting echoes off the bathroom walls.

My hands fly behind me and fist his wet hair and I clench around his cock. “Mmm,” I moan loudly, riding out my orgasm. His lips clamp down on my neck as he grunts his own release with one final thrust.

Slowly, Maceo lowers me back to my feet but remains deep inside of me. I know if we stay in this position long enough, we’ll have round two. I’m more than willing, but he pulls out of me, his come seeping down my thighs.

Maceo turns me around to kiss me and laughs at the pout on my face. “Baby, I would love nothing more than to go again, but the water is getting cold, and we have dinner plans.”

We definitely didn’t have plans to go out tonight, which means this is a setup. Folding my arms over my chest, I scowl. “You’re trying to pull a sneak-attack.”

He grimaces, confirming my suspicions.

I roll my eyes, making quick work of washing myself a second time, and get out. Maceo is right behind me, worry etched in his face. He knows I’m pissed *again*.

“Are my parents joining us?”

Maceo’s cheeks puff before releasing the air. “Yeah.”

“For real, Maceo?!”

“Your mom wouldn’t take no for answer, and I really didn’t want to start another fight.”

“Were you going to take me to dinner and surprise me with my parents waiting for us?” I accuse.

Maceo opens his mouth to defend himself but quickly clamps it shut, knowing he has no argument.

“Whose side are you on?” I ask with a hurt voice.

He runs his hands up and down my damp arms. “Yours, baby. Always yours.”

“If you were on my side, you wouldn’t be plotting an ambush. You’re shooting three for three right now, and none of it is winning you any favors,” I grit, stepping away to dry off.

Maceo sighs but says nothing else as we get dressed.

Spitefully, I insist we drive my Subaru to the restaurant. Maceo loves nothing more than to ride us anywhere with me snug against his back on his bike. I’m surprised when he doesn’t protest, which honestly pisses me off. I want him just as upset as me. He brought this hellfire down on himself. Frustrated, I grind my teeth.

He tries to placate me by turning on my playlist, but I quickly shut it off. He’s a cunning man who knows music calms my inner bitch, but I’m not having it tonight. I will be wearing *bitch* like armor for this torturous event.

Maceo sighs deeply and tries to take my hand. I pull it away and fold my arms over my chest defiantly.

“Pixie, please,” he pleads with me, holding out his hand.

My eyes narrow as I look over at him. He looks upset. And fuck me, I hate seeing him looking like a kicked puppy.

With a huff, I drop my hand in his, ignoring how comforting his touch is. I look out the passenger window,

denying him my undivided attention. Maceo is an attention-whore, and I know my rebellious act will get under his skin.

I can feel his eyes turn to me several times as we drive. As angry as I am with him, my eyes keep sneaking peeks at him too, especially with how handsome he looks in fitted dark-blue jeans and a black button-down, highlighting all his gorgeousness.

His dark good looks are a combination of his Spaniard and Colombian heritage. He rarely dresses this suave, but he's trying to match me in my body-hugging black dress. Did he believe dressing up would score him some brownie points and make me happy?

Well, too fucking bad—no one is going to be happy tonight, because I'm sure as fuck am not happy. I will spread my unhappiness with everyone since I'm an equal opportunity bitch to all.

When we get to the steak house, Maceo parks the car. He tucks a wild hair of mine behind my ear, and my body zings from his loving caress. He knows his touch affects me and he braves a quick kiss to my cheek.

I turn and look at him full on. His dark eyes hypnotize me, and he takes advantage of my moment of weakness by capturing my lips. His kiss is urgent and demanding, and I give in because I hate denying him. *Way to hold out, Jo.*

He breaks the kiss and leans his forehead against mine. "It's an hour, two tops. Afterward, we'll go home and cuddle, I promise."

Cuddling sounds magical, like the perfect dessert.

Maceo hops out and runs around to open my door—always the gentleman. I climb out, eager to get this shit over with. Maceo walks beside me into the upscale restaurant, his warm palm guiding me at the small of my back. My parents are seated near the front, noticing us immediately.

This dinner is already going to be tension-filled as is. I try to shelve my hostility as we walk to the table, anything to make this experience less painful. Hellos are exchanged, and

Maceo helps me into my seat. He lowers himself next to me, takes my hand in his, and brings it to his lips for a chaste kiss. I know he's trying to relax me, but it's useless. I busy myself, scanning over my menu to avoid engaging my parents.

Maceo and my parents go back and forth with pleasantries, and I fight my eye roll.

Anger is the dominant feeling I'm experiencing, but I'm also hurt. A small part of me acknowledges if my parents hadn't been such huge dicks, I may not have moved out to Colorado and met Maceo. Should I be thanking them for pushing me away?

Maceo squeezes my hand gently, urging me to join in the conversation. I ready myself to talk, but I'm saved when the waiter comes to take our orders. My parents order cocktails and Maceo orders his whiskey neat. I order my bourbon on the rocks, as well as a bottle of wine. Alcohol is definitely going to make this dinner more bearable. We order our food and the table falls silent.

Everyone seems to be looking at me to make the first move, and I don't like the attention.

My mom clears her throat. "Six weeks 'till the wedding. Exciting, right?"

I nod and take a sip of my water to avoid talking.

Mom tries to engage me again. "I can't imagine planning a wedding in such a short period of time. Are you prepared?"

"It's all good," I state, but once again, Maceo goes over my head.

"Josephine has tackled everything like a boss. She's ridiculously organized and has this whole binder with a spreadsheet she put together for everything we have done for the wedding. But we still have a list of things we need to complete, and Josephine has her hands full with construction projects," he says.

My mom catches on to Maceo's hint. "You still have things to check off your list?"

I shake my head ‘no,’ but Maceo bobs his head ‘yes.’

“We have all these little things to finish,” Maceo continues.

“Do you need any help?” Mom’s enthusiasm is over the top.

Again, I shake my head. “Nope. We got it covered.”

“Oh, but baby, you told me you needed my help with picking bible verses and such for the ceremony,” Maceo reminds me. “And the song we dance to during the reception.”

I shoot him a warning glare—the kind of look which screams ‘don’t make me throat punch you.’ I know what he’s doing. He’s trying to wrangle my mom into helping me with the wedding duties, allowing him to bail.

Well, tough shit.

“Those are intimate things only the couple should pick out *together*,” I say firmly. He cannot force me into having a relationship with my parents, nor should he try—it’s still raw.

Maceo nods his head but continues to push his luck. “It will be fun to have your mom help with some of the details, like the color napkins, table settings, and centerpieces.”

“Opal is helping me,” I lie. I wish Opal could help me, but she’s busy studying for her final exams to get her GED. I would never impose on her now.

Maceo raises his eyebrow at me, knowing I’m lying. “Opal has more important things to worry about with school,” he says sternly, his eyes darkening.

If he believes he can bully me into working with my mother, he’s out of his damn mind. Even if my mom and I were on good terms, I would not ask for her help—we don’t agree on anything.

“I can help. I’d love to help, actually,” my mom says, hopeful.

There are a million nasty comments on the tip of my tongue, but my mom is not the person I’m upset with at the

moment.

“Thank you for offering, but the person I want involved is my fiancé. But apparently, he wants nothing to do with the planning.”

Maceo shakes his head and squeezes my hand. “Not true.”

“How is it not? I’ve been running the whole show. You’re the one who asked today what you could do to help me, and I told you what I needed. But you must not have meant it since you’re so eager to give your responsibilities to anyone else,” I say flippantly.

“I’m not suggesting just anyone help us. I’m suggesting your mom.”

“Stop pawning me off on my mother,” I snap, yanking my hand away.

“This is my wedding too, and I want your mom involved,” Maceo says in a slightly louder voice. It wasn’t an order exactly, but it sure fucking felt like one.

Oh, no he didn’t!

My head turns slowly to give him my death glare. He has gone too far.

Realizing his mistake, Maceo sits back in his seat and raises his hands slowly, as if to say, ‘calm down.’

There’s no flipping the switch back to casual.

“You’re right. It’s your wedding too. Start carrying your own weight and do the few fucking tasks I assigned you, and I’ll take care of the rest. Oh, and I’ve decided there’ll be *no* honeymoon. I’ll be too busy working.” I grab my clutch, rise from my chair, and storm off.

Yes, I know I’m running—*again*—but I simply can’t handle the fury swirling around inside me. I need a couple of minutes to cool off. If I’m forced to deal with this intense anger before I’ve calmed down, I will go fucking ballistic on everyone.

The sound of a chair sliding across the floor alerts me Maceo's on my heels, but he can't enter the ladies' room. I dash inside and hear him curse. I trudge into the farthest stall, flip the toilet lid closed, and sit my ass down with a huff.

This day has been a continuous shit train. I keep trying to jump off, but everyone keeps pulling me back. I should be elated right now, with Maceo being back home and our wedding in six short weeks, but all I feel is miserable and disheartened. I've worked hard to surround myself with positivity after I fled California, and now Maceo has drug the most negative people back into my life.

Why would he do this to me? Is he punishing me for something I'm unaware of?

A toilet flushes, followed by a running sink. The last person leaves the restroom, leaving me in solitude. I take the private moment to let myself meditate.

I hear a deep, muffled voice outside the door and know Maceo is talking with someone. It's only a matter of time before he gets impatient and barges in here to confront me. Maceo has no concept of giving me space—it's both an endearing and maddening trait of his. He means well, but it can be smothering.

I pull my cell out from my clutch and text my best friend.

Can you pick me up at the Wilderness Steak House? The three of them are ganging up on me.

Jared responds immediately. **Atlas already called me and told me not to interfere or else he'd skin me alive. Sorry, but I actually believe he would.**

I growl, irritated. I heard Maceo talking outside the bathroom, but I assumed he was talking with my parents. Now I know he's trying to prevent me from escaping. I strain my ears to hear if he's still on the phone with him. He's talking rapidly to someone.

Heated, I fire a text back. **Chicken shit!**

Jared texts back. **Sorry, but he's way bigger than me.**

Hmm. Jared's words trigger an idea.

I fire off a text to Tony. **Mayday! Mayday! I need your help.**

The dots appear to show me he's responding.

"Don't you fucking dare!" I hear Maceo's muffled voice growl out. Shit, he must be on the phone with Tony now.

I fire off another text. **Tony, please!**

The dots stop and start again.

There's knocking on the bathroom door. "Pixie, are you alone?"

I ignore him and look back at my cell. Tony has responded.

I want to help, Little Jo, but he threatened to fire my ass before I even start. I kind of need the job.

Motherfucker! I wasted all this time, reaching out to the wrong people. I should have called one of the bunnies.

Maceo's calls from the doorway again. "Josephine, I'm coming in."

Jesus. I look around the stall frantically and notice a small window above the toilet. *Huh, would you look at that.*

Now, a normal person would forfeit at this point, but I'm far from normal. The window is tiny, but I'm tinier. For once, I'm grateful for the crap recessive genes my parents bestowed on me.

Carefully, I climb on top of the toilet lid, pushing against the window 'till it gives. I step on the back of the toilet and start to hoist myself up.

I'm a runner and have incredibly strong legs, but this feat requires upper body strength. Wincing from my broken ribs, I struggle to pull myself up but manage to get as far as my breastbone when the restroom door swings open.

Desperate, I hurry to pull myself through the open window. Maceo opens the first stall door, and the second, and the third...

Lord, give me strength!

I'm nearly out and I push on the outside walls to leverage myself the rest of the way, but I'm totally stuck. The Lord blessed and cursed me with a booty, and right now, it's definitely a curse.

I whimper as Maceo enters the stall and starts laughing his ass off. "Did you actually believe your luscious derrière was going to fit through there?"

"Yes, I did," I mumble miserably, the fight leaving my body.

"I made you so angry you felt you had to slip out a bathroom window? Fuck, Pixie. I'm such a jackwagon."

"Yeah, you are."

"How can I make this up to you?"

"You could start by helping me out of the window. I'm stuck."

"I still can't believe you thought you'd fit." Maceo giant hands wrap around my waist to free me from the window. The warmth of his touch has me sighing.

Maceo stiffens. "You want me to touch you, baby?" The air thickens with anticipation as his palms slide from my waist over my bottom, caressing my curves. "I kind of like your ass at this height."

Uh-oh! "Maceo, we cannot have sex in a restaurant. My parents are out there."

He sniggers enigmatically as he bunches my skirt to my waist, displaying my thong. "We can do whatever the hell we want so long as we're quiet. You can always tap out by saying, 'ice cream.'"

Our safe word is *ice cream*—he chose it—I was fine with *stop*.

"I mean it, Pixie," Maceo says in a serious voice. "If you're not comfortable with anything I do, you need to use your safe word. You hold all the power, baby."

It certainly doesn't feel like I hold any power stuck in this position, but bailing on a chance to have sex in a public place is not part of my makeup. Public places are kind of *our* thing.

A crack echoes around the bathroom. My ass stings from the swipe of his palm, not painful but not exactly comfortable either.

I wince and try to wiggle back out of the window. Another crack of his hand connects with my exposed bottom. I yelp, my lady bits quivering excitedly. He rubs the sting deep into my skin with his large, calloused hand.

“If you don't want your ass spanked stop shaking it in my face,” he says in a low rumble.

He gives me two mild slaps alternating cheeks. I whimper with wanton desire. “I wasn't shaking it that time.”

His big hands cup and massage my round bottom. “No, but you did plenty today to deserve it.”

My anger flares. “You're such an asshole! Like you didn't contribute to pissing me off?”

Two more mild cracks on my already sore backside. I bite my bottom lip to keep from screaming. My rational side is hollering at me to stop antagonizing him. I'm definitely not in the position to, but my irrational side keeps feeding my inner bitch.

He growls. “Yes, I'm an asshole, but I'm *your* asshole. And now, this asshole wants your asshole.” He rips my thong from my bottom, exposing my sopping sex.

“Maceo—” I try to rein him in, but he's already spreading me wide and rimming my tight sphincter with his devilish tongue.

I groan and try to back myself out of the window, but my effort only pushes my ass further into his greedy face. He moans his yearning, his hands firmly holding my cheeks apart. I feel vulnerable in this position with my legs dangling like a puppet and him forcing me open to his every will.

He circles his tongue around my pussy before diving into my hot entrance. A moan slips from me, and I slap a hand over my mouth, remembering we're in public where anyone could catch us.

This is beyond embarrassing...and naughty.

He laughs against my sex, sending magnificent tremors along my pussy. I mewl loudly against my hand as he continues to fuck me with his tongue.

Maceo's tongue slips out and is replaced by one of his thick fingers, working me into a tizzy. His lips trace their way to my clit, and he sucks it hard. My legs begin to shake as my orgasm brims near the surface.

God, this feels so fucking good!

The rough finger in my pussy vacates and goes straight to my anus, circling twice before returning to my pussy to collect more of my natural lubrication.

"Mmm," I hum in acceptances.

When Maceo's finger returns to my anus, he slowly pushes his way through the tight muscle barrier 'till he's seated to his knuckle, making my body buck. His thumb hooks around and enters my pussy, filling both my holes with his thick fingers. I pant with need, and his tongue flicks relentlessly against my engorged clit, his piercing adding extra zeal to my already stimulated sex.

Maceo's goal must be to turn me into a puddle because he continues his persistent assault on my nether region with licks, nips, and sucks...*oh, my God!*

I'm on the brink of an intense release when the restroom door opens. We both freeze when someone enters the stall closest to the door.

I can feel Maceo smiling against my mound before he vigorously attacks my clit with his naughty tongue.

You wicked, wicked man, Maceo.

Shameful whimpers try to rumble from my throat, but I bite my tongue to stop their escape. I pray for whoever is in

the stall to finish quickly. Seconds later, the person flushes the toilet, washes their hands, and leaves.

As soon as she's gone, I no longer hold back. My pussy contracts around his thick thumb, the slickness from my orgasm flushing over his hand and my thighs. He replaces his thumb with his tongue and laps up my juices frenziedly.

When the last of my tremors subside, Maceo removes his mouth from my snatch and gently tugs my skirt back into place. He grabs me by the hips and pulls me free of the window before placing me gently back on my feet, holding me against him in a warm embrace.

"I was wrong to push your mother's help on you. I was trying to make everyone happy when the person I should have been making happy was you. I'm sorry, Pixie. I've fucked up a lot today, and I promise I'll make it up to you. But can you at least be cordial with them? They're trying baby, but things won't get better if you cut them to ribbons every time they speak," he murmurs against my head.

Sated, I bob my head. He purposely worked me over like this to calm my temper. I'm not going to lie; it worked like a charm.

"And baby, don't run from me. I don't want another man finding you with your butt on display in some window," he says with humor in his deep voice, patting my bottom playfully.

Taking me by the waist, he escorts me from the stall. Quickly, he washes his hands before he takes my hand in his. He peeks his head out the door, making sure the coast is clear, and then pulls us both out into the hall and back to the dining area.

My parents sit patiently at the table with drinks in hand. They glance up, and it's hard to ignore the hope in their faces when we return. It makes me feel slightly bad for losing my cool earlier. Oh hell, whom I'm kidding—I feel really bad.

Maceo helps me into my seat. I wince slightly when my bottom contacts the chair cushion. He notices my discomfort

and runs his hand along the nape of my neck, caressing me softly to combat the soreness he left on my ass.

He holds my stare, desire gleaming in his eyes. It always robs me of air to know I stir such primal yearning in him.

Maceo smirks before running his tongue along his lower lip, where my arousal still lingers. He closes his eyes, savoring the taste of me on his tongue. His chest rises and falls before opening his eyes, black and ablaze.

Damn you, Maceo! Don't be getting all aroused in front of my parents. I shift uneasily in my seat.

He grabs the wine bottle with his free hand and pours me a glass before handing it to me. I take it from him and down it. He refills it, but I push it aside and go for my bourbon instead.

My parents stay quiet, and for once, I relax in their presence. Maceo continues to rub my neck, my shoulders, and upper back while we wait for our meal.

My father takes a sip of his cocktail before addressing me. "How's work going?" Leave it to my dad to stick to safe topics.

"Good. Busy but it's what I signed on for," I say, sipping my bourbon and enjoy the burn. I make eye contact with my dad, and he holds my gaze.

I was always daddy's little girl. Never cared to go shopping with my mom and sister, doing all the things girls typically like. I was more interested in getting my hands dirty, tinkering around in my dad's garage.

As I look at my dad, I see how miserable he is and how hard it is for him to be here beside me, walking around on eggshells and waiting for an opening to step back into my life.

Something shifts inside me, and the wall I'd built around my fragile heart crumbles. I've missed my parents so fucking much. I want the relationship I use to have with them, not this cold, distant, hostile association.

I decide to be brutally honest with them instead of keeping it buried, where it has the tendency to fester 'till it pops like a

pimple.

Needing liquid courage, I take another long sip of my Maker's and set my glass down, looking at my parents.

"I'm fucking hurt by how you treated me. I hate you for not listening to me when I told you I was robbed by my own boyfriend and overlooked for promotions because I'm female. I hate how you didn't support me during one of the hardest points in my life. I hate how, when I told you my ambitions, you belittled me and told me I was foolish. I hate you for pushing me away."

With shaky control, I continue. "I hate you for making me miss your birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and every home improvement project which you damn well know I should have been overseeing."

Grateful for finally having me open up to them, my mom bursts into tears, and my dad struggles to keep his own emotions in check.

"I lost over a year with my family—yes, I chose to leave, but you shunned me. And for what? Because I wanted something more and dreamed of being bigger than bottom rung? You guys worked your asses off to give Simone and me a better life. Why can't you understand I would work my own ass off to go the next step up?"

"Staying with Jacob wasn't going to get me anywhere, and he took advantage of me and our relationship. Four years I poured my heart and soul into that job. I earned that promotion, and it was ripped away by the firm and given to *him*. I deserved better than what he and that company gave me."

My dad reaches his hand across the table to me and takes mine. His emotions getting the best of him as tears fill his blue eyes. "We were foolish to assume you were any different from us. Hard work is in your blood, and we're damn proud of you for finding your own path."

He stands from the table and pulls me into a giant papa bear hug like he used to when I was little. My mom stands and

wraps her arms around both of us.

“I’m still angry with both of you,” I admit.

“It’s okay,” my dad says, looking at me. “We’ll take it one day at a time.”

I nod, and we sit down. Maceo drapes his arm around my shoulder, leaning in to kiss my temple and whispers, “Thank you, Pixie.”

Our food comes, and we all eat and chat about safe topics, like the weather, my work, and anything not related to the wedding or our feud.

Curious if my parents were serious at my condo, I ask, “Are you serious about moving here and coming out of retirement?”

My dad nods. “I’m too bored staying at home. You know me, I’m not happy unless I’m busy.”

I know exactly what he means because I’m the same way.

“Maybe you wouldn’t mind coming to work for me on the builds. Your career as a welder speaks for itself. You could pick your hours—full or part-time—or work when you want, as long as you don’t have a problem with your daughter bossing you around.”

Shocked, all three of them stare at me. Yeah, I’m kind of surprised it came out of my mouth too.

My dad’s eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles. “You’d want to work with your old man?”

“Sure. Why not.”

My dad looks like I handed him the moon. He’s beaming with joy, and I’m rocked by how fucking happy it makes me too.

My mom smiles. “We’ll need to sell our house and find a place here.”

Maceo sets his fork on his empty plate. “You can stay in Josephine’s old condo ‘till it’s sold and after we’ll move you into headquarters. We have six rooms still available. We can

store your items in one of the garages on the property until Josephine has your cottage complete.”

My dad looks uncomfortable. “I’m not sure we can afford a new cottage,” he manages to say. “Josephine’s work is high end and probably well out of our range.”

Maceo raises an eyebrow. “Who said anything about buying it? Josephine and I are gifting it to you.”

Now it’s my turn to be shocked. I’ll build them a wonderful retirement home to their comfort and style, but it costs money to build, and I don’t have much in the bank after investing all of my savings into my company. I’m selling my condo, but I was planning on throwing what I make from the sale at our new home.

Maceo takes my hand and gives me a gentle, reassuring squeeze.

“We couldn’t possibly accept it?” my dad stutters, surprised.

“Why not? You’re bringing your thirty-five years of experience to Josephine’s company, and Stella will provide childcare to our children when the time comes. Your daughter designs beautiful homes. She would be upset if you didn’t live in a place she created. I have the property already, the expense is nothing to me,” Maceo says nonchalantly.

“Dear, I know you do well with your security business, but we can’t take money away from you guys when you’re growing your businesses, building a future home, and planning on starting a family,” my mom interjects.

I have to agree with her. Maceo can’t go around spending all his hard-earned money like it grows on trees.

Maceo throws back the last of his whiskey before looking at both of my parents. “I brought in one million on my last government contract mission with the governor, and that’s not including the stand-by fee I get monthly from state security or any of my other paid assignments.

“My schedule is booked with high paying mercenary gigs and security detail jobs. Our business has been booming, and

we're growing.

“Josephine and I have briefly discussed our finances, but we haven't talked about my net worth yet. She and our future children will be well taken care of if something were to happen to me. I have more than enough in the bank to give you guys a cottage. I want our children to have a relationship with their grandparents the way I had a relationship with my *abuela*.”

I knew Maceo had deep pockets when he hired me to design the MC headquarters, but I didn't know how deep. We agreed to combine our finances after we get married, but I really don't care what he has in his bank accounts. I'm not with him for his money.

My parents look at each other before looking back at him. “Son, we'll take the cottage if you insist, but—” my dad tries to argue again.

“We do insist,” he says with finality, looking at me to see if I agree with him.

How can I possibly tell him he can't give my parents a house? Money isn't the issue, I'm willing to rebuild my relationship with my parents, and he wants our future children to have unbreakable bonds with their grandparents.

Maceo has no living relatives, and he started the Mercy Ravens MC as a way to have a surrogate family of brothers. Family means everything to him, which includes mine.

I'll never deny Maceo what he wants, especially when he's generous with my overbearing parents. I bite my lip, tears sneaking out and rolling down my cheeks.

Maceo's stern demeanor softens when he takes in my face. “Baby,” he whispers lovingly, kissing the tear away.

I close my eyes and lean into him, counting my blessing for having this amazing man in my life.

CHAPTER FIVE

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“**N**o. NO! Lorenzo, stop! HEEELP! Maceo, help me!”

Jesus! I nearly jump through the roof, hearing Josephine’s bloodcurdling screams, waking me from a deep sleep.

Springing into action, I try to grab hold of her swinging limbs. “Baby! Baby, wake up!”

Punk appears at our bunk, helping me restrain her from potentially hurting herself—and others. “Don’t wake her. It’ll send her into a panic attack.”

She breaks through my grasp and clocks me good in the chin. “Christ!” I grit through my teeth and get a hold of her flaying arm again.

The whole room is awake now. Gauge flips on the lights.

“Gauge, no! Turn the lights off. It startles her,” Opal yells over Jo’s cries.

Gauge quickly flips the switch, but it’s too late.

Josephine screams and thrashes wildly on the bed, clawing at the sheets. It takes both Punk and me to hold her down.

Not sure if restraining her helps or hurts her because she seems to fly off the handle. It’s like she got a shot of adrenaline to the heart and turned all Hulk, busting through our hands and kicking out with more strength than I imagined her capable of.

“Don’t let her get up! She’ll try to run outside,” Punk shouts. Chase runs to block the doorway.

I do the only thing I can and lay on top of her. Josephine screams and thrashes.

Then...silence.

Scared shitless, I roll off of her. I check to make sure she's breathing and has a heartbeat. She's okay, just out cold.

Punk sinks to the floor by our bed. "Well, that wasn't too bad."

I balk. "Not too bad? Are you fucking kidding me?!"

Punk shakes his head. "No, Atlas, it wasn't. At least she didn't have a panic attack. Trust me. This was mild in comparison to the last three nights. Maybe with you back home and her coming clean about her paranoia of being watched—thanks to fucking Bianchi—maybe now it's easing up."

I pull Josephine's slumped form to my chest, holding her to ward off any more potential episodes. The night terrors were bad before I left for California, but this...this is something totally different. I don't want to imagine how horrific they were when I was gone.

Punk pats the end of the bed, and Hades jumps back on top of our legs. "Keep him close. He's your first responder. It may be too hopeful to assume this is the only episode tonight." Punk climbs into his bunk, passing out instantly.

The room falls back into slumber but I'm wide awake, listening, and waiting for any change in Josephine's sleep pattern. My fingers comb through her ashen-brown hair absentmindedly. I stew over the reason for Jo's paranoia.

She screamed in her sleep for Lorenzo to stop. Not Jacob. *Lorenzo.*

I'm going to fucking kill Bianchi for causing her anxiety. Had he listened to my damn warning and stayed away from her, she would still be on the right path to recovery. But no, he had to spy on her, making her a paranoid wreck, and having it manifest while she's at her most vulnerable—in her fucking sleep. Now she's stuck in limbo, not able to move forward in her emotional healing.

I will nail the prick to the wall. Nobody messes with my woman.

It's been a little over a week since Jim and Stella dropped in and surprised the hell out of us.

Things are the same with Josephine, busting her ass to finish the headquarters for my crew, adding all the final touches. The landscape is finally complete, and her second crew is busy tweaking the minor details.

The first crew broke ground two acres over on the site she chose for our new home after she shot down my site suggestion. She's the professional—I'm not going to argue when she knows best. I'm man enough to admit her location was the better pick.

The basement foundation will be poured today. Josephine busied herself designing her parents' new home and had the blueprints completed by mid-week. She has instructed her crew to break ground on Jim and Stella's cottage another two acres over from our future home while our foundation cures over the coming week.

Stella is still trying to win over Josephine, jumping at every opportunity to help with the wedding. Josephine has torn into me a half-dozen times for my fuck up, suggesting Stella help with the last minute wedding details.

After seeing the things Stella is picking out for their house, I completely understand why Josephine doesn't want her mom's assistance with wedding planning. The woman's taste is cringe-worthy. However, Josephine has asked her mom to come to her final gown fitting, which made Stella ecstatic.

On the other half of the coin, Jim helped the entire week on the build. The construction and welding knowledge he has brought to Josephine's team has impressed all of them. After spending the week with him, I know where Josephine gets her hard work ethic from—she's like his mini-me. The two of them seem to be getting along great. *Thank fuck.*

Stella and Jim told Simone they were moving the night after we had dinner at the restaurant. She was not pleased. Considering she lives in Sacramento and constantly travels for her accounting job, you would assume she would be okay with her parents leaving California, but that's not the case.

It seems kind of ridiculous to expect her parents to stay in Los Angeles in a risky neighborhood without either of the girls living nearby, but I don't say anything since it's not my place. Josephine seems to be squawking enough on her parents' behalf—I don't feel the need to step on more toes. Though if this continues, I foresee Gauge standing up alone without a maid of honor.

Chase did a sweep of the building site, rental, condo, and all computers and cells used by the team—nothing popped up. We all let out a huge sigh of relief, but Chase had a nagging feeling in the back of his head and dove deep into our surveillance system via the cyber web. Red flags flew up across the board.

Chase's typical calm demeanor flipped to pure rage. In all the years I've known him, I've never seen him this pissed, and we've been in some real dire situations.

Using our surveillance system to monitor our moves and locations explains why Bianchi appeared out of thin air to find Josephine alone on the road—it was genius actually, in a stalker-psychopathic kind of way.

As furious as I am with him monitoring us visually, I'm more pissed off he had access to audio on all live feeds. He knows Josephine and I had fought when I came home from California. If the twisted little fucknut thinks he can use this to weasel his way into Jo's life, he's got another thing coming.

Chase hasn't left the garage in days, submerging himself in the dark web to find Bianchi's hacker. Until Chase finds who the shit stain is, all surveillance is down to protect our safety.

Josephine keeps bringing Chase meals and begging him to rest, but he steadfastly refuses. He feels responsible for having this shit fly under the radar, but he can only have his fingers in so many pies. No one blames him—only Chase does.

It's part of the reason why Josephine has worked tirelessly to finish the tech room at the new headquarters. Chase, Butch, and Ziggy are now settled over at the build site. It's a tremendous upgrade from our hole-in-the-wall garage setup.

With Ziggy being on-site, he and Jared have been ogling each other nonstop. No longer able to watch them pine after each other without either one willing to make the first move, I finally ask Ziggy to stand up with Jared at the wedding.

Ziggy tries his best to mask his expression into a look of indifference, but his smile is cracking through. "Of course, Atlas. It will be an honor."

I throw my brother a bone. "Oh, and FYI, Jared is interested in what you're offering if you decide to man up and go after him."

Ziggy's eyebrows shoot to his hairline and his mouth gapes open like a fish out of water. I choke down the laugh brewing in my chest. When the shock wears off, Ziggy's face looks like it could split in half from smiling.

"Fuck yeah!" Ziggy crows, fist-pumping the air. He surprises me with a big kiss on the lips, and races toward the office trailer where Jared does most of his work.

Josephine giggles behind me. "Um, do I have anything to worry about?"

Oh, Pixie wants to play!

I spin and take quick stock of my surroundings to make sure no one's around to see me snag her around the waist and haul her upstairs to our nearly completed presidential suite.

She tells me not to hold back, so I slap her bottom scarlet and take her rough the way she loves it, leaving no room for doubt that all of me belongs to her. Guess we can check off unfinished headquarters on our bucket list of places to have sex.

In other club related business, Tiny Tony is adjusting well to MC life and gets along with the crew perfectly. He and Punk take turns guarding Josephine, and Reaper has returned to his regular surveillance duties.

The guys aren't fans of Tony's *mafioso* name and have been brainstorming potential nicknames.

Josephine keeps pushing for 'The Mountain,' like the dude from *Game of Thrones*, but honestly, nothing seems to fit Tony better than his name—Tony.

Gauge has already been bugging him about pledging to the Mercy Ravens MC and earning his cut. Tony seems intrigued, but after being tied down to his mob his whole life, he's not ready to commit to another family yet. He's content guarding Jo and open to working recon. We're all hoping he'll come around and patch in.

All week, I've accompanied Josephine to her PTSD counseling. Her therapist was shocked when she learned Josephine's paranoia was merited, and she indeed was being watched.

I was also given a healthy dose of death glare from the counselor for having introduced Jo's parents back in her life before she was ready. I get it—I overstepped. But if we were to wait until Josephine was ready to reunite, it probably would have meant her parents would miss the wedding. There was no way in hell Jo was going to make amends with them anytime soon if left up to her. I took the dirty looks in stride.

Since my return home a week ago, Josephine's night terrors have decreased significantly, but every once in a while, she throws a curveball. She'll go a night without an episode and the following night she may have two back to back. She went all week without a panic attack following a night terror, but then she had one in the middle of the week during the day. And it was all thanks to fucking Lorenzo's gift-giving and my temper.

Bianchi had a gold necklace delivered to her, apologizing for upsetting her on the road days before. The necklace was too much for me to handle. I flew into a rage, jumping on my hog to return his present—by shoving it down his throat. Maybe if I was lucky, he'd choke on it.

Josephine flipped out, worried I'd get hurt. She dropped to her knees with a panic attack consuming her. Gauge chewed

me out, pointing out my actions brought it on. He was right—it was my fault. I've been trying to check myself at the door more often in order to avoid Josephine going through another one.

It's finally the weekend, and I'm running with Hades by my side and Josephine in front of us on our usual running trail along the Cache la Poudre River and Rocky Mountains. It's the first week of September, only five weeks 'till we say our vows. For the first month of autumn, the weather is still fairly warm, but soon our early morning runs will force us to dress in layers.

It's the first time Josephine has attempted to run since being roughed-up by Jacob. I can tell running still hurts her healing ribs, but she's kicking both Hades and my ass.

She laughs when she looks over her shoulder at me. "I haven't run in over three weeks. How am I schooling your butt?"

Having been staring at her beautiful derriere the entire run, I give her a broad smile. "Anyone ever tell you you're a cocky little shit?" I surge forward to overtake her.

"Hey!" she complains when I breeze past.

Wanting to catch her off guard, I spin around and grab her in my arms. She squeals and I chuckle as I lift her off the ground. I nuzzle her neck with my morning scruff, making her giggle, before claiming her mouth and ravaging her lips 'till she's a moaning mess.

Hades gets bored waiting for our PDA to subside and starts digging a hole off the path.

Smiling, I nod my head at the boulder where I first encountered Josephine not quite thirteen weeks ago. "Well, what do you know? Look where we are."

"Maceo, as much as I would love to, we're not having sex on the trail today."

Disappointed, I sulk. "Why not?"

“Because the furniture is being delivered to headquarters this morning. You and your brothers are hauling everything to its designated rooms. We’ve talked about this already,” she chides.

I pout. “Baby, come on. It’s been too long. I’m sporting blue balls like a daily accessory lately. I don’t get to have you at the rental because all my brothers are there. I don’t get to have you at the condo because your parents are there. I’ve had you once this week at the build site, and you haven’t allowed me to do it since.”

“It’s too risky with my crew scattered all over the site. I’m not taking the gamble of having one of my employees catch me in the act. What kind of example would I be setting if they knew what I was doing on the job?”

“It’s not like we weren’t careful. I made sure no one was around before I hauled you upstairs.”

“It only takes one slip up, babe. We’re not doing it at my work sites again. Sorry, not sorry.”

“Okay, okay. You’re the boss. I’ll respect your boundaries, but it’s not my fault if you get me hot and bothered when I visit you at work.” I bite my bottom lip as I run my hands over her waist. “You drive me nuts with your dirty jeans and sweaty face.”

Josephine’s face puckers. “Eww. That’s not appealing at all.”

“It is to me,” I say adamantly. “I think it’s sexy that my woman works hard and isn’t afraid to get in there with her hands. It’s hot as hell.”

Josephine smiles and wraps her hands around my neck. “Is this equivalent to a man wearing a tool belt around the house when he’s tinkering with things?”

“Hey, if tool belts are your thing, I’ll buy one and wear it everywhere. I’m not judging.”

Josephine burst out laughing, which makes my dick jump for joy.

I rub myself against her, my fully erect cock pressing against her stomach, begging for access. “Baby, you were fucking with me all last night when you were licking the envelopes for our wedding invitations—*mmm*—I don’t like you licking anything but me. You made me jealous of fucking paper. *Please*, let me pleasure you.”

Josephine looks over at the boulder and then at me, her pupils dilated. “You have ten minutes.”

Thank fuck!

“And I’ll get you off twice in that time.”

I swiftly grab her under her ass and crush my lips to hers, pressing her into the boulder. I set her on her feet and drop to my knees, yanking her booty shorts and panties down.

There’s nothing I love to do more than eating my woman out and watching her shatter around my mouth. I bury my face against her hairless mound and attack her precious pearl with my tongue.

Her breath hitches and she bucks against my face, her hands fisting my hair. “Don’t you dare stop.”

Wouldn’t dream of it. I suck on each of her wet lips before gorging myself on her warm center like a starved man; my nose pressed firmly against her rosy clit. Her musky feminine scent overpowers my senses ‘till all I notice is her and my need to declare her as mine.

“Do you like it when I fuck you with my tongue?” I purr against her tender nub.

She thrust her greedy sex in my face, begging for my mouth. “Yes. More please, more!”

Feeling like a smug *sonofabitch*, I grin, my gaze traveling the length of her body to her costal eyes. “I love it when you beg.” My thumbs part her wet lips, and I dive my tongue back into her tight pussy.

Her body is worked up, her juices spill from her snatch, down my face. *Damn, she tastes amazing.* Sugar and cream and all things sinful.

Exhilarated, I moan into her and watch her face glow with ecstasy as she detonates like a bomb around my tongue. Her screams pierce the air and her body quakes violently.

Using the broad side of my tongue to drag my barbell piercing against her sensitive sex, I lick her clean until the last of her aftershocks have left her body.

My God, do I love this woman and how she lets herself go with me. It's a gift, one she only shares with me.

The hungry look in her aqua-blue eyes tells me she's far from done with me. I promised her two orgasms, and I always deliver on my promises.

Springing to my feet, I'm about to drop my shorts and set my big guy loose when I hear a twig crack.

My head snaps in the direction, and I see a figure creeping in the brush. Hades immediately goes on the defense, moving in front of us.

My mind would normally register this as an animal, but I see enough to know it's a person, a gangly looking man in workout clothes. And this person witnessed me pleasuring my woman.

"Why you motherfu—" I growl, sprinting toward the creep. Hades barks, chasing after me. Josephine screeches behind me. The guy leaps to his feet, dashing uphill to the visitor parking lot.

Before his feet reach the pavement, I tackle him to the ground, a cloud of pollen being kicked up around us from falling off the trail and into the ragweed.

It's not much of a scuffle since the guy is twig thin and lacks upper body strength. I flip the scrawny guy over and straddle him, causing him to plead. "Don't hurt me, please!"

How dare he ask for mercy after watching my woman come! He violated her privacy for fuck's sake. I roar at him, and Hades snarls in his face.

"Maceo!" Josephine is behind me, trying frantically to stop me from digging my fingers into this pervert's eye sockets and

blinding the bastard.

“Did you watch my woman? Did you?” I yell into the guys face.

He whimpers and shakes his head in denial. *Fucking Liar!*

My fist connects with his jaw, and his head whips to the side on impact.

I have the guy in a death grip, ready to beat the life out of him. He claws at my hands, but it's useless.

Unable to yank me off the perp, Josephine runs around to face me. She climbs over the guy, grabbing me by the face. “Dammit, Maceo! Look at me. Stop!”

My tunnel vision returns to normal, and I focus only on her beautiful face. “He watched you!”

Josephine nods. “I know. But we were in a public place, not our own property. He didn't do anything illegal. We're the ones in the wrong. Plus, look at him, Maceo. He's practically a kid.”

I look at the guy and see what she means. His face is young and barely grows any facial hair. The guy can't be more than twenty. “Who sent you to spy on us?”

The creep's eyes go wide. “What?”

I'm practically gnashing my teeth in this pervert's face. “Don't fucking play games with me, boy!”

Josephine attempts to calm me. “Maceo, it's probably a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Nu-uh. No way in hell he fell upon us by chance. The boulder isn't on the path, but several feet away—and we were on the side facing away from potential early morning risers. “He. Was. Sent.”

Josephine's face scrunches with worry. She looks over at the boy-man. “Did someone pay you or make you come looking for us?”

The guy shakes his head back and forth, but he's lying, I can tell. He can't make eye contact with either of us. “Get out

of the way, Josephine. I'm going to rip this little shit's ears off."

The dude's arms fly up to his face to protect himself. "Alright! Alright, I was paid!"

"Who?" I ask in an icy voice.

"The mob man, that's who. I run this trail every day, but usually in the afternoon. One day, this ugly dude approached me and offered me a job to track you guys. Asked me to report everything I heard or saw back to him," he rambles quickly.

"I told him I wasn't interested, but he pulled a gun on me. He told me to take the money and do the job, or else he'd put a bullet in me."

I pinch the bridge of my nose before addressing him. "Was his name Paolo?"

The guy nods. Josephine hisses. Pretty Paolo—the ugliest fucker on Bianchi's payroll.

"When were you approached, and how long has this been going on for?" I demand.

The guy is singing like a tweaked-out canary. "Like six, seven weeks ago. The assignment was to be on the trail every morning by five and run at a safe distance behind you."

Josephine's hands fly to her head, her embarrassment flushing her oval face. "Oh, God! How many times have you watched us?"

The guy squeezes his eyes close, ready for another blow from my fist. "Enough to know it's always at this boulder," he admits.

I haul the kid to his feet. "You're lucky my woman is here to stop me from beating your sorry ass." Holding onto the perv by his shirt, I yank my phone out of my athletic shorts and call Gauge.

"You better have a damn good reason for calling me this early, Atlas."

“Caught one of Bianchi’s spies on the trail. Come pick this piece of shit up.” I give him our location and end the call.

Ten minutes later, Gauge and Punk come with my SUV and throw the fucker in the trunk. I help Jo in the back seat before climbing in next to her with Hades. Gauge turns us back around to the rental.

We pull in the driveway, and Chase is waiting out front of the house with Reaper and Brass, the muscle of our crew. They have no problem knocking a couple of teeth out on fuckers like this sexual deviant if it means we get more information out of him.

Too bad for my bloodthirsty brothers—I’ll be taking the liberty of the job myself.

Reaper opens the trunk of my SUV and Brass yanks the little cocksucker out, dragging his blubbering ass into the garage. Brass throws the guy into a chair, restraining him with his heavy hands weighing on the pervert’s shoulders. Hades sits directly in front of the peeper, snarling.

Josephine looks troubled with her arms folded over her chest. I’m surprised she wants to be anywhere near the guy.

Punk stands next to her and sneers at the spy. “What the fucker do, Atlas? Did he do something to Jo?”

A growl builds in my chest. “If you count spying on my woman while I pleasure her as something, yeah, he did.”

Punk’s nostrils flare. “You were creeping on my sis?!”

Chase shakes his head angrily. Gauge comes to stand by my side, laying his hand on my shoulder to calm me down—always my anchor when I’m ready to lose my shit.

Reaper snorts. “Is that why you two go run every morning? Damn, maybe I need to start running if it means I can get pussy.”

Punk gives Reaper a death glare. “Not the time to joke, Reaper!”

Reaper looks around at everyone, completely clueless about the tension in the room. “What? Too soon?”

“Reap! Shut it,” Brass warns his best friend.

Gauge brings us back to point. “Fill us in on how this connects with Bianchi, Atlas.”

I give them a rundown on what happened. All my brothers hiss.

“I’m not a pervert,” the kid pipes in. “I didn’t have a choice. If it makes you feel any better, I have no interest in your woman. I like someone else, okay?”

“And I’m sure this girlfriend of yours would be delighted to hear about your morning activities,” I chide.

The kid clamps his mouth shut. He’s either angry at me for calling him out on his shit, or he’s feeling ashamed for working with the Bianchi mob. I don’t give a fuck as long as he answers my questions.

“How the hell did you stop yourself from beating the shit out of him?” Punk asks me.

I nod at Josephine. “She wouldn’t let me.”

Punk rolls his eyes, but I can tell he gets it. “Want me to take her inside?”

Josephine huffs, annoyed. “I’m right here, *Junior*. I can decide for myself.”

“Why you go and use my old name, sis? I meant no offense. I only meant that I’m not sure you want to be around for the ugly parts,” Punk explains.

Josephine’s brows pull together. “Ugly parts?”

Brass beats his palm with his fist to get the point across. Josephine’s eyes go wide.

“You can stay if you want, Josephine. It might keep me from flying off the handle.” I crouch in front of the guy in the

chair, making sure his eyes are on mine. “Besides, our pervy friend here is going to tell us everything we want to know. What’s your name, kid?”

The guy blinks and looks uneasy. “Um, my name is Thomas. Thomas Guthrie.”

I snort but quickly check myself. “Seriously?”

The guy frowns, confused why I find his name humorous. “Yeah.”

I look at my brothers. Punk is biting his bottom lip hard. Chase and Brass are looking at the ceiling, smiling. Gauge is shaking his head, unable to make eye contact with the kid or me. And Reaper is turning red from holding the air in his lungs, like he may pop a blood vessel. All of them are trying to keep their shit together.

We’re professionals. We’re able to control ourselves.

Yeah, totally professional.

Suddenly, Reaper bursts like a balloon. “Bahaha! *Peeping Tom.*”

And like that, my men and I are reduced to immature children, doubling over with side stitches.

“Bet his parents didn’t anticipate he’d live up to his name,” Gauge chuckles.

Tom looks offended, but what can he say—his name is fitting.

After the humorous tremors have subsided, I get down to business. “How old are you, Tom?”

The peeper looks at the ground. “Nineteen.”

Ah, shit. He really is a kid.

I look at my brothers, and each one of them shakes their heads. It was beyond wrong for Paolo to drag this barely legal man-child into this mess. I almost feel bad for hauling off on the kid—*almost*.

I lean in closer, giving Tom no choice but to make eye contact with me. “Okay, Tom. I’m sorry you got the short end of the stick and were dragged into this shit-storm, but you play with the cards you’re dealt, ya feel me?”

Tom nods, and I continue. “I want to know how you contact Pretty Paolo when you have something to report.”

Tom’s swallow is audible. “I have no way of contacting him. He shows up whenever he feels like it. Sometimes he comes to my computer classes on campus. Other times he appears at my apartment. He used to show up at the Italian restaurant where I use to work, but I quit there when I got a tech job at the campus computer labs. Now he shows up there sometimes.

“It’s usually once a week, and the conversation only lasts as long as it takes me to get the story out. If he feels my recount is short on detail, he may press me for more information, but otherwise, he doesn’t say anything. Cash will magically appear under my doorjamb or in my mail.”

Fuck! I run my hands down my face before looking over at Chase. Chase rolls his eyes before addressing me. “Who would have guessed Pretty Paolo was this smart?”

“No shit,” I agree. I wanted physical evidence to link Paolo to Tom. Phone calls, texts, emails, bank deposits—anything but face-to-face conversations and cash transactions.

We work hand-in-hand with local law enforcement to help our community. Detective Luke Quire is a good friend of ours, and for years he’s been trying to rid the city of the Bianchi mob. Together we have been building a case against the Bianchi Empire and feeding the FBI intel.

I can’t take this to Luke with only Tom’s word against Paolo’s. I need some hard evidence to have Luke jump on board.

Gauge steps in front of Tom and stares him down with his cool green eyes. “When was the last time you had contact with him?”

Tom eyes Gauge warily. Gauge is the smallest of my brothers at six-foot, but he has an eerie calmness to him that can set you at ease or put your nerves on end. More than once, he's used this Jedi mind-trick on me to cool my temper. "A week today," Tom says.

"He's due to make contact," Gauge surmises. "We need to get a jump on this, Atlas."

"Agreed," I say. "Tom, we're going to have you wired for the next few days. When Paolo makes contact, I want you to alert us with a text. If at all possible, I want you to record the conversation with your phone in case the wire is faulty. We'll try to have eyes on you at all times. Do this for us, and I may let you walk away intact. Do you understand?"

Tom looks sick, but nods.

"Very good. Chase is going to get you geared up and walk you through the process. You'll follow his instructions to the T. Brass will be your shadow, and he'll be watching your exchange with Paolo. If you alert Paolo that you've been compromised, or warn him that your conversation with him is being monitored and recorded, Brass will know and drag your ass back here for me to deal with," I threaten.

Tom sobs, but clearly understands the seriousness of this. "I'll do whatever you want. Please, don't hurt me."

Josephine glares at me, livid. "Maceo, is this necessary? He was threatened into doing this by Lorenzo's men, and now you're doing the same damn thing to him. How does scaring him make you any better than Paolo?"

My normal reaction would be to roar my dominance, flip a table, or throw a glass bottle, but after nearly losing Josephine at Jacob's hand, I've learned to get a better grip on my emotions when it comes to my protectiveness for my woman—well, it's a work in progress.

"Josephine, I don't want to hurt him, and I won't as long as he does everything we tell him. I understand he was coerced, but now he's righting a wrong. I'm tolerant enough with this piss-ant after learning he was watching us together for weeks."

Josephine shakes her head, clearly disappointed in me.

Punk gives a frustrated groan. “Atlas, this is why I suggested you’d let me take her inside. Jo doesn’t understand why we work the way we do. She shouldn’t have to be here for this shit. It’s fucking hard on her; can’t you see that?”

Before I can retort, Josephine turns her fury on Punk. “I’m not a child. I’d know what’s going on, whether I’m present or not. Removing me from the situation doesn’t solve the problem.”

Punk looks remorseful. “Ah, come on, sis. Don’t be mad. I’m only looking out for you.”

Gauge, always the diplomat, says, “I know this seems cruel, Jo, but Atlas is being lenient considering the situation. No man would be any more tolerant in his shoes. Bianchi is out of line and violating your privacy. This shit needs to stop. Peeping Tom here is our best chance at nailing the fucker. What we’re making him do is no different than what the police would demand.”

Chase backs up Gauge. “Exactly. You can hardly blame Atlas—the kid was creeping on you. Shit, I’d be no different.”

“He’d be no use to us if I was in Atlas’s shoes because I’d have strangled him,” Punk mutters, and Brass and Reaper nod in agreement.

I’m grateful for my brothers validating my tactics, but Josephine is still upset. She walks out of the garage without giving me a backward glance. Hades stops his growling at Tom and hightails it after his *mamá*.

I jut my chin out at Chase. “Handle the kid. I need to go talk to Josephine.”

CHAPTER SIX

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JOSEPHINE

I lock Hades and me in the bathroom to get showered and ready for my workday. It's never a good idea to keep Maceo away from me, but I'm pissed at him—I need space to wrap my head around what I witnessed on the trail and in the garage.

Maceo was ruthless, terrifying even. I don't fear Maceo. He would never hurt me, but I know he's capable of making good on his threats when it comes to anyone else. His protective streak over me makes him incredibly dangerous to those who seek to harm me.

Tom is not innocent, and I'm not foolish enough to delude myself, but he was only spying on me because he was forced. To believe he may have enjoyed watching Maceo and me being intimate...

Gah! I cringe. No, I need to believe Tom is as much a victim in Lorenzo's scheme as I am.

Victim. I loathe the word. I use to believe I was a strong, independent woman capable of overcoming anything thrown at me—as if I was immune to all the evils of the world. But I'm not.

Kidnapped, beaten, and nearly raped.

Tortured by night terrors, panic attacks, and daily counseling.

Being watched not by one man, but multiple men: Lorenzo, Esteban, Jac—I swallow hard—Jacob.

I sink to the bottom of the shower, sobbing. Hades whines and hops into the shower behind me, licking the back of my head. I turn and wrap my arms around my sweet baby boy, crying into his black velvet fur. Hades is always there for me in all my times of need, and I'm grateful for him.

Knock, knock, knock—soft knuckles rap on the door. “Pixie, it's me.” I hear him turn the knob and curse when he discovers it's locked. “Come on, baby, open up.”

“Go away,” I mutter to myself. I need fifteen minutes alone—fifteen fucking minutes to fall apart before I have to pull my shit together again.

Louder, more insistent knocking shakes the door. “Josephine, please, open the door.”

I try to control my sobbing and suck in a ragged lungful of air, hiccupping.

Maceo must have his ear to the door because he starts to get frantic, pounding on the door and rattling the doorknob. “Baby, what's going on? Are you okay?”

In my head, I know I should let him in the bathroom before he rips the door from its hinges, but I can't find the strength to rise from the shower floor. If I'm honest with myself and I'm going to come apart, I'd rather do it with Maceo present, letting him see how much it affects me.

Instead, I hold on to Hades tighter when he whines his concern.

I hear the ping of the lock being busted before heavy footfalls cross the bathroom linoleum. Maceo drops to his knees outside of the shower, worry etched in his hard face.

I'm sure I look pathetic, sitting at the bottom of the tub, hanging onto my rescue dog. I don't have time to dwell on it because Maceo pulls me from the shower and cradles me in his lap.

Hades jumps out of the shower and shakes, splattering the entire bathroom in water droplets.

“You couldn't give me some privacy for a while?”

Maceo stiffens and looks in my eyes. “Do you really want me to leave you alone right now?”

Be honest with him, Jo.

Letting him know I need his support is not a sign of weakness. It shows I know when to ask for help. Before Maceo came into my life, I thought I had to do everything myself, but we have each other to lean on now. “No. I want you with me.”

Maceo relaxes and runs a hand down my wet hair, kissing my forehead affectionately. “I’ve got you.”

I wrap my arms around him and feel my body begin to calm down.

Neither of us says anything for a few minutes before a growl builds in Maceo. “I’m going to kill him. I can’t allow upsetting my woman to go unpunished.”

“He’s a kid, Maceo,” I defend quickly. “What he did was gross and wrong, but please don’t hurt him.”

“I’m not talking about Peeping Tom.” I lift my head to look into Maceo deep brown eyes, shadowed by his dark eyebrows. “I’m talking about Bianchi. That fucker gave the order to his henchmen to spy on you, and those men went ahead and recruited their own spies. None of this would be an issue if Bianchi knew his fucking place and stayed the hell away from you.”

I squeeze my eyes tight to hold in tears, burying my face into Maceo sleeveless workout shirt. “I hate feeling like I have no control over anything. It’s like I’m a sitting duck, waiting for all hell to break loose. I want to feel safe again without having to rely on you to protect me.”

Maceo’s gentle, but strong fingers tilt my chin. “And I’m going to make sure you have the safety and security you deserve again. I know you don’t approve of my interrogation tactics, but it’s necessary and effective. As much as I want to hurt the kid for watching us, I’m well aware we have bigger fish to fry, and we need Tom to reel in Bianchi. I’ll do everything in my power to help you feel strong again.”

I'm not an operative or a Navy SEAL—I don't know what goes into interrogating a suspect. What I do know is that I trust Maceo knows what he's doing, and I am going to have faith in his ability to do what's best.

His full, soft lips press firmly against mine before he stands us up, disrobes, and pulls me into the shower to finish cleaning up.

“How are you feeling today, Jo?”

Wow! What a loaded question.

Maceo was busy orchestrating how Tom was going to help us. Thus, I came to my appointment alone.

Well, not alone—Punk is waiting for me in the reception area. But I wish Maceo was here holding my hand like he normally does when he's home.

I stare numbly at Heather, my counselor, realizing she wants a response from me, but I don't trust myself to speak. In lieu of words, I settle on a shoulder shrug.

“That good, huh?”

“Pretty much,” I mutter. “It's more of the same—crazy, obsessive guy hell-bent on destroying everything I love and staking a claim on me.”

Heather nods. “Well, is it something you'd like to talk about?”

I shake my head. With the Mercy Ravens doing their own investigation into Lorenzo Bianchi and his henchmen, I'm not sure what I'm privy to reveal. Heather swears our sessions are confidential, but she still writes what we discuss in her notes.

If those notes were to fall into the wrong hands...oy vey.

It's disheartening to not be open in my own therapy appointments, but I'm starting to doubt my faith in anyone not linked to the Mercy Ravens.

What if Heather has been compromised?

The rational part of my brain argues my theory is preposterous, but the irrational part of my brain nags at me about conspiracies and treachery. My irrational side has been steering me for over a year and has proven to do right by me, making me pause when rational ideas float into my head. How whacked is that?

Jesus, I'm fucking losing it. My head falls into my hands and I stare numbly at the floor.

Heather waits a heartbeat before asking another question. "How has mending your relationship with your parents been going?"

Fuck. Another touchy subject I'm not willing to get into today. I feel I really need a day to decompress and not have to deal with everything. Unfortunately, my schedule has no opening for a mental health day.

Lorenzo obviously knows Maceo and I had a fight—thanks to the video surveillance feed getting hacked. But is Heather feeding Lorenzo information about my private life? She did tell me my feelings about being watched were 'misguided.' Maybe she knew all along and was trying to make me doubt my instincts.

Lorenzo's words from our confrontation on the road last week replay in my head.

"But Pina, you look exhausted. I know you're not sleeping."

He *knows*. Why would he say that? How would he know I'm not sleeping? I only talk about it during counseling or in private with Maceo.

"If you were in my bed, I would chase all those bad dreams away and keep you safe."

How does he know about my bad dreams? There are no surveillance cameras in the bedroom for Lorenzo's hacker to access.

While the two parts of my brain war with each other, Heather moves on to another topic. “How are you sleeping? Are the night terrors growing in severity? Lessening? Or no change at all? What about the panic attacks?”

Fuck, Fuck, FUCK!

I’m not sleeping. I’m hardly eating. Lorenzo knows it. And this woman may be an informant for the mob.

Logic be damned! I’m following the path of illogic and keeping myself safe.

I jump to my feet and pace the length of Heather’s office. The muted blue hues on the walls are meant to calm, but it isn’t working for me. My irrational side is screaming at me to say nothing to Heather.

She can’t be trusted. Even if she’s innocent in this, somehow, our sessions are *not* private. I don’t know how I know this, but I feel it, feel it deep in my core.

But how is the information being leaked to Lorenzo?

The hacker.

Yes, the hacker has accessed Heather’s files electronically. I need to talk to Chase when I leave here, express my worries to him, knowing he’ll take my concern seriously and look into it.

Heather watches me as I wear a hole in the carpet. “Jo, are you okay? You look stressed? Have you been taking your anti-anxiety medication?”

“Yes,” I clip. She knows taking medication is a touchy subject for me. I understand I need to take it to help me from feeling overwhelmed like I am right now, but I hate having to take any medication which alters my chemical balance.

I eye Heather suspiciously, trying my best to mask my emotions. Heather watches me with furrowed brows.

Why is she studying me like that? Does she think there’s something wrong with me? Hell, maybe there is something wrong with me.

No. I'm not delusional. I feel my suspicions of Lorenzo are merited.

Not bothering to hide my fidgeting, I sit back down across from her and give her a small truth. "I left the build site for this appointment as the bulk of my furniture deliveries were arriving. I know Jared will be fine instructing our team and the MC members where everything goes, but I want to be there and manage my own projects."

Heather nods, mistaking my behavior the way I intend. "You like to be in control. And you've had little of it lately."

No shit! And I want to take the wheel back.

"Are you sure there's nothing else you want to discuss?"

"I guess I'm not in a talkative mood today. There's too much going on in my head, and I need to sort through it before I can effectively communicate it."

She smiles and throws me a bone. "Understandable. Do you want to cut out early and get back to work? We can pick up again on Monday after the weekend at our usual time?"

There's no way I'm coming back here for any more sessions, but I don't tell her that—I don't want to give off alarm bells.

I nod, as if I agree with her, and walk out of Heather's office, doing my best not to run.

"Wow. That was quick. Everything okay?" Punk asks. He throws the hotrod magazine he was reading on the table in reception.

Desperate to get the hell out of here, I grab his hand and yank him outside to my car. Thankfully, Punk doesn't question my sudden need for escape.

Wordlessly, I cruise out of the parking lot. We make it a couple of miles before Punk looks over at me. "Sis, everything okay?"

I'm trembling and trying hard to keep myself together because this shit with Lorenzo is really starting to freak me the fuck out.

Punk puts a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, pull over."

I pull off the highway and shut off the car.

"What's going on? Did your counselor ask you to talk about something you didn't want to talk about?"

Close. I take a deep breath and ramble through my illogical theories. I half expect Punk to make some joke about me having a screw loose, but he does nothing of the sort.

"Are you okay to drive?" he asks, his brows furrowed.

"I—I think so." I lick my lips nervously. "Do you believe I'm acting foolishly?"

Punk surveys the road around us, tense and on alert. He shakes his head. "No, I don't. Your gut feeling has been spot on since I've known you. You're my sister, and if you speculate your therapist has been compromised, I'm going to take you seriously. Let's get back to headquarters and fill in the rest of the guys."

A few minutes later, we're back at the new headquarters. I park and run into the house to the tech room, ignoring the furniture chaos in the living room.

Chase sees me barreling in the room and arches a pierced eyebrow. Hades whines at our feet, sensing my uneasiness.

"Chase, I need to talk to you?"

"Is Punk teasing you again? Say the word and I'll knock the fucker on his ass," he chuckles.

"I'm not the fucker messing with her this time," Punk says with a steely voice, flopping in a chair.

Chase tenses. "What's going on, Jo?"

My worries about Heather come spewing out of me like vomit. I tell him about my counselor and how she poopooed my concern when I suspected I was being watched. I tell him how she records *everything* we discuss and documents it. I tell him how Lorenzo is aware of my night terrors from his cryptic comments. And I tell him I have no proof other than a nagging feeling in the back of my head that my shit has been compromised.

Chase's brown eyes grow darker with every passing second it takes me to explain my concerns. When I'm done, his eyes are nearly as black as Maceo's. He looks over my head at Punk. "Call Atlas and Gauge, and tell them to come in." Chase turns to one of his many computers and starts typing away.

"What are you doing?" I ask, sitting next to him.

Without looking away from the monitor, Chase addresses me. "I'm seeing how easy it is to hack into your therapist's database."

It seems like he's only been working mere minutes when he starts cursing. He works a couple more minutes before running his fingers through his long, tawny hair in frustration.

Chase grabs his cell and makes a call. "Stop macking on your boy-toy and get your ass in here. Call Butch while you're at it." He ends the call, with who I assume was Ziggy, and his fingers return to the keyboard, moving across the keys at blazing speed.

"Is there anything I can help with?" I ask.

Chase spares me a glance. "You know how to navigate the dark web?"

I give him an irritated look. He knows I have no hacking skills. "How about something I can actually do?"

"You could tell me what's discussed during your counseling sessions? I know it's personal, and I wouldn't ask unless I felt it could help us. Leave out the details and give me the bullet points. I'll be able to use the information to see if anything similar is floating around out in cyberspace."

It's not like Chase is a stranger to what happened to me. I can be honest with him and trust he will respect my privacy. I give him a brief description.

He nods. "I need Ziggy and Butch's help now. We'll be able to access more with the three of us digging."

Uneasiness settles over me. I pull my knees up to my chin, rocking back and forth. Hades jumps to his hind legs on the armrest of my chair and lays his thick head on my shoulder. I close my eyes and ask Chase the question I already know the answer to. "How bad is it?"

Chase doesn't pause his work when he answers me. "It's not good, Jo."

Ziggy comes running into the room and sits across from Chase, starting a different set of computers. "Care to fill me in?"

"Jo's therapy files may have been accessed remotely from an outside source, most likely Bianchi's hacker. I was able to crack through the clinic's cyber wall in less than five minutes, and I located her files in their system. I'm currently trying to open her records."

Ziggy grumbles as he works. "Aw, hell."

Butch enters the room and grabs a tablet before approaching the flat screens on the wall. The screens flicker to life and texts of computer jargon scroll up the screens like movie credits—it looks like he's installing code.

Chase updates Butch on what's going on and he nods his understanding. Butch is not a man of many words, but what he lacks in communication, he makes up for in his knowledge of the dark web.

All three of the men work in silence, allowing the occasional swear to pass their lips from time to time.

Punk clears his throat. "How sure are we this is Bianchi's doing and not Esteban's? Couldn't Moreno be behind this instead?"

“A fair point,” Chase says with his eyes focused on his computer. “Based on what we know, and what Bianchi has already revealed to Jo, he’s suspect number one. Setting a trap to see if Bianchi reveals more than he should, will confirm my suspicions.”

They’re not working long when Ziggy punches his desk. “There’s a hole. Every time the clinic backs up data, it makes a copy which allows a third party to come in and access the duplication.”

Chase and Butch freeze. “Is there a trail?” they both ask.

Ziggy nods. “It’s encrypted, but it’s a silver lining.”

“Follow it.” Chase looks at me. “Programs with holes shouldn’t be backed up. Whoever runs their IT is an idiot. It’s safe to assume your counselor is unaware her database has been compromised. I doubt she has been working with Bianchi, but bringing the counselor in for questioning is a must.”

I nod understanding, but I’m still not going to trust anyone outside the club until the hacker is stopped. “Should I call her?”

“Do you want to, or would you rather Atlas handle it? No one will blame you if you choose to avoid her right now.”

“I’ll call.”

I stay and observe Chase’s tech team dig through areas on the internet I never knew existed. There really isn’t anything I can help with, and from what the guys tell me, it could be days or weeks ‘till they crack the encryption.

Eventually, I can’t put off my work any longer. I make my way into the gathering area and do what I do best—manage my crew.

My workers need direction, and the rest of the MC crew is twiddling their thumbs, waiting on me to tell them where to

move everything. I start assigning tasks to the group and tell them to form an assembly line.

One group unloads the trucks. Another group hauls everything into the main area of headquarters. And the last group hauls everything to their locations inside. I have a few workers doing minor tasks like hanging curtains or artwork. While Jared and I go around adding final touches as areas finish up.

I will have this house done by the end of the day if it kills me. By tomorrow, Maceo and his brothers will be able to move into their new home, allowing me to break ground on Lloyd's barbershop by Monday.

Jared and I have finished setting up Maceo's and my new king size bed when Maceo enters our suite.

Silently, Maceo crosses the room, his chest heaving from controlling his rage. He wraps me in his muscled arms, his brawny body encasing me.

Jared clears his throat. "I'm gonna go check on our team and make sure everything is going where it needs to be." He walks out of the room and closes the door behind him.

Maceo pulls us to the bed and sits on the edge. I stand firmly between his legs, determined to have him hear me. He reaches for me, but I push his hands away and shake my head.

"I'm not going back to counseling," I say, holding my head high.

Maceo looks at me with his brows pulled together, concerned. "I understand not trusting your counselor, but Chase has built a solid case determining Heather had no knowledge of the breach in security, and there's no evidence suggesting she gave Bianchi the file willingly. You need to continue therapy, baby."

Appalled, I back away from him.

Maceo is quick to explain. "Your treatments are important in your emotional recovery process. I'll be damned if I allow Bianchi to fuck with it. Heather will be here soon to see what exactly has been infringed in her database. We're going to give

her false information to import into her electronic notes and see if we can use this to our advantage. In the meantime, you will continue daily sessions.”

“Is that an order?” I challenge.

Maceo’s eyes open wide with surprise. “What? No, of course not. It’s a request.”

“Well, it sounds like an order, and either way, I’m not doing it.” I shake my head. “I don’t feel comfortable talking to her anymore. I feel like my privacy is continually violated. I’d rather suffer in silence than continue to put my emotions at risk.”

Maceo pinches the bridge of his nose. “Pixie—”

Furious, I cut him off. “I’m not negotiating on this, Maceo! Fuck around with your own mental state if you want, but I’m not going to be used as a damn guinea pig.”

He takes several deep breaths to rein himself in before looking at me with his coal-black eyes. Whatever anger he was about to unleash has died, and empathy has taken over his hard, handsome face.

“I’m sorry if I made you believe your feelings didn’t matter. Obviously, I don’t want you to put your emotional state at risk, but Pixie, we need to at least keep up appearances. We don’t know if he’s got eyes on you when you go to counseling. If you stop going, he may know we’re on to him. Bianchi can’t catch on to us tracking him.

“Right now, we have nothing directly linking him to the hacking. We need to see if he personally slips up with the new intel. I need your help, baby—I can’t do this without you. You don’t need to keep seeing her as *your* counselor. You don’t have to say one peep to her. We can find you a different therapist in the meantime, but go to the appointments and let Heather upload the information we give her.”

Feeling vulnerable, I wrap my arms around my torso to hold myself together.

Maceo steps in front of me and runs his large hands over my scrawny arms. “I would never ask you to do something

that would hurt you, baby.”

“I know,” I whisper. “I’ll go to the appointments and give her the fake information, but I’m done talking with any therapist until we stop the hacker and Lorenzo.”

Maceo brushes his thumb over my cheek before leaning in to kiss me. And kiss me he does, ‘till I’m gasping.

I need this. I need to forget about all the bullshit for a while and focus on Maceo and me. I know it’s not going to fix our problems, but it will remind us that we have each other, and we’ll make it through this.

Heat floods my veins from Maceo’s touch. Within seconds I’m wet between my thighs. I shove him with all my might onto our bed. His hearty laugh fills the room when I straddle his waist. Clearly, I’m turning him on because his dick is growing rock hard and pressing against my sex.

“As much as I want to christen our new bed, I need to get back to work, and you have a final fitting if I’m not mistaken,” he says with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

I pout and roll off of him onto my back. Maceo turns on his side and captures my lips in a searing kiss before climbing off the bed. He opens the door a crack and stops with a curse, adjusting himself through his jeans without shame. No matter how much he tries to reposition his junk, he’s still sporting a tent.

I giggle and bite my bottom lip seductively when he scowls at me.

“You think it’s funny when I have to go face my brothers with a hard chub?”

“Like you’re not leaving me with damp panties?”

A growl builds in his chest. He stalks forward, positioning himself between my legs. “Fuck it. Spread for me, Pixie.”

We’re in the middle of an intense groping session when there’s a knock at the slightly open door. Maceo groans and tries to pull away, but I lock my ankles around his waist. “Go away!” I sing out to whoever is in the hall.

Gauge pops his head in the room and gives me an apologetic look. “Prez, the shrink is here.”

“Coming,” Maceo grumbles at the same time, I say, “Not yet.”

Maceo chuckles, hoists himself up with me still hanging onto him, and kisses me one last time. He sets me back on my feet and brushes the back of his fingers over my cheek. “I’ll see you later, beautiful. Don’t forget to take Punk and Tony with you to the bridal boutique.”

Having Tony escort me to the bridal store worries me. “I don’t know if Tony should go back there.”

Jacob’s minion nearly bashed in Tony’s brains with a baseball bat when Tony was guarding me outside the dressing room. I’m sure he doesn’t want to relive the memories any more than I do, and walking into the store is sure to trigger emotions for both of us.

“I already talked with Tony and offered him an out. He told me he goes where you go.” He looks at me with concern. “Are you going to be okay going back there?”

No. But I can’t tell him this, or else he’ll insist he come with. I don’t want him to see me in my gown before our wedding. It’s bad luck, and we’ve had enough of it lately—no point in tempting fate.

I give him my most convincing nod before he heads out with Gauge. I’m left alone in our suite, cursing myself for not having brought clean underwear for my fitting.

I’m at my final fitting with my wedding party, my mom, and my two bodyguards.

I thought this would be a good pre-wedding event to bring along my mom. My dress is already picked out, and there’s nothing she can say to dampen my mood.

Well, I was wrong.

My mom observes me with a wrinkled nose. “This is your wedding dress?”

The happy demeanor I was sporting has evaporated the moment I hear her disapproving tone. “Yes, this is the dress,” I say with an eye roll. I know I shouldn’t be nasty to my mom, but she’s making it damn difficult with her negative remarks.

Maceo’s words play on repeat in my brain. *Give them a chance. Try to be cordial. Don’t cut them to ribbons.*

I’m trying to be nice for Maceo’s sake, and I’ve been hitting it off great with my dad, but I’m finding the feat tricky when it comes to my mom. She is the queen of backhanded compliments and has no problem voicing her opinion whether you ask for it or not.

My mom grimaces. “Well, it’s awfully provocative.”

“No, it’s not, mom.” *And if it is, I definitely want to wear it for my future husband.*

You’d assume my mom would catch the drift and back off, but no. “It’s practically sheer!”

Oh, please. “It’s an allusion, mom. I’m completely covered by two layers of lace. Who cares if it gives an outline of my silhouette?” *And it will drive Maceo wild!*

“Your *naked* silhouette,” mom barks.

Count down from ten, Jo. Ten, nine, eight—oh, to hell with it!

“Who the fuck cares, mom? I love it and Maceo is going to *loove* it more. This is my wedding, my wedding dress, my choice. You don’t have to like it, but please, keep your negative thoughts to yourself.”

My mom huffs—a peevish trait I’ve inherited from her. “Well, I’m sure your father won’t be pleased having his daughter ogled at by an entire biker gang.”

I scowl. “Club, mom. It’s a club, not a gang. They’re not involved in anything nefarious.” She really can’t help herself, can she?

Ebony, the raven-haired Latina beauty, pops the bubble of her gum. “I don’t see what’s the big deal. I mean, it could be more revealing—a thigh-high slit, a plunging neckline to her navel, exposed back to her ass crack—she’s got none of that. Hell, if it was me, I’d be walking down the aisle in fishnet stockings, knee-high boots, and white lingerie.”

My mom blanches and does the sign of the cross.

Opal admires me with a content sigh and a lazy smile. “It’s perfect. You look like a fairytale princess.”

“I agree, Jared says. “It’s classic. You’ll be a timeless bride.”

My mom glares at Jared. “Why are you here?”

“Because I’m the man of honor. I go where Jo goes,” Jared says cheekily.

“You mean the best man,” my mother corrects. She pauses. “Isn’t Maceo’s VP his best man?”

Jared smiles maniacally. “No, you’re right, Stella. Gauge is the best man. I’m Jo’s *man of honor*. And I’m standing up with the guy I’m dating, Ziggy.”

My mom’s eye twitches. I have to choke back the laugh bubbling in my chest. Jared is all about shock factor when it comes to getting his point across, and right now, my mom is one step away from tweaking out.

“Well, I think you look sexy as fuck,” Punk says, leaning against the doorframe. “Your ass looks killer in that gown and highlights it perfectly. And I would know since I’ve seen your naked butt dozens of times.”

And with that comment, Punk finishes my mom off. She gasps and sinks into the nearest chair, clutching her chest. Hopefully, it’s enough to keep her from saying anything else that’s negative.

A dark shadow casts over the room as Tony steps into the space after finishing his walk around the perimeter. He looks completely at ease, which helps putting me at ease. But it’s hard to keep the memories of my kidnapping from sneaking in.

A shiver runs along my spine, and Tony notices. I know he'd do anything to have a do-over from that day. He gives me a wink and nods at my outfit. "Looking good, Little Jo."

I smile back. "Thanks, Tony. Punk says it 'highlights' my butt."

Tony gives a thunderous laugh. "You're rocking it, for sure. Maceo's a lucky dog."

My mother moans. "Can we please stop referring to my daughter's bottom like it's a focal point?"

"But it is," all three of the guys say in unison. My mother grits her teeth.

"Guys, stop torturing my mom," I concede. They snicker, but don't fight me. "Ebony and Opal, why don't you go try on the dresses you're interested in."

The girls run into the dressing rooms squealing, and I make my way to mine only to be stopped by my mom.

"Why do you have a man of honor and not a maid of honor?" she asks condescendingly.

I groan and look at the guys. "I take it back. Continue harassing her." But it's too late. Mom is on a mission and won't be stopped.

"Your sister is going to be hurt if you don't ask her to be in your wedding," my mom nags.

My eyes roll up to the ceiling. "Right, like I was hurt when you all shamed me. And even then, Maceo was the one who had to kick your asses into gear to apologize."

My mom flinches as if I slapped her. *Fuck*. I was too harsh. Honest but harsh. I need to stop dredging up my parents' past transgressions whenever I feel provoked into an argument. I'll get further ahead in repairing our relationship if I focus on making new memories with them and letting go of the bad ones.

The seamstress unzips the back of my dress, and I go into the changing room to shimmy out of my gown. I dress quickly and walk out to hand my dress off to the sales associate.

My mom snatches my hand to get my attention. I yank it away, cringing. “Don’t fucking grab at me in here of all places. This is where your favorite person abducted me,” I hiss.

Mom gulps and raises her hands. “I’m sorry. I only want you to hear me out. Simone, your dad, and I are truly sorry for our part in driving you away. And yes, Maceo is the only reason we came back into the picture, but we were afraid you would push us away again. You can’t hate us forever.”

I grit my teeth, knowing she’s right. It’s not like I want to keep holding onto this hostility. I’m just struggling with the idea of putting my heart out there and risking getting hurt again.

My mom sighs. “Your sister would make you part of her special day.”

I laugh at my mom. “Please. You and dad may have apologized, but Simone hasn’t tried to extend an olive branch.”

“It’s because she’s busy with her job, sweetheart,” my mom defends.

“Too busy to call and apologize? Bullshit, mom! I’m always busy and I make fucking time for those I care about. She had no problem calling and bitching me out for ‘guilting’—her word, not mine—you guys into moving to Colorado. She could have apologized then, but she didn’t. And if she’s too ‘busy’ with work to reach out and make amends, then she’s too busy to stand in as maid of honor,” I lash out.

Our bickering ends when Opal comes out of the changing room wearing one of the bridesmaid dresses, looking like a Grecian goddess. The gown is elegant and accentuates her hourglass figure in the most sensual of ways. Mom and I stand in breathless awe.

“You look stunning, Opal,” I say.

“That dress was made for you,” my mom admits appreciatively.

Opal blushes and smiles, shy and sweet as always. “I hope Gauge likes it.”

“Oh, he definitely will,” I say with a wink. Opal’s smile spreads from ear to ear.

“Well,” Ebony calls from behind the dressing room door. “Not to outdo Jo or Opal, but I’m confident all eyes will be on me.”

Ebony bursts through the door, wearing the tightest, shortest, most revealing bridesmaid dress I’ve ever seen. The dress is sleeveless with a corset bodice, displaying her well-endowed chest like it’s on a serving tray. Ebony’s black hair comes nearly to the hemline of the dress, barely below her bootylicious butt-cheeks.

She looks *hot*, like Vegas showgirl, majorly hot. Ebony is right—all eyes are on her.

I let out a low whistle. “Damn, girl.”

Opal covers her mouth, giggling at my reaction.

Both Punk and Jared nod their heads, agreeing with my assessment.

But Tony...Tony is looking at Ebony like he met the mother of his future children. His mouth drops and his baby-blue eyes are wide. I actually use my hand to bring his jaw back up, sniggering as I do so, but Tony doesn’t seem to care. His eyes roam over Ebony like he’s trying to undress her.

Ebony notices his undivided attention and gives him one of her killer smiles, blowing him a kiss. That seems to snap him out of his trance, and he blushes hard.

She gives me a pleading look. “Please, please, can I wear this one? The others are too restrictive. They make me look like a nun.”

I snort. “I highly doubt you could look like a nun in anything you wear, even if you were wearing a habit.” I pause and notice how happy she is. “I have no problem with you girls wearing different dresses, as long as you guys are comfortable and happy with whatever you pick out, I’m cool with it. Keep in mind the gowns will be emerald though—it’s my only request.”

Both Ebony and Opal jump with giddiness.

My mother looks like she's ready to shoot laser beams out of her eyes. "Josephine Freya Holland, you can't be serious?!"

Whoa! My mom used my full name—she hasn't used it since I was a kid.

"Jo's in troubleee," Jared sing-songs his taunt.

I suppress giving my best friend the finger and address my mother instead. "Mom, it's fine."

My mom is miffed. "The dress is *too* revealing. Think about your guests and what they might think."

Punk snorts. "This looks like another *fun* family feud I don't want to be involved in. I'm going to survey the property outside. Good luck, sis."

My arms fold across my chest as I look at my mom. "There isn't anyone invited who's going to mind Ebony wearing this dress, man or woman. Only you care."

My mom tries again. "What about the pictures, Jo? Your future kids will be looking at those."

I shrug my shoulders. "It's not like she's nude—all the important parts are covered."

"And it passed the bounce test without me spilling out. I'll be fine when it comes to shaking my body on the dance floor." Ebony shimmies her triple D boobs to demonstrate.

Tony's jaw snaps together. "Little Jo, I think you should listen to your mom."

I give him the side-eye. I know why he wants her to wear a different dress, but it isn't up to him.

Ebony gives him a smirk before singing Beyoncé's, "*If you like it, then you shoulda put a ring on it.*"

Tony glares at Ebony before addressing me. "I agree with your mom—it's too revealing. Perhaps Ebony could pick another dress? Preferably one that starts at the top of her neck with complete coverage to her feet. Might I suggest a floor-length muumuu or a long-sleeved maxi? Anything to *not*

highlight her—” he waves at Ebony’s smokin’ body “—curves.”

Finding Tony’s sudden attraction and interest in protecting Ebony’s modesty is hilarious. I cover my mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

“You don’t get a say,” Ebony chides, wagging a manicured finger in Tony’s face. “It’s Jo’s choice.”

Tony’s jaw ticks and his fingers twitch. I know the mannerisms too well. Maceo does it any time when he wants to paddle my ass.

Oooh, Tony has a crush. I’m totally going to tease him when we’re alone.

Tony’s eyes desperately sweep across the rows of dresses. He homes in on a conservative gown and yanks it from the rack. “How about this one? Oh, look, it has pockets! Every girl *looves* pockets. Pockets win out over corsets every time.”

Ebony gives Tony an incredulous look. “You want me to renounce this one of a kind glove for a smock with pockets? Have you lost your damn mind?”

Irritation getting the best of him, Tony throws the gown over his shoulder. He gives me an accusing glower while addressing Ebony. “I’ve been told pocket-dresses are the best.”

“Hee!” I squeak with amusement. I do recall saying something similar to Tony, but it was my opinion and not the opinion of all women. Ebony is not going to be swayed by pockets, as awesome as they are.

“I’m wearing this dress, and that’s final,” Ebony declares.

Tony folds his hands and begs. “Little Jo, please, don’t approve this.”

My mom pleads too. “Jo, listen to your very big, scary gentleman friend here. The dress takes away from the very classic look you’re going for.” AKA, my mom is saying it’s trashy.

Ebony gives me a wink before speaking to my mom. “Stella, you feel this dress is inappropriate, correct?”

My mom nearly shouts. “YES!”

“Would you say it makes Jo’s wedding gown look modest in comparison?” Ebony continues.

Mom nods. “It makes hers look conservative, I agree.”

Ebony smiles triumphantly. “If I agree to wear the same dress as Opal, will you stop criticizing Jo’s?”

My mom bobs her head, vigorously. “Yes, I would. *Please* pick the other dress!”

Ebony shrugs. “Okay.”

Tony and my mom look shocked. “Okay?” they say in unison.

Ebony nods. “I’ll wear the other dress, but if I hear anyone say one more negative thing about any of Jo’s wedding choices—not just the dress—then I’m walking down the aisle in this.” Ebony shimmies her rack again for good measure. I swear to God, I hear Tony moan.

My mom lets out a sigh of relief.

Ebony gives me a little squeeze saying, “I got you, sister,” before sashaying back into the dressing room.

All seems to go fine until we go to the counter to put a rush on the dresses and other wedding apparel. Ebony is getting both dresses—the approved, demure bridal gown, and the no-no dress. Opal is getting the approved dress, but my mom throws a wrench in the gears. Not when she orders her mother of the bride gown, but when she orders another bridesmaid dress, the same size as Opal’s. There’s only one other person I know who has an hourglass body like my friend. My sister, Simone.

“What the hell, mom!” I’m beyond frustrated. My family dynamic is shaky, and adding my sister into the mix isn’t going to add stability until she apologizes to me.

She gives me a pleading look. “I’m only ordering it in case you change your mind. My treat.”

Unbelievable! If she wants to spend her money buying a dress my sister may or may not use, it's her prerogative.

Irritated, I swipe my credit card. My gift to my mom and the girls was to buy their outfits and shoes for the wedding. Maceo plans to do the same with his half of the wedding party and the ushers. I scrawl my signature before setting my mom straight. "I'm not agreeing to anything until Simone and I hash shit out."

My mom gives me a small smile. "But you'll consider it if you two work out your differences?"

Simone and I fought like cats and dogs growing up, but we became best of friends when I graduated high school. A year ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to ask her to be my maid of honor.

But things changed when she didn't support me leaving my job for a fresh break from Jacob. She broke my heart, and until my parents came out to Colorado to confront me, I had not heard one peep from her. No phone calls, texts, emails, or messages on social media. *Nada!* Our one and only phone call in over a year, we argued over my parents moving here.

But she's my sister...

I've already agreed to ask her in my heart if we patch things up—it's my pride that's getting in the way.

The sales clerk hands me my wedding dress in its garment bag, and I thank her.

My mom asks one last time. "Jo?"

"Yeah, mom. I'll consider it," I say with a resigning sign.

Maybe Maceo's right. Maybe our wedding will give me my family back, but only if I let them in.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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Josephine's counselor, Heather Fisker, stares at the monitors on the wall showcasing all the electronic notes on Josephine's therapy sessions breached on the clinic's database. Heather walks the room with a trembling hand covering her mouth.

I asked Josephine if she wanted to be present for this meeting, but she said no. She told me her emotions were too raw to be civil this soon. Josephine knows her limits, and I need to respect her wishes. I screwed up when I brought her parents back into her life before she was ready, and I'm not going to make the same mistake by forcing her to confront Heather.

Even though Heather had nothing to do with the infringement, Josephine associates the violation with her counselor. If we were able to wait a day, maybe Jo's answer would be different, but this can't wait. The longer we hold off on investigating, the longer it will take to track our hacker.

Heather clears her throat. "Were any of my other patients' files compromised?"

Chase takes the lead. "As far as we can see, it's only Jo's information that's been violated, but that's not to say others aren't at risk. Jo was the target, and your database security is weak. It took me less than five minutes to break through your firewalls and access this information. The hacker was no different, but he got a little sloppy and left an encrypted trail which we're currently tracking."

Heather falls into one of the office chairs and hangs her head in her hands. “This is serious. If any of my other patients have fallen victim to this breach in personal information... This is the kind of thing that could potentially be harmful to several of my patients. Most of my PTSD patients are barely hanging on as is—this could throw many over the edge. What am I going to do?”

“Nothing. You’re going to continue to treat your patients as you have been—Chase already implemented extra securities into your system for all your other patients. If you must continue with electronically documenting sessions, save it to a flash drive and not your database. We will be giving you false information about your appointments with Josephine, and you’ll enter the material into the system. We’re hoping to entrap this hacker,” I say.

Heather looks up at us. “Shouldn’t we go to the police with this information?”

Gauge pipes in. “And have you reveal that several of your patients, as well as many other’s being treated by your facility, have possibly been exposed to a breach in personal information? The police would be legally bound to inform all of your clients. As far as we can see, no one besides Jo’s has been hacked. Not to mention, we would deny any knowledge that would link us to hacking into your system to see it was possible.”

Heather looks at the monitors and shakes her head. “How did your crew discover the breach?”

“Josephine was suspicious after Lorenzo Bianchi let it slip he knew she wasn’t sleeping and having night terrors.”

Heather’s hazel eyes go wide with fear. “Bianchi? As in the Italian mob boss?” Heather looks green, like she may get sick. Gauge places wastebasket by her—none of us want to clean that mess.

“We suspect he’s involved,” Chase says.

Heather’s face crumples in confusion. “Involved? In what way?”

“Well, he has an interest in Jo,” Chase explains.

“It’s not an ‘interest,’” I correct, my voice tight with restraining anger. “It’s a fucking obsession.” I want to hit something, preferably Bianchi’s face.

Heather looks shaken. “How is Jo handling this?”

My jaw ticks. “About as well as you can imagine. She’s refusing any more therapy sessions with you and has firmly stated she will not talk to another therapist until we’ve caught the hacker. All of this makes Josephine feel violated all over again.”

Heather folds her arms over her chest and looks me square in the eye. “I understand her feelings, but her anger is misplaced. Her anger should be on the hacker and Bianchi, not me. I did nothing wrong. I followed company policy and used the clinic’s database for recording all notes on my patients.”

“We understand,” I say, “but Jo is unable to reason when it’s her emotional turmoil scattered all over the dark net.”

“Atlas, it’s imperative for Jo to continue her therapy, if not with me, then with someone else. She could regress or worse. Being active in her emotional healing is critical since her attack was only weeks ago,” Heather stresses.

I nod, because I know she’s right, and I respect her experience with treating many PTSD patients. “She’s not saying no to counseling, just to you, and preferably to start after the hacker is found. Her mental health notes being electronically documented is a hard pass for her.”

Heather straightens her shoulders. “I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“The only thing that’s going to bring Jo peace of mind is if we can identify and locate the hacker. I need you to continue your sessions with Jo, sans the counseling, and input the info we give you. Please don’t engage her in therapy. I know my woman, and it will set her off, make her storm out, and blow any chance of us nailing the bastard. Can we count on you?”

She gives me a tight smile. “Absolutely.”

It's late by the time the guys and I call it quits for the night. If we're lucky, we can get a couple of hours of sleep before the sun comes up.

We shuffle out of the tech room and look around the main floor, stunned. The entire place has been furnished, complete from floor to ceiling.

“Ho-lee-shit,” I drawl. She actually finished before the deadline.

Gauge stumbles forward and face-plants on one of the oversized sectionals in the gathering area. “Someone call Opal and let her know I'm crashing here. Better yet, one of you fuckers go and bring her to me.”

“Maybe you should get her yourself,” Opal calls from the kitchen. A delicious aroma wafts out toward the main room.

Gauge is on his feet and jogging over to his girl. “Tell me that smell is enchiladas, gorgeous.”

Opal giggles when Gauge wraps her up in a bear hug and peppers her neck with kisses. “Sure is. Jo gave me the recipe.”

At the mention of my woman's name, my ears perk up. “Is she still here?”

As if being called on cue, Hades barks and bounds loudly down the stairs. He sails through the air and lands in my lap, making me grunt. The dog is not exactly light. He slobbers me with kisses and finally settles down when Josephine approaches, freshly showered, and looking sexy as fuck.

I push Hades off my lap and stand to greet my woman with a soft kiss on her delectable rosy-pink lips. I lean my forehead against hers and inhale the citrus scent wafting off her skin.

“Well, this sucks,” Ziggy grumbles. “Atlas and Gauge have their partners, and I'm without mine.”

“He's upstairs finishing your suite,” Josephine says with a wink.

Ziggy leaps from the couch and takes the stairs two at a time.

“You better get your butts down here and eat with us,” Opal hollers after him. “I didn’t stay awake this late to make dinner for nothing.”

I steer Josephine into the kitchen to scoop up heaping platefuls of Mexican goodness and garden salads. We all sit around the big banquet table, eating and moaning our contentment with the meal.

When our bellies are full, we work as a team to clean the kitchen and put away the leftovers. With yawns and sleepy faces, we say our goodnights and move into our respective suites.

When I walk into our room, I’m hit with a total midcentury modern vibe, similar to the rest of the house. The furniture is sleek walnut in a lighter brown finish. The accents are brass, leather, and natural fibers. Josephine had lit a couple of scented candles before coming downstairs to dinner, and the room smells of warm almonds and honey. She granted my one request, and her plush blue velvet couch is in the sitting area along with her modern wingback chairs. The two of us have a lot of fond memories on that couch, and if I have it my way, we’ll keep it forever.

Josephine pulls me into the bedroom and the bed is made in the same blue linen colors as the couch. The room is rich and elegant and way classier than I am, but I love it. Not only because Josephine designed it, but because she made this space with me in mind. Everything, from the blackout curtains to help me get more restful sleep between missions, to the higher doorframes to accommodate my size, has been flawlessly planned out for my needs. She’s always thinking of me.

“Baby, it’s perfect,” I murmur against the crown of her head.

Her bright blue eyes seek my approval. “You like it?”

I give her my famous panty-dropping smile, which always makes her wet between her thighs. “Love it. Love the house. Love our suite. And I love you.”

Hades yawns loudly and retreats to the corner of the bedroom. His XL twin mattress is fluffed with new sheets, blankets, and dog toys. He plops down and within seconds he’s snoring.

And that’s all I hear—Hades’ light snores, the buzzing of bugs floating past the slightly open windows, and the beating of my heart drumming for my beautiful woman.

Surprised, I raise an eyebrow. “It’s very quiet.” I expected Butch and Chase to be asleep in their suites, but I assumed I would hear Gauge and Opal going at it with their room being across the hall from ours.

Gauge had been biting at the bit to move him and Opal into their suite. They wanted to enjoy each other’s company without having to worry about someone walking into our shared bunkroom mid-coitus. But as I strain my ears, I hear nothing that could be mistaken for the sounds of passion.

Hell, I half expected to hear Jared and Ziggy going at it, and they’re all the way on the other end of the hall.

Josephine must read my mind because she smirks. “I soundproofed all the suites’ walls. After living at your rental, I determined it was mandatory.”

My eyes go wide. “No one can hear us?”

Josephine shakes her head with a smile. “Not a peep. Well, I shouldn’t say that. The doors are not soundproof as a safety precaution, but do provide a buffer, and if the windows are open, voices can carry.”

My dick fights to break free of my jeans and bury itself in Josephine. But I need to do my men a solid before I can indulge myself on my woman.

With my heart beating rapidly behind my ribs, I hold up a finger when she starts to walk seductively toward me. Quickly, I yank out my cell from my leather cut and fire off a text to both Gauge and Ziggy.

Suites are soundproof. Go hog wild.

I'm not sure if either will get the message since they're both probably in the act of pleasuring their partners, but I would be a piss poor brother if I didn't try to fill them in on the perk.

Gauge immediately responds. **THANK FUCK!**

And Ziggy follows it up. **What he said.**

I toss my cell on the nightstand, chuck my boots off, and hook a finger at Jo. "Come here, woman."

Her sexy, curvy hips swaying back and forth hypnotically has me reaching out and snagging her waist, drawing her lithe little body flush with mine. She squeals when I attack her with kisses, rubbing my well-past five o'clock shadow against her sun-kissed skin.

I sweep her in a threshold carry, capture her plump lips in a promising kiss, and carry her across the room to our Goliath bed. Gently, I lay her out across the silky linens and take a step back to take her all in.

My eyes gaze lazily over her petite frame and I can't help but sigh. This woman is my everything. *Mine! All fucking mine.*

Tonight, I want to set aside all the bullshit we've had to deal with the past week and solely focus on us right here, right now. I'm going to worship her body in *our* bed, in *our* new home.

As excited as I am about the soundproofing, I'm in no rush. She'll be screaming through her orgasm soon enough.

"Are you going to stand there, or are you going to join me?" she teases.

Smiling, I slip off my cut and pull my shirt over my head. I know my woman gets turned on when I showcase my shredded chest and abs. My cock twitches when I hear Josephine's little gasp pass her lips. The sounds my Pixie makes when she's enjoying herself always act like an electrical current to my dick.

Don't rush through this, Maceo.

We only have this first time in our new place once. I want to savor every agonizing second of it, pleasuring my woman 'till she begs me to finish deep inside of her.

With great restraint, I leisurely undo my belt and remove my pants and boxer briefs together. I grab the nine-inch steel pipe between my legs and pump it slowly, watching Josephine's pupils dilate, her coastal eyes growing darker as she watches me manhandle my third leg.

I nearly blow my load when the tip of my cock drips with precome and my wicked minx's dainty tongue darts out to lick her top lip subconsciously.

"Fuck, Josephine," I groan, tugging on my balls to stop my release. "You don't play fair."

Josephine's hooded eyes connect with mine and she cocks her head. "Play fair? How the hell am I not playing fair? You're the one giving me the striptease, working your thick dick like an instrument in a slow ballad. I'm still fully dressed."

I blink and look over my Pixie. *Huh*. She's right. Josephine is still clothed. And I'm the schmuck standing here butt-ass naked, jerking off in front of her. Even fully dressed, my girl has the power to make me feral and forget my manners.

"Well, we better rectify that, shall we?" I say, grinning like a fool. I lean over and bite back a moan when my fingertips connect with the soft skin of her firm abdomen. I slowly yank her tank top off and do the same with her night-shorts and tiny panties.

Josephine stretches out on the bed, and I can't help but stare at her toned body, flexing in anticipation and flushing with arousal. Her breathing is deep, her chest rising and falling, flaunting her perfect round tits. Her nipples harden to diamonds under my gaze, and my mouth salivates, eager to suck them into my mouth.

"Fuck me. You're gorgeous. The most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on."

Josephine blushes more as she steadily lets her legs fall apart, presenting her wet and ready pussy to me.

As if Josephine's sexy body wasn't killing me already, the flower between her thighs calls me to heaven. I stumble eagerly onto the bed and hover over her body, propping myself up on my forearms.

I claim her lips in a deep, unhurried kiss, loving the feeling of her perky nipples brushing against my heaving chest. When Josephine moans, I swipe my tongue into her mouth to tangle with hers, sucking and savoring her taste.

We're both a moaning, sex-dripping mess, and I couldn't fucking love it more.

"Maceo, please. I need you," Josephine purrs against my lips.

Eager to fulfill her wish, I line myself up with the golden honey pot at the apex of her thighs. "Anything for you, baby," I say, inching my way inside of her 'till we're pelvis to pelvis, both of us panting.

God, she feels fucking good, sheathed snugly around my throbbing cock. Doesn't matter how often I take her; her pussy is always tight. It takes all of my control not to go all animalistic on her.

Grinding myself against her clit, I watch as her costal eyes roll back into her head. It always gives me such a power trip knowing my body is giving her this pleasure that only I can give.

I pull nearly all the way out—enjoying Josephine's whimpers at the loss of me—before slowly pumping all the way in her again. I set a leisurely pace of in and out, but my pumps in are firm, making sure my pelvis rakes against her precious pink pearl.

Unable to stop my mouth from salivating, I lean down and capture one of her dusty-rose nipples into my mouth, suckling and swirling my tongue around the peak. I release it with a wet pop and move on to the next, giving it the same attention as

the first. Back and forth, I go between her plump little breasts, my hips thrusting at the same measured rate.

“Mmm,” Josephine hums in approval. Her fingers cling to the meat in my shoulders, digging into my skin. It should hurt me, but it only turns me on. Truth is, I love it when she uses me as her scratching post.

“More, Maceo, more,” she pants.

Normally, I would increase my tempo, maybe start pounding harder, but it’s not what I want tonight. I want to continue the torturous pace, increasing the intensity of her pleasure. I hook her knees in my hands, pulling her legs up into a V, and placing them over my shoulders. In this position, I’m hitting her G spot deep within her, making her tight pussy squeeze me harder.

Christ, her snatch is heaven.

“Your body was made to take my fucking,” I rumble out in a rough voice, barely able to control my need.

Josephine mewls loudly with the increased sensitivity. I’m practically grunting like a bear with each slow, hard thrust of my hips, connecting with her like the beat of a drum. *Boom, boom, boom.*

The steady grind of our pelvises pushes us closer to nirvana.

Our labored breathing and our hips connecting are the only sounds to fill my ears. I can feel her sex tighten around my cock like a velvet vise grip.

Fuck, it feels good. So fucking good.

“M—Maceo,” Josephine stutters. “More.”

Avoiding a change in tempo, I snake my hand to her clit instead. My fingers swirl once, twice, and press down hard.

Josephine goes off like a firecracker, clawing her nails down my back. “Oh, God! Maceo, I’m coming!”

And come she does. She squirts all over us, her juices dripping down my balls, collecting in a puddle beneath us.

Hot damn! I've never made a woman squirt her orgasm before, and it's hot as hell. Talk about an ego boost. I feel like the fucking world champion.

My balls instantly tighten to the point of pain. I buck hard into her, shooting my heavy load all the way to her womb. My little men are going to be seeping out of her for days, and it fucking makes me proud as hell.

Josephine's arms fall limply on the bed. Her eyes are closed and her breathing labored. I should pull out and roll to my side, but I'm not ready to leave her heaven yet. Her pussy is still having the occasional aftershock rolling through, and my cock wants to be present for any last tremors. I bury my face in her neck, supporting my weight on my forearms to avoid crushing her.

For several minutes, we lay like this, trying to regain our composure. When our breathing evens out, I pull my head away and smile down into her angelic face.

Josephine smiles sweetly at me. "Welcome home, love."

Be still my heart, how this woman slays me.

I'm awake from my peaceful slumber to an obnoxious buzzing from my cell. My arms and legs are currently wrapped around Josephine, spooning her slender form. I reach over to the nightstand in front of me and grab my phone.

"Yes," I clip, holding Josephine snug against me.

"We have eyes on Paolo," Brass whispers into the phone.

Silently, I slip out of bed and tug on some jeans, sans underwear—there's no time to scramble around.

"Where?" I growl, crossing the suite and stepping out of the room.

"He's waiting in a Bentley outside of Peeping Tom's apartment. Guessing he's planning on ambushing the kid when he leaves to go to the trails," Brass drawls.

I check my watch. *Shit*. Tom will be heading out of his apartment in less than ten minutes. “Are the cameras installed outside his place?”

“They sure are. Butch took care of it yesterday,” Brass says in a low tone.

Thank the saints for Butch. Relieved, I stride across the hall and rap my knuckles on Gauge’s door. There’s some stumbling and cursing, but Gauge opens the door.

“We’re on. Round up the crew.”

Gauge is not a morning person, but hearing we’re close to bagging Bianchi is like a triple espresso to his senses. He wakes the others and has everyone in the tech room with minutes to spare. Chase and Ziggy jump on the monitors and bring up the surveillance footage.

“Ring up the kid,” I order.

Chase calls Tom and puts him on speaker. He answers on the first ring. “Hello?”

“You’re about to make contact with Pretty Paolo outside your apartment. Brass has eyes on you, and we’re going to feed you your lines. Do you understand?” I say in a controlled voice.

“Yes, sir,” Tom says with a tremor. “I have myself wired and my earpiece in like Chase showed me.”

I nod. “Good. Go ahead and turn it on. I know this seems scary, and you’re probably nervous, but I want you to try to maintain some sort of composure.”

“I don’t know if I can be composed around the dude. He scares the shit out of me. I’m always nervous when I see him,” Tom confesses.

“Then your demeanor will be natural and more in our favor, Tom,” I placate him.

Tom sighs and connects his earpiece to our system, disconnecting his cell. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Gauge takes over the reins. “Head downstairs and act surprised when Paolo pops out. He’ll be suspicious if you aren’t.”

We hear the creak of the old wooden stairs as Tom makes his way out of his campus apartment.

Surveillance shows Tom opening his complex’s door onto the street. Tom starts to run toward the trails and doesn’t make it ten feet before Paolo steps into his path. Tom skids to a halt and grabs at his chest. A loud thump is heard on the speakers.

“Get your damn hand off the speaker, kid,” Chase growls out.

The surveillance shows Tom swiftly removing his hand from his chest, hearing Chase loud and clear.

Paolo stands stoically in front of our snitch. He says nothing, waiting for Tom to update him.

We rehearsed how this would play out yesterday. Tom practically had the lines memorized on what he was to say, but we still are going to feed him his script.

Cameras show Tom swallowing his nerves. “Um, I have an update for you.”

Gauge tells him his lines, and Tom repeats them back to Paolo. “Saw them with their dog running yesterday on the trail. First time I’ve seen her running and not biking in weeks.”

Paolo waits, expecting more. Tom shuffles from side to side.

Gauge looks at me, asking permission with his eyes to continue. I didn’t want to reveal anything personal between Josephine and me, but Paolo has learned enough about our sexual endeavors to know there’s no way we weren’t intimate out on the trail at least once this week.

Grinding my teeth, I nod. Gauge gives Tom more lines. “He took her behind the boulder again.”

Paolo nods and gives him a look, a look which says, ‘spill your guts.’

Tom blushes as Gauge tells him his next line. “He was going down on her.”

Punk starts pacing the room, shaking his head angrily—he’s pissed revealing this personal information about the two of us as much as I am.

Surveillance shows Paolo cocking his head and raising an eyebrow. “And?”

Is this a fucking joke? Does the sick bastard want more details about me eating out my woman?

I’m not alone in my thinking. All of my brothers snarl their disgust.

Tom said Paolo would ask for more specifics if he believed there was more to report. When we pressed Tom for an explanation, he said Paolo hadn’t pushed for more detail lately. The only reason I can surmise for the sudden interest is that we deviated from our normal quickie.

This was different. This was new, something we hadn’t done before on the trail, meaning it was information that Paolo would want to introduce to his boss. Or maybe he only wants to hear it for his own cheap kicks.

If he wants details, I’ll give him fucking details.

Our little sexcapade was pure and private. I have no intention of sharing the real story. But what I’ll give him will be fucking eye-popping.

I take over the lines from Gauge. “She was begging him to make her come. She said she wanted to feel his thick tongue on her bare pussy lips. She was purring like a kitten wanting to be stroked.”

The cameras show Tom’s cheeks turning beet-red. “Um...”

“Repeat it, boy!” I shout.

Tom rambles quickly to repeat my words verbatim. Paolo’s eyes go wide as I expected. All my brothers suck in air, looking at me like I’ve lost my damn mind. But I’ve only warmed up.

“He took her behind the boulder where he stripped off her shorts and panties like a crazed man and spread her wide, diving to feast on her juicy snatch. He slurped her up like a starved man,” Tom repeats my words, adding his own exaggerated hand movements to enhance the effect.

Paolo’s eyes nearly bulge out of his sockets, not use to hearing such graphic details of our lovemaking.

Punk shoves me. “Dude, that’s my fucking sister you’re talking about!” I push him off me with my forearm.

“He kept making her come and come on his tongue, ‘till she was screaming for him to put two in her pink and one in her stink,” Tom repeats my next line with a flaming-red face.

Chase and Gauge start cracking up, unable to remain professional any longer. Ziggy rushes around the desk to stop Punk from cold-cocking me.

Paolo swivels his head around, nervously checking to make sure no one is around to overhear this news.

“She rode his hand ‘till she gushed all over his palm. Afterward, she begged him to put his cock in her back door. He spun her around and rammed himself into her ass, making her squeal like a pig. He fucked her with his foot-long for so long, I lost track of the time. And when he came, he roared like a damn lion. The ground shook, animals fled for safety, and birds took to the sky,” Tom stammers my last sentences, his voice raising an octave.

When Paolo sees Tom has nothing more to add, he turns away from the kid with the most stunned expression. Stiffly, the prick walks back to his car and drives away without a backward glance.

“Well done, Tom. Take the day off from the trail. We’ll be in touch. Brass, bring your ass back to headquarters,” I say.

“Sure thing, Prez,” he chuckles. I disconnect our communication.

The tech room erupts in laughter; everyone, hunched over and grabbing their sides—well, everyone aside from Punk. He’s glaring at me, ready to dish out some whoop-ass.

“What the fuck, Atlas?” Punk yells.

I wipe away the tears of laughter from my eyes. “Chill, Punk! It didn’t actually happen. The real story is for my woman and me only. I made all that shit up.”

Punk’s shoulders relax. He cups his head in his hands. “Oh, my God. I was ready to lay you out.”

“Fuck that noise. I would never do that to Josephine,” I promise him.

Ziggy sniggers. “You couldn’t figure out he was joking when he said the earth quaked and all matter of life fled in fear?”

Gauge snorts loudly. “Or when he referenced his junk as a foot-long?”

I scowl at my best friend. “Hey, my dick is fucking impressive.”

“Porn star worthy, I agree, but you ain’t twelve inches, that’s for fucking sure,” Gauge chokes, gasping for air after his giggle fit.

Punk squeezes his eyes tight and shakes his head. “Hindsight is twenty-twenty, guys. All I kept seeing was Atlas finger fucking Jo in the ass and in the snatch. It was awful.”

“Well, it’s not like we haven’t done it before,” I say with a shrug. I’m enjoying Punk’s discomfort way too much to leave it alone.

Punk plugs his ears. “Ugh! Stop talking. How the hell am I supposed to look Jo in the eye without indecent images popping in my head?”

“Calm down, bro. It’s not like she’s your *real* sister,” Gauge says, grinning like an idiot.

Punk waves his hands at Gauge. “You’re cool with the fucking visual Maceo painted? She’s as much your sis as she is mine.”

Gauge frowns as he mulls it over. He glares at Punk. “Thanks a lot, asshole. Now I feel all pervy.”

Chase is the first to gain his composure. “Not that it wasn’t great comic relief, but what the fuck was your endgame, Atlas?”

I sigh. “It was clear Paolo wasn’t going to say anything to incriminate himself. He gave away nothing and could easily argue he ran into some kid on the street, rambling a bizarre story. If we turn it over to authorities, they’re going to say it’s not enough. I made the presidential decision to fuck with him and see how Bianchi responds to this new bundle of intel.”

Ziggy points his index finger at me. “Now that will be interesting.”

“What will be interesting?”

All eyes turn to my sexy kitten, standing in the doorway, dressed and ready for her morning run.

Punk takes one look at her, blushes, and drops his eyes to the ground. He quickly exits the room muttering something about getting laid and erasing the visuals in his head. The rest of us laugh at his expense.

Josephine looks wide-eyed after him before looking back at me. “What’s wrong with Punk?”

Smirking, I stalk over to her and wrap her in my arms, kissing her puffy lips, still swollen from our lovemaking last night. “I’ll tell you all about it on the run.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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The weekend seemed to fly by. Saturday, my men finished emptying out our rental and moving everything into our new headquarters. When everything was cleaned, and the last box was removed, we all had one last drink at the dump, toasting farewell. After, we went straight to our new home for an epic party—food, booze, a roaring bonfire, loud music, and the woman I love wrapped around me.

Sunday, I awoke to Josephine going down on me—best fucking wake-up call ever. We made love for the better part of the day, only stopping to eat, shower, and sleep.

Monday started with a run for Josephine and I. We ran past Tom running in the opposite direction—he no longer has to follow us when we run, but he needs to keep up appearances in case Paolo surprises him on the trail one day. I nod at him, and he nods back. Since he's switched sides and started working for us, he walks a little bit taller and breathes a little easier. The kid doesn't seem half bad.

All is good until we go to Josephine's scheduled counseling appointment. The mood shifts from relaxed to tense, sitting here in Heather's office with Josephine throwing off 'don't fuck with me' vibes. Heather sits across from Josephine, patiently waiting.

I pull the flash drive out of my pocket and hand it to the therapist. "This contains the notes we want you to upload to Josephine's files. Enter it like you normally do—Chase will be monitoring from our end for any outside activity breaching the firewall. We'll bring another flash drive with more fake info when we come to her next scheduled appointment."

Heather places the flash drive next to her computer. “What’s on it?”

“I have a new compulsion—checking locks on doors and windows to the point I grow anxious if I don’t check. We didn’t want to add too much info to the file. Less is more sometimes,” Josephine says.

Heather eyes her hesitantly. “Jo, I hope you know I’m truly sorry this happened.”

Josephine turns her head toward the door. She’s probably longing to escape. “I don’t blame you, but I’m not happy about any of this shit.”

Heather leans forward. “Jo, I want to encourage you to continue your therapy. If not with me, then with someone else. Please consider it.”

“Not happening,” Josephine says firmly. “I understand the importance of PTSD counseling, but it’s not an option right now. I’ll resume once we’ve apprehended the threat. Please, stop pressuring me.”

Frown lines form between Heather’s eyes. “I’m concerned for your wellbeing.”

“I understand, but this is a special circumstance, and I’m not going to be forced into doing something when I don’t feel safe. Hell, nothing is currently safe. It wouldn’t matter who I saw. This hacker would find any information if it’s entered into a computer,” Josephine says tersely.

Heather refuses to leave it alone. “Surely, there’s some alternative other than halting treatment, regardless of how temporary it may be?”

Josephine’s nostrils flare and she stands. She’s quickly losing her cool. “I’m growing really fucking tired of repeating myself.”

Fuck, Pixie, please, please don’t run. The mission can’t risk Josephine becoming overwhelmed and fleeing.

Heather says nothing. She sits quietly, waiting for Josephine to cool off.

“Am I able to stop taking my meds without any adverse side effects?” Josephine asks abruptly.

“Jo—” I start.

“They make my head feel fuzzy. I want to be alert,” Josephine interrupts me.

With Bianchi posing a danger, I understand why Josephine wants to be focused, but going off her meds and stopping counseling seems like too much change at once.

“Besides, if we want to start a family, it’s better if I’m off this stuff now and have it out of my system,” Josephine continues.

My heart leaps with joy. Hearing her talk about us starting a family is music to my ears. But is it too soon to stop?

“You’re on a mild anti-anxiety med. There are no side effects if you decide to stop taking it, but hold onto it. If you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed and need something to take off the edge, you have something. If you become pregnant and still need something in an emergency, we can discuss options at that time,” Heather answers.

Josephine slowly begins to relax, and I’m able to pull her back on the couch with me. I cradle her against my side, comforting her, but it also serves as another means for securing her from dashing out of the room.

Josephine gives Heather a scrutinizing gaze. She’s barely hanging on by a thread, and any disturbance might fray the thread to nothing.

Heather taps her lips with her finger, contemplating. “What if we continue counseling behind the scenes?”

My eyes scream at Heather to ‘shut the fuck up.’

Heather ignores me and addresses my woman. “Jo, how would you feel about one of my student residents taking over your counseling? This person isn’t required to enter notes in our system since he’s technically not a member of our staff. You’d be helping him out with his required hours of service, and you would be continuing your treatment. I would update

him with my notes and set him free. I won't require him to update me on your progress—I'll sign off on it, putting your privacy first."

Well, I'll be damn. That's not a half-bad idea.

I look at Josephine. "What do you think about that?" I'm not pushing her either way. Josephine is the one who needs to feel comfortable with this.

Josephine's brows pull together. "You and all other staff would be left out of it?"

Heather nods. "Yes. Students are required to complete several hours of service to meet their major or doctoral requirements. I'll give your case to him with the stipulation that you'll not be included in any of his dissertations."

Josephine bites her bottom lip. She looks uncomfortable, and it's clear she'll not be making any decision on the spot.

"Give her a couple of days to decide," I offer.

Heather nods. "Of course. We can readdress it at our next session—" Heather doesn't get to finish what she's saying before Josephine launches out of my arms and bounds for the door. She heard 'next session' and took it as her cue to hightail it out of there. I have to sprint after her.

I finally catch up to her in the parking lot. "Pixie," I say, taking her by the elbow to stop her.

She yanks herself free of my hold, her body language telling me to give her space.

I hate not being able to comfort her when she's upset like this. I thought I behaved well back in Heather's office and did my best not to pressure her. "Baby, what is it? What did I do?"

She sucks in a big breath, her bottom lip quivering. "It's nothing you did. I'm just emotional and I can't fucking talk about it without fear of having someone using it against me. I don't want to talk to anyone else, student or other, about what I went through—I can't risk being compromised again. I know my limits and I simply can't afford to chance my sanity. I don't want to start all over with a new counselor. I don't want

to give J—Jacob a second thought. It's not fair. He's dead. Why do I still have to suffer?"

"Oh, Pixie." I pull her in and press my lips to her forehead. I wish I knew what the right thing to say to her was. I also wish I could kill Jacob all over again for putting my woman through this hell. I decide words aren't going to do shit right now to make her feel better. I rock her in my arms instead.

"I want to feel safe and in control again. I want to alleviate my rattled emotions," she mumbles, repeating what she said to me after we caught Peeping Tom.

I feel hopeless.

More than anything, I want to hold her and kiss her fears away, but it's not realistic. This isn't a fantasy—it's cold reality, and sometimes shit can't be fixed with comforting words and cuddles. Sometimes you need something solid to hold onto, to ground you, and give you reassurance.

A notion pops in my head that may help her feel all the things she needs.

Well, fuck me sideways, that's a brilliant idea, Maceo! Why haven't I thought of this before?

"What time do you need to be at Lloyd's build?"

Josephine collects herself and looks at her watch. "I've got an hour before Jared will be hounding me."

An hour is plenty of time for what I have in mind.

We're back at the headquarters, outside behind the mechanics' shop. There's nothing but acres of brush, wild grass, trees, and the Rockies surrounding us. I'm about ten feet away from Josephine, balancing bottles on a fallen log. I hike back through the tall grass to stand beside her.

She looks less than thrilled and adorable as fuck wearing the oversized ear protection muffs.

I pull her muffs back to talk to her since she doesn't need them yet. "Don't give me that look, baby. This will be good for you, I promise."

Josephine looks unconvinced. "Exactly how is this helping me?"

"It helps in a number of ways. First, it's stress relief—you get to take out your anger and aggression on something without hurting yourself or others. I know you run to relieve stress, but sometimes, babe, you need to bust shit up. You can pretend each one of those bottles is someone you want to feel your wrath. Jacob, Lorenzo, Esteban—hell, Pixie, you can pretend one of those bottles is me when I piss you off enough. You can lose your shit and it's okay. And I know sometimes you like to angry-fuck me to relieve quick tension, but when I'm not available, this will be a good substitute.

"Second, you will learn how to defend yourself with a gun. You should probably learn how to handle one anyways since they're all over headquarters—secured and locked up, or on our persons—but if you come across a gun, I want you to be able to safely check to see if it's loaded and how to unload it. Learning how to use one will put you in a defensible position that you wouldn't have if you don't learn.

"And third, it's fun as fuck," I say with a wink.

Removing my Glock from my conceal carry holster, I hold it out for Josephine to see. It's small and lightweight, making it ideal for a first-time petite user like Josephine, and it doesn't have the kick-back like some handguns.

"This is a Glock G19. This is the magazine, the grip, the trigger, the barrel, the slide, and the chamber.

"Where's the safety?"

"Trigger safety is here. Your finger needs to be fully engaged on the trigger to inactivate the safety." I empty the magazine to show her how to load it with the speed loader. "Insert the magazine, pull the slide back until it locks open, hit the slide release, and a bullet will enter the chamber. The gun is now cocked and locked."

“So...pull the trigger and go bang, bang?”

I chuckle at her adolescent, but very accurate conclusion. “Exactly.” I hand over the gun. “Your turn.”

Josephine takes the gun like she’s holding a live grenade, but she unloads and loads it several times like I’ve shown her ‘till she seems comfortable with the action.

Taking the gun back, I motion with my free hand at the bottle targets. “First rule of gun safety is never point a gun at a person unless you intend to do them harm. Second rule is to never put your finger on the trigger until you’re ready to shoot. We’re going to do some target practice. Keep both eyes open, both hands on the gun, line the sights up with the target, and shoot.”

After our earmuffs are securely in place, I demonstrate by shooting once at one of the bottles and it explodes. Josephine nearly jumps out of her construction boots.

I motion for her to take off her ear protection like me and hand the gun back over to her. “Your turn.”

Josephine glares warily at the pistol in my hand. “Um, I don’t think this is a good—”

I stop her from finishing the sentence by putting the gun in her hand. “It’s fine, Pixie. Trust me.”

Those coastal-blue eyes of Josephine’s stare at me, doubt clouding her vision. My woman needs my reassurance, and I’m more than willing to accommodate.

Smiling, I take her by the hips and turn her toward the bottle targets. “Relax and breathe normally. Spread your feet shoulder-width apart to steady yourself. When you’re ready, keep both eyes open, aim, and shoot like I showed you.”

I place her ear protection back on before donning my own. Placing my hands on both sides of her waists to anchor her in place, I let her feel my confidence seep into her, letting her know without words that I’m in this with her.

Josephine follows my instructions; her small chest rises and falls naturally. She raises the gun and pulls the trigger,

clipping the top of one of the bottles.

Josephine rips her earmuffs off, spins around holding the gun out in front of her, and beams like the sun. “I did it!”

Jesus! My hand gently, but firmly, pushes her hand holding the gun downward. Being taken out by my fiancée wielding my own handgun is not the way I want to go down.

“Remember rule number one—never point a gun at someone unless you intend to shoot.” Josephine looks a little chagrin, but her enthusiasm is winning out. Her giddiness makes me grin. “You had a damn good first shot, Pixie. Do it again.”

Josephine dons her protection and shoots again, hitting another bottle dead center, and scattering its remains to the wind.

My little woman goes to town, emptying the magazine, and destroying all the bottles. Had I known I was going to unleash her inner Annie Oakley, I would have brought more rounds. For her first time shooting, she did pretty awesome.

“Again,” Josephine says, bouncing on her toes. Her gemlike eyes are wild with excitement.

Hot damn! Josephine getting all target-practice-hungry is sexy as sin. Makes me want to bend her over and fuck her senseless. My cock is going to be a very angry appendage for not following through.

“We’ll do more tomorrow, along with some hand-to-hand combat training, I promise. Right now, we need to get you over to Lloyd’s build,” I say apologetically.

“Aw, come on! One more time, please?”

I may have created a little gun-toting monster. I smile and shake my head. She needs to get to the site and manage her crew. She’ll be upset with herself if she’s late on the first day of a new project.

Josephine pouts.

Unable to help myself, I laugh at her cute little sulking act, pull her against me, and give her a long, unhurried kiss on her

pouty lips.

“*Sonofabitch*,” I mutter as my fingers fumble over the tiny-ass buttons of my dress shirt.

Josephine assigned me suit detail and it’s turning out to be a disaster.

I’m downtown at our local upscale men’s clothing store with the guys in the wedding party, trying on everything in the store with no success. Jim is busy helping Josephine at the new site and will come by later with Stella to get fitted for whatever I pick out. Seeing how I’m tweaking out over this, it’s probably a good thing my future father-in-law isn’t present.

“Maybe if you didn’t have catcher mitts for hands, you could manage to button a shirt,” Punk teases behind me.

I glower at him in the mirror, giving him my thick middle finger. “Another word and I’ll shove it up your ass.”

Punk and the rest of my wedding party laugh.

After I manage to finish buttoning my shirt, the sales associate holds out the suit jacket for me to put my arms through. I shake out my arms and tug the coat closed. It’s fucking suffocating. I look like an over-stuffed sausage with my muscles straining against the fabric. I go to lift my arms and can’t, and I’m pretty sure I’m not supposed to see the outline of my cock down my leg either.

The clerk gives me a wide smile. “How does it feel, Captain Tabares?”

“Like I’m wearing a straitjacket that’s slowly cutting off my blood supply to my extremities. Why is everything so tight?”

This is the seventh suit I’ve tried, and each one feels like my balls are being smashed together and my arms and legs are

going to rip through the seams. Each suit got more restrictive as we went. This last one is by far the snuggest.

The sales associate sighs. “It’s formfitting and all the rage, Mr. Tabares. It looks striking on you.”

“Striking or not, it doesn’t fit. My lungs feel like their being pressed, my arms are stuck to my sides like a penguin, my dick is embedded in my leg, and my balls are being squished up against my taint so far, I might as well shove them in my ass to give myself breathing room.”

My men burst out laughing. *Glad my discomfort is humorous.*

Chase cocks his head at me. “Why does this image remind me of the movie *Tommy Boy*?”

“Piss off, Chase.” I actually want to laugh at his reference. I do feel like a fat guy in a little coat, though I’m not overweight in the slightest—more like a giant man in an elf coat.

The salesman looks disappointed as he frowns. “This one’s not a contender?”

“Definitely not,” I say with finality.

Punk groans and throws his head back. “Fuuuck! I’d rather be shopping with Jo. At least she’s fast and knows what she wants—in and out.”

Frustrated, I attempt to run my hands down my face, but the damn jacket stops me. “This would be easier if Josephine would tell me what she wants, but no, she wants *me* to pick it out. Josephine is the love of my life. I want to get this right for her. She deserves everything to be perfect, which includes all of us in tailored suits.”

Gauge lays his hands on my shoulders. “We’ll sit here and help you get it right.” He looks over his shoulder at Jared and Ziggy. “Hey, love birds! Isn’t this your area of expertise?”

Ziggy makes a sound of disgust in the back of his throat. “Why? Because we’re gay, we should have good fashion sense?”

“Awkwarrd,” Reaper says in a high voice.

“That’s wrong on so many levels,” Jared chastises, leaning into Ziggy’s embrace.

I shake my head at Gauge. “Bro, you best proceed with caution.”

Gauge waves his hand at the two lovers. “Oh, come on. You’re telling me they can’t dress you? Well, not you, Ziggy. You dress as shitty as the rest of us. But Jared looks like some *GQ* lumberjack who stepped off the runway.”

Everyone looks at Jared. Gauge is right. Jared dresses to impress.

“Thank you?” Jared says, with his brows pulled together. He leans over to Ziggy. “Are lumberjacks sexy?”

“Very sexy, babe,” Ziggy reassures, drawing him closer.

“Well, don’t hold out on us, bro. Pick something out for Atlas,” Punk says.

“I don’t wear suits,” Jared tries to reason. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

We all grumble with defeat.

Annoyed, I try to free myself of the suit I’m stuffed in. The tailor standing next to the sales associate steps forward and helps assist me. He tries to slide it down my arms from behind, but it gets stuck around my biceps. The two of us must look comical, like the most bizarre match of tug of war ever. The tailor tugs and tugs but no luck. The jacket is stuck on me like a second skin. “You have got to be shitting me!”

My brothers stifle their chuckles, disguising them as coughs. They know I’m not above turning all Hulk and ripping my way out of my clothing in order to strangle them with my bare hands.

Brass looks at Reaper. “If he’s stuck, you know our big asses aren’t going fit.” Reaper snorts in agreement.

I barely keep my voice below a growl. “Will someone please get me out of this thing?”

Reaper and Brass step forward, nudging the tailor and sales associate aside. They each grab a sleeve and try to yank the jacket down my arms. The seams begin to pop and everyone freezes.

Brass looks back at the sales associate. “Exactly how expensive is this suit?”

The clerk looks a little worried. “It’s the latest Tom Ford addition for fall fashion. It’s nearly four-thousand.”

“Fuck!” I roar. I may have money, but it doesn’t mean I like to rip it up for shit, kicks, and giggles. I shake my head. “Is there any way to peel me out of this thing without busting it apart?”

The salesman blinks. “I don’t know. This has never happened before.”

“Hey asshat, next time you get an itch to put a big dude in a little suit, fucking don’t. You go straight to the big and tall section and tailor the shit around him,” Reaper chides.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here? I’ve never seen a gorilla in a suit before,” an Italian accent purrs.

All heads whip to Lorenzo Bianchi standing off to the side. His goons, Pretty Paolo and Lucky Luca, flank him. Bianchi stands there with an air of superiority in his fine Italian-made suit. His face looks amused, taking in my current predicament.

I can’t help but feel like a fool standing with my arms handcuffed behind my back in the suit jacket. I don’t like it—not one fucking bit.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I snap.

Bianchi appears unaffected by my anger. He waltzes into our space with his hands in his pockets. “I had an urge for a new suit and was in the area.” He circles me like a shark, eyes trailing over my body. “*Ah*, Tom Ford. I’ve never been much a fan of his work—too edgy, I suppose.”

“Good thing Josephine likes edgy, wouldn’t you say?” I taunt.

Bianchi ignores my slighting and continues to circle, observing me. “I prefer Armani and Bottega Veneta myself—the look is more classic, elegant. But I guess for you and your *gang*, Tom Ford is high end.”

All of my men roll their eyes.

Reaper leans over to Brass. “Did he really insult us for being MC when he’s a sleazy mob boss?”

I agree with Reaper, but I’m more hung up on Bianchi referring to us as low class. *Who the fuck cares about high end? Oh, right! Only uptight pricks like the weasel in front of me.*

“What do you want, Bianchi?” I ask, not bothering to hide my irritation.

Bianchi finally raises his eyes to mine. “Oh, nothing in particular. Wanted to say hello, seeing as we’re in the same store.” Bianchi looks around the space and the faces present. “Where’s Pina? I would have guessed she would want to be present to make final calls.”

Reaper frowns. “What’s a Pina?”

“I think it’s a fruity drink,” Brass answers.

Bianchi rolls his eyes. “It’s not a drink, you uncultured swine. *Pina* is short for *Giuseppina*, which is Italian for Josephine. *Pina* is the same as calling her Jo, but sounds far more elegant. Perfect when you describe her and how refined she is.”

Brass and Reaper look at each other and burst out laughing. “Do you even know Jo? She prefers ripped jeans and working with her hands. ‘Refined’ isn’t in her character description.”

“Only because you’re incapable of seeing it,” Bianchi says offhandedly. “Is anyone going to tell me where Pina is? I see her usual security is here. Please, tell me you didn’t leave her alone again?”

“Don’t worry about her. She’s well protected and watched at *all* times,” Chase says. The warning is clear in his words—

don't fuck with her because I see everything.

Bianchi glowers but looks legitimately concerned. "Who is with her?"

Gauge crosses his thick arms across his chest. "Tony is with her."

Bianchi does a double-take. "Tony? As in Tiny Tony? *My* fucking Tony?"

Punk smirks. "*Our* Tony now, bitch."

Bianchi's eyes snap to me, dark and irate. "You left her with that fuck up?!"

"A man who nearly died for my woman is more than qualified to protect her," I seethe.

"He should have fucking died! He failed his job. Because of him, her obsessive *ex ragazzo* got a hold of her and messed with her head. Now she can't sleep, she's having nightmares, she's barely eating and holding it together," he rages. "How could you be this stupid?"

I'm about to step forward and give him a piece of my mind but stop myself. Bianchi is emotional at the moment. If I've learned anything from my Pixie, it's that people tend to say things they don't want to be revealed when they're emotional. I can take his insults if it gets him to slip up and reveal more than he should about Josephine's mental health.

"*Deficiente!* Moreno is out there waiting for the perfect opportunity to snatch Pina, and you're the *cretino* serving her up on a silver platter."

"The only thing you care about is preventing Esteban from moving in on your territory. Stop pretending you give a shit about Jo," Chase argues, stroking Bianchi's anger. He knows egging the douchebag on will possibly entrap him.

Bianchi turns his anger on Chase. "Don't tell me I don't care about her. I care more about her than Atlas or any of you." He whirls back around on me. "*Fanculo!* She hasn't fared well with one abduction. Do you believe she would fair okay after another?"

The dick is close to fucking up—I can feel it in my marrow.

“And now she’s developing odd ticks, compulsively checking locks everywhere she goes,” Bianchi rambles, heatedly.

And there’s the smoking gun.

No more needs to be heard. The fucknut finally showed his cards, and we got the bastard. We know, without a doubt, the hacker works for Bianchi, and this isn’t Esteban trying to fuck with me. That last tidbit was fake news and only the upload to her file this morning.

“What she sees in you, I’ll never understand. But I refuse—fucking refuse—to sit back and watch you put her in danger,” Bianchi argues.

Gauge pokes the bear some more. “Oh yeah? What are you going to do about it?”

“Make her see reason. Show what a shit-show your way of life is. Educate her on all the ways I can love her, protect her, and mold her into the woman she’s meant to be. I will make her mine!”

The fuck?! Oh, it’s fucking on! Nobody lays claim to my woman.

Swinging my arms downward, I shred the jacket, seams busting open from my muscles flexing and pulsing—the hell with the bill. I stalk forward and I’m stopped short when Reaper and Brass get a hold of me. I’m inches away from ripping the mob boss’s head from his shoulders.

“Calm down, Prez,” Reaper whispers. “Don’t give him a reason to press charges.”

“Come near her and I’ll end you,” I grit through my teeth, struggling against my brothers.

Bianchi gives a mocking smile. “Oh, I’ll *take* your woman. Take her, lay claim on her, mark her, and own every fucking inch of her ‘till she won’t remember your name.”

“The hell you will!” I get an arm loose and swing a fist at Bianchi’s face, barely missing him. “Come here, you coward.”

Bianchi’s pretty-boy face lights up with delight, seeing me hot and bothered by his weak claim to my woman. “Pina likes it hard and dirty. I’ll make sure to give it to her real good, all the oral and anal play she wants,” Bianchi taunts.

Punk shoves the Don. “The fuck you say about my sis?” Ziggy and Jared bookend Punk’s sides, ready to dish out their own punishment.

Bianchi looks shocked that someone had the nerve to touch him. He eyes Punk warily. “Sis?”

“Yeah, my sister, as in Jo.” Punk jabs a long finger in the prick’s chest. “And she’s off-limits.”

Thank God Gauge has enough sense to question Bianchi. “Why would you think Jo likes oral or anal? That seems awfully specific. You creeping on our first lady, you sick fuck?”

“Boss?” Pretty Paolo warns. Not entirely sure if he’s warning him about revealing too much information or because they’re overwhelmingly outnumbered, but it puts a cork in our fight.

Bianchi bares his teeth, frustration marring his otherwise near perfect face. He straightens his suit and looks around at all my men before settling his gaze on me. “It appears I have another appointment.” He spins on his Italian loafers—*fuck me, another loafer-dick*—and walks out with his henchmen following in his footsteps.

With Bianchi out of the building, Brass and Reaper release me. I crack my neck and roll my shoulders—they had a good hold on me. “I hate that asshole,” I mutter.

Chase gives me a wicked smile. “Yeah, but now we know he’s the asshole responsible for our hacking fiasco. We got the fish on the hook—we’re going to reel him in.”

“After we get this suit dilemma figured out,” Gauge interjects. “What kind of suits did Tony wear when he worked

for Bianchi? He's a big fucker and all his shit looked good on him."

The tailor who was hiding in the corner when the brawl nearly happened creeps out toward us. "Are you referring to Antonio Moretti?"

I raise an eyebrow at the middle-aged tailor. "That be him. Why?"

The tailor clears his throat. "I was Mister Moretti's tailor. I know all his measurements by heart and what suits worked best for his body type. I can go and grab you the one I have in mind if you'd like. I can tailor it to fit your frame better than any of these pre-fitted designer suits. In fact, it will work best for your entire party, judging by your massive frames."

Thank fuck.

I go to my cut hanging on the chair and pull out the *GQ* picture I ripped out of the magazine. "I want this. My woman saw it and said it was 'hot.' Sales-boy still hiding in the dressing room claimed he could do better, but failed. Can you give me this?"

The tailor looks at the picture and nods. "I can."

I rub my hands together. "Let's get started."

The tailor disappears and returns with a suit nearly identical in color to the gray in the picture. "This is a Topman Muscle Fit Suit. It is tailored to a muscular physique to define the shoulders, chest, biceps, and thighs. The material is engineered to stretch as you flex your muscles. The entire ensemble is a fraction of the cost of the Tom Ford, at only seven hundred."

Now I'm really pissed. I was crammed into suit after ill-fitting suit, and all it got me was a headache and a four-thousand dollar bill. "Why the fuck was this not brought out first?"

The tailor smiles. "We work on commission. Logan, your sales associate, was trying to rake in the profit."

Of course, the little shit was stringing me along.

“I’m all for pleasing the customer—keeps them coming back,” the tailor adds.

Taking the suit, I march into the dressing room, kicking Logan out, and praying this is the last suit I try on.

After changing, I step out in front of the floor-length mirrors and appraise myself. The suit fits good—like *real* fucking good. The fabric stretches around all my muscles but doesn’t feel like it’s cutting off my circulation. It’s breathable and surprisingly comfortable.

The tailor smiles, knowing he did well. “We can get the vest, tie, and pocket square in whatever color you’d like to match your wedding colors. The suit looks very handsome on you, sir. How does it feel?”

“Like a fucking glove,” I say with relief.

“Do you want to try on a couple of other options or do you feel this meets your expectations? Are you content with the fit and the shape? We could try this suit in charcoal or black if you want,” the tailor drones on.

Before I can respond, Punk practically whines. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, will you say yes to the dress already, Atlas?!”

I glare at my brother and his reference to the TLC reality show. We had watched a shit-ton of it when Josephine was recovering after the ‘incident.’ Normally, I would tell Punk off, but I’m too relieved at having finally found something. “This is the one.”

Pleased, the tailor gets to work on taking the rest of our measurements.

CHAPTER NINE

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JOSEPHINE

It's four weeks 'till the wedding and I'm feeling the crunch.

Work on Lloyd Martinez's new barbershop is moving along swimmingly. The historical building he bought is located in Old Town Fort Collins, an artsy area of downtown. The building is gorgeous from the outside, giving off an Art Deco vibe. My plans to incorporate some of the outside elements into the inside design synced with what Lloyd was hoping for.

Lloyd is a former SEAL and good friend to Maceo, making it important he's beyond satisfied with my work. His business will be on the first floor and his home on the second. I'm kind of jealous of his trendy, industrial urban home, but I'm more excited about my own.

I brought in both crews to gut the building, top to bottom, but once the debris was cleared, I sent my second crew back to mine and Maceo's build site to work on framing our forever home. My dad is managing the second crew at my house while Jared and I manage the barbershop project with our first crew.

I got a pleasant surprise from my realtor, informing me my condo sold and the new owner was in a pinch to close on the deal pronto.

That, of course, meant Maceo and his men had to quickly empty the remainder of my items and put them into one of the storage garages at headquarters. It also meant my parents were kicked out and would be moving into headquarters with us—*lucky me.*

My parents were thrilled to be closer to Maceo and me, so I brushed off the negative vibes and decided to be happy.

It's Friday morning, and Maceo and I have finished our run with Hades. I'm stretching out before going inside. He grins, watching my butt as I bend over. "Let's get some water. I want to work on some more hand-to-hand defensive tactics with you," Maceo says.

We walk into headquarters to a racket going on in the kitchen. I peak my head into the industrial size kitchen and find my mother going to town, pulling out dish after dish of quiche from the double-stacked ovens.

"What the...mom, what are you doing?"

My mom looks up from her work. "Oh, hi, dears. How was your run?"

Hades scurries over to her, wagging his nubby tail. Smiling, she hands him the ham bone she dried out for him from the night before. He snags the bone from her hand and runs off to enjoy his treat.

"Mom, what is all this?"

She cocks her head at me. "Egg bakes, of course, silly."

"No. I mean, why are you doing this?"

Mom wipes her hands on her apron before grabbing a knife to cut through the breakfast casseroles. "Well, with your dad and I staying here until we move into the cottage, I decided I should make myself useful and make everyone breakfast from now on."

Maceo grins. "Thank you, Stella. The crew will appreciate it."

"Mom, you really shouldn't have gone through the trouble. The whole crew eats at a local diner downtown each morning. The old diner kind of relies on us being there to keep their doors open."

My mom looks crestfallen. "Well, I don't want to put someone's business in jeopardy. Maybe I can take over lunches or dinners?"

Maceo is about to open his mouth, but I speak first. “Mom, you don’t need to do anything. You’re a guest. Please don’t feel like you have to cook meals as a form of payment.”

My mom puts her hands on her hips. “I need something to do. This is the longest I’ve gone without working, and I’m getting a little restless. I want to help.”

My shoulders sag. I definitely don’t want to assign my mom any wedding tasks without me being present. Plus, there’s not enough left to do. Mom made sure I checked off one thing a day on the to-do list. Bringing her into my design business is completely out of the question—we’d be at each other’s throats with our clashing opinions. I decide a meal wouldn’t be a bad idea to keep her hands busy.

“You know, the men are coming and going for jobs at the drop of a hat, they sometimes skip meals. Maybe you can plan some sort of paper bag grab-meal plan, where food is already prepared, and they can pull it from the fridge to take with them,” I suggest.

Maceo looks a little taken aback. “What a great idea.”

My mom’s face looks hopeful. “Would it be helpful to the crew?”

“Absolutely. I’m a little disappointed I didn’t come up with the idea myself. I can give you grocery money from all the men and you can set the menu,” Maceo encourages.

Mom sparks to life. “Are there any diet restrictions or allergies I should be made aware of?”

“None at all, but the more protein you add, the better,” Maceo says with a smile. “I can pay you for your time.”

My mother raises a hand. “No, dear. Absolutely not. Jim and I are living here rent-free, you’re gifting us a cottage, and I need something to keep my hands busy. I won’t accept any payment.” My mom bounces in place, excitedly. I recognize that I do the exact same thing when I get excited about a project.

Triple comes sniffing into the kitchen like a bloodhound. “What smells so good in here?”

My mom flashes him a big smile. “Egg Bake, dear. Grab a plate and dish up.”

It’s not long before word of my mom’s cooking spreads throughout the house. The guys come running in to fill up on breakfast goodness.

Candy rolls into the kitchen looking worse for wear—she must have hit the bottle hard again last night with Red—but at least she’s wearing a robe to cover her usual morning nakedness. Maceo has threatened her more than once to shape up or ship out. It looks like she might finally be getting on board. She shuffles past my mom to get to the coffee maker.

“Oh,” my mom squeaks when she takes in Candy and her nest of pink hair. She reaches out and starts to comb her fingers through the mess, startling Candy.

“Oh, dear, this won’t do. You can’t walk around with your hair all wild like this. Come along. We’re going to brush through this mess and tame it into something presentable.”

My mom grabs Candy by the hand and starts tugging her out of the kitchen. Candy gives me a desperate look. I raise my hands and shake my head—the universal sign for ‘you’re on your own.’

Better her than me.

Once my mom gets something in her head, it’s impossible to stop her. She’s already decided that Candy is going to be her human doll for the morning, and I’m not stepping in to take Candy’s place.

Deciding to skip defensive training, Maceo and I grab a plate and join the rest of the family at the banquet table. As we eat, *Highway to Hell* begins playing super loud through the house.

“Who the fuck is blasting the stereo?” Gauge hollers.

Chase chuckles as he stands from the table and makes his way to the front entry. “I switched out our generic doorbell for something way cooler. I’ll go answer the door.”

All goes silent and we look at each other uneasily. It's clear that no one is expecting company. The front gates are currently open for the construction crews to get in and out, meaning anyone could come onto the property.

"Maybe it's one of the workers looking for Jo?" Flay suggests.

Gauge wraps a protective arm around Opal. "No. They would call her or walk on in—they know they don't need an invitation to enter our club."

Maceo gets up and starts moving to one of many secret compartments hiding firearms. He's already has a pistol in hand when we hear the door open.

"*Sweet Jesus,*" Chase draws.

Maceo stalks to the door with Punk and Gauge behind him, ready to help out.

"Are you just going to stand there ogling me like a creep, or are you going to let me in and help me with my damn bags?"

I freeze, recognizing the familiar, sassy voice.

Maceo rounds the corner with his men, guns drawn.

"Holy hell!" the voice squeaks in fear.

I'm on my feet and running for the door, skidding into Punk's back. "Stay back, sis. Some prissy-looking chick is here."

"Excuse me! What did you call me, limp dick?"

Punk snorts. "Hardly limp. And if you weren't such a priss, I'd maybe consider gracing your presence with it."

I push him out of the way. "Punk, shut up!"

Maceo throws his arm out in front of me, preventing me from going to our visitor, but I can see her.

She looks exactly the same as the last time I saw her. Shoulder length sandy-hair styled straight and professional. Form-fitting dress clothes to show off her killer curves and

narrow waist. Skyscraper heels adorn her feet and give off a 'don't screw with me attitude.' Her oval face is artfully done with flawless makeup and pulled into a tight expression, clearly showing how irate she is. And her gray almond-shaped eyes are forming storm clouds and throwing lightning bolts.

"Simone," I greet my sister.

"Jo," she replies.

My heart does a little dance. Has she come here to apologize to me in person? Are we finally going to be able to bury the hatch and be sisters again?

Maceo lowers his gun and looks at me. "Simone? As in your sister?"

"The one and only," Simone answers before addressing me. "Are you going to call off your Neanderthals and let me in?"

"Who you calling Neanderthal, Miss Priss?" Punk asks angrily.

Chase gives Punk a warning look. "Enough, Punk."

"I guess Neanderthal isn't the correct terminology. I meant moron," Simone goads.

Punk fires back without pause. "*Moron!* I'm no moron, your Royal Bitchness!"

"Alright! Enough, both of you. Punk go stand in the corner and think about what you did."

Punk protests, flabbergasted. "Me? Why do I get the timeout?"

"Because you initiated the fight!" I look at all four of them. "You all handled this poorly and need a timeout. Shame on you."

I grab Simone by the crook of her elbow and pull her away from the house a good twenty feet. "What the hell are you doing, egging them on?"

"Me?!" she asks shrilly. "What about *them*? I drove over sixteen hours and I'm greeted at the door by one guy drooling

over me, another one pulling a gun on me with backup, and another one calling me a priss!”

“Jesus, Simone. Calm the fuck down!” I chide. “I’m not saying I’d behave any better. You have every reason to be upset, but you don’t do yourself any favors by sinking to their level.”

Simone raises an eyebrow. “You agree with me?”

I’m about to answer yes when Maceo answers from behind me. “Yes, but she would have been a hell of a lot meaner. I should know. Our first introduction was an epic fail—well, the first half was, but the second half—” Maceo looks at me and gives me a mischievous smile “—was heaven.”

I give my fiancé a pointed look. “I told you to take a timeout. Why are you not facing a wall?”

Maceo throws his head back, laughing. “You were serious? That’s adorable.”

I grab my head, exasperated. “Go away. I’m talking to my sister.”

“But I want to meet her,” he says, coming closer.

Simone’s eyes go wide with alarm as she takes in Maceo’s massive form—her eyes home in on the pistol tucked in his waistband. “Jo?!”

“It’s okay,” I reassure her before turning to my fiancé. “Maceo, back up. You’re scaring my sister.”

Simone’s face goes steely. “Maceo? This is the lowlife you’re marrying, who convinced mom and dad you were preppers and to move out here to Timbuktu?”

I raise a hand to my sister. “Now wait a minute. Maceo is not a lowlife—he’s the president of a security firm and motorcycle club. Don’t bad mouth my future husband when you don’t know anything about him. He never told mom and dad I was pregnant. They concocted that harebrained idea all on their own. We never asked mom to quit her job or for the two of them to move here. They made all those rash decisions

before I talked to them. Go ahead and be pissed, but direct it where it's deserved."

Simone flips her hair over her shoulder. "He told them you were getting married quickly because you wanted to give them—and I quote—'grandbabies.' How the fuck else were they supposed to interpret it?"

"Ladies," Maceo tries to placate. "Maybe we should all take a deep breath and calm down."

"Shut up!" we both shout at him.

He raises his hands in surrender. "Okay. I'll stay out of it. But you two are sisters." He grabs my arm gently and turns me to him. "Baby, don't fight, please."

I understand why this is distressing for him, seeing as he was an only-child and orphaned to his grandma. Family is a precious miracle to him—he doesn't understand the dynamic of my relationship with my sister.

I take his hands in mine. "Maceo, it's okay. Simone and I need to hash shit out."

Maceo remains unconvinced.

"She's right," Simone says behind me. "Fighting is kind of our thing. It has been since she was two years old and would terrorize me."

I turn toward my sister, rolling my eyes. "I was fucking two. How terrorizing can a toddler be?"

"Tell that to the crescent-shaped scars you left on my upper arm with your serrated baby teeth. You were like a rabid animal mom and dad set loose in the house," Simone argues.

"Right, and you were the prodigal child sitting on her thrown, who could do no wrong, but behind closed doors, you were a witch who would lock me in the basement," I retort.

"You were such a tattletale! Biggest pain in my ass. 'Oh, dad! Simone had a boy over when you weren't home. Oh, mom! Simone didn't do her chores,'" she mimics in a poor interpretation of my voice.

If she wants to dance, I'll fucking dance.

We circle each other in the front yard like two karate fighters looking for our opponent's weakness. Find and strike, even if it's only with words.

“Oh, gee, look at me! I'm Simone Holland, and I'm fucking perfect—perfect grades, perfect boyfriends, perfect job. I'm the apple of my parents' eyes. Everything I touch turns to gold, and when I shit, it smells like roses and a botanical garden is formed. I'm just so fucking PERFECT!”

Simone growls and I swear her nails grow into talons. “Take it back. We both know you were the favorite. ‘Oh, look what I built in the garage, dad. I dusted for you, mom.’ Gah! You're such a kiss-ass!”

Oh, it's on now.

If there is anything I have perfected over the years from fighting with my sister, it's the art of tongue lashing.

“I'm the kiss-ass?! If you could find a surgeon willing to do it, you'd have your lips attached to our parents' asses—that's how much of a kiss-ass you are, you kiss-ass!”

“You're such a bitch!” Simone rages.

This is escalating quickly and I'm losing my cool. “Takes one to know one, Simone. Ugh! Can't you just apologize already?”

Simone balks. “Apologize? What the fuck for?”

Is she serious right now? How can she not know what I'm talking about? “For being an unsupportive sister when I needed you most. For telling me I was an idiot for quitting the firm.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” She gives a small laugh. “You want me to apologize for telling you that you were stupid for leaving a job without notice? Newsflash, leaving any job without notice, is the definition of stupid.”

That's it!

Next thing I know, the claws are out. Simone and I are rolling on the ground, grabbing at each other's hair and clothing, screaming, and biting like hellcats.

"Holy shit!" Maceo springs into action and tries to pull us apart, but when Simone and I reach this point, nothing can stop us. We both push Maceo off of us as a team before going back at each other.

"Fuck!" Maceo yells. "RAVENS!"

Well, shit. Maceo is going to bring all his brothers to the yard to try to break up our scuffle. I need to get in my heavy hits now before it's too late. My sister must be thinking the same thing. We both increase the intensity of our fighting skills, rolling around on the ground like two kids on a playground.

"Hot damn!" I hear one of the men say. "Catfight!"

The men come charging out of the headquarters, whistling, and chanting, "Fight, fight, fight."

"Stop!" Maceo screams at his men, clearly distressed with them encouraging us.

Simone uses her upper body strength to grab my wrists and pin me to the ground. She straddles my waist, immobilizing me. I have a moment of sheer panic. "Don't you dare!"

She makes the most cringe-worthy sound of clearing the back of her throat and produces a giant spit loogie.

"Don't you *fucking* dare!" I scream at my sister.

Simone slowly lowers the spit loogie 'till it's dangling above the tip of my nose.

Desperate, I try to break free of her hold before the disgusting ball of slime touches my face.

The loogie comes closer and closer until my eyes cross, and the glob touches my nose. Simone sucks it back up to repeat the process.

Horrified, I give a blood-curdling scream, renewing my strength like some battle cry. I free a wrist and instinctively

push one of her breasts into her face right as she's lowering another string of mucus. The loogie smashes into her forehead, along with her boob.

I pelvic-thrust her forward, bucking her from my body.

Simone goes flying—asses over teakettles—landing on her face. Her skirt has hiked up during our scuffle, and now her bright-red thong is on display for the world.

Simone spins around like a raging bull and charges. The two of us start slapping at each other.

“For fuck's sake, someone help me!” Maceo bellows to his men.

Chase comes in and grabs Simone around the waist, and Maceo comes in to snag me around mine.

Simone and I don't stop, though the guys are pulling us apart, we use their bodies as leverage and kick wickedly at each other.

“Simone Eira! Josephine Freya!”

We freeze, hoping if we stay still mom won't see us, like she's some prehistoric dinosaur with crap eyesight.

Mom comes to stand between us. “What has gotten into you, girls?”

The two of us start firing off accusations left and right, our voices getting louder and louder to drown out the other sister.

“Enough!” Mom shouts.

The yard is so quiet, you can hear a pin drop until Maceo orders, “Alright, fun's over brothers. Head off to your daily assignments.”

“Aw!” they complain in unison, before trudging off to their jobs.

The only MC brother remaining is Chase, holding my sister's back close to his chest with his muscled arms locked around her body. With one arm still wrapped around her, he takes his free hand and gently tugs down her skirt to cover her back up. Simone startles at his touch and peeks over her

shoulder at him. He stares back at her with an intensity that passes for indecent. The odd look in his dark brown eyes makes me question if he plans to ever release his hold on her.

Dad rushes out of the headquarters to stand beside mom. He looks frazzled as his head whips around between his daughters and wife. “I don’t care who started it, but I’m ending it,” he says tersely.

Mom gives an exhausted eye roll. “You missed the boat, Jim. They’re done rowing, aren’t you girls?”

Even though I’m still angry with my sister, I nod. I didn’t want to fight to begin with—Simone has a way of bringing out my inner MMA fighter when tempers flare. Maceo relaxes his grip on me, but keeps me snug against him.

Simone clearly is not done arguing. She yanks herself free from Chase’s arms and steps in front of my parents. Chase follows close behind her, one arm outstretched, ready to pull her back.

Simone huffs. “Well, isn’t this peachy?! Mom and dad have already moved in.”

Mom shakes her head. “We’re only staying here temporarily.”

Simone’s shoulders slump with relief. “You’ve changed your mind? You’re moving back?”

My parents shake their heads. “No. We’re staying here at the headquarters until Josephine finishes building our cottage next door to their new home,” dad answers.

Simone grits her teeth. “A cottage? Are you shitting me? Is this why you’re leaving me and coming here?”

Mom gives Simone a sad smile. “Simone, honey, we’re leaving California—we’re not leaving you. We never see you anymore because you’re busy with your job and traveling all the time. You canceled every visit you planned with us, except for Christmas Day. Your dad and I aren’t getting any younger, and we can’t rely on you to help us as we get older. You have your career to think about. Josephine is in a better position to help us.”

Feeling oddly slighted, I grimace. “I have a fucking career too, you know?”

My mom waves her hand to shush me. “I wasn’t dismissing your work, Jo. I only meant you’re stagnant and not traveling all over the damn place. Your sister’s job makes it impossible for her to be available to help if something were to happen to us.”

“So, you’re not moving here because Jo is getting married and plans on starting a family, or because she’s building you a house?” Simone inquires accusingly.

My dad shrugs. “It definitely does give us something to look forward to in our old age, but it was not the determining factor. We didn’t want to feel like a burden for you, sweetie. Maceo wants us to have a close relationship with the kids they plan on having.”

“Again, with the kids. Can we at least get married first? We don’t know if we can even have them,” I scoff.

Maceo gives me a pointed look. “My boys are good and ready to go. We both know I’m giving you twins at least twice over.”

“Not the time, Maceo,” I chide.

Simone struggles to hold in her tears. “So, because I chose to have a career and put off having a family, you’re moving to where you have a family?”

Mom takes Simone’s hands in hers. “There’s no reason to stay in California if it’s only to have you visit once a year, honey. You can travel once a year to where we live.”

Simone wipes aggressively at a tear running down her face. “Well, did you consider that maybe I need you and moving out here only makes it more difficult for me to visit?”

“Simone, you don’t need us. You’re an independent woman who needs help from no one. You have a successful job, bring in a great income, and recently moved into a beautiful condo. You have everything all together,” my dad says with reassurance.

Simone shakes her head with agitation. “I’ve got shit. And now I don’t have my parents near me either.”

“Dear, that’s not true—” my mom starts to argue, but my sister cuts her off.

“Yes, mom, it is. I’ve got no job, no condo, no security, no future plans, nothing but what I have on me.”

My parents look horrified. I recognize the look because I was the unlucky recipient of it when I left Jacob after he stole my promotion.

Oh, fuck!

“What about Trent?” mom whispers.

“Who’s Trent?” Chase asks with steel in his voice.

My thoughts exactly. She hadn’t been in a relationship when I moved away from California, only dating here and there, but nothing serious.

Simone sneers at the mention of Trent’s name. “My boyfriend. Well, ex-boyfriend, now.”

My dad looks pained. “You two broke up?”

“No, dad. I dumped his ass,” Simone says proudly.

“Thank fuck,” I hear Chase mumble under his breath. I shoot him a dirty look because if he thinks he’s going to get freaky with my sister, he and I are going to have a problem. My sister is a good girl and doesn’t do casual hook-ups. I’ll be damned if I let any of the men in Maceo’s crew treat her like anything less than a queen.

My mom chokes on a sob. “Why? Why would you break up with him?”

“Because after traveling on an eight-hour flight back home from New York a day early to surprise Trent on his birthday, I walked in on him fucking my boss in our bed,” Simone seethes.

Something about my sister’s ordeal is bringing on déjà vu. I look over at her Mercedes-Benz SUV and see it packed to the gills.

Fuck, fuck, FUCK!

My mom looks frantic, her face lined with worry. “But your job?”

“And the condo?” my dad mimics our mom’s panic tone.

I throw up my arms between my sister and my parents. This is exactly how my fallout with my parents happened, and I won’t let it happen to Simone. “Nope. Not happening. Mom, Dad, go cool off. You need to think before you speak—need I remind you what we went through?”

My mom looks at me with tears. “But her career—”

“Will be fine. She’s a damn good accountant. Companies will be throwing money at her to get her in the door,” I say firmly.

Simone crosses her arms over her curvy bust. “And the condo was never in my name—Trent never wanted me on the title. I’m free and clear,” Simone adds.

My parents visibly relax. I hook my arm through Simone’s and pull her into headquarters before they ask any more triggering questions, leading her upstairs to mine and Maceo’s suite.

When I go to close the door, Maceo and Chase are both standing there, like they’re going to follow us right in the room. I understand why Maceo would follow me, but Chase...

He’s looking at Simone the way Maceo looked at me the first time out on the trail. I have nothing against Chase—he’s a great guy, charming and intelligent—but my sister is days out of a very messy relationship and is in no position to be swept into another.

I raise my hand to both men. “I need to talk to my sister—alone.”

Maceo’s dark brows pull together, concerned. “Pixie...” Maceo can’t stand to be out of the loop or away from me.

I place my hands on his chest to calm him. “This is girl talk time. Plus, she won’t reveal anything to me if you’re in the room—she doesn’t know you,” I explain.

Maceo frowns but he nods. I stand on my tippy-toes and he bends, allowing me to kiss his full lips. “Okay, I’ll give you girls alone time.”

“Thank you, future hubby,” I purr, making him smile.

I look over at Chase. “Thank you for your help with my sister. Maybe you and Maceo could empty her vehicle, and move her into one of the free rooms?”

Chase looks longingly after my sister before giving me a sincere smile. “Of course.”

The two men turn to walk back into the hall. With them gone, I close the door and join my sister on the couch. Simone has kicked off her heels and has her feet tucked underneath her, nestled into the corner. She looks out of sorts, like it’s only hitting her now how her actions are going to make for some drastic changes in life.

There’s no one who understands better than myself what she’s feeling. The scariest thing about starting over is taking the first step, and it’s more terrifying when you’re making the journey by yourself. I need to extend an olive branch and help her get through this. My sister will know she not alone—I’ll hold her hand every step of the way.

I clear my throat. “I’m not going to ask you to explain anything to me—it’s none of my business. I heard enough outside to know what’s what. I only want you to know that I’m here if you want to talk. I support you,” I say softly. I slide my hand across the couch, palm up.

My sister snuffles and places her hand in mine. We sit in comfortable silence for several minutes before Simone swallows. “Cynthia, my boss, was purposely cramming my travel schedule for months, giving her the opportunity to sleep with my boyfriend while I was away. They’ve been fucking behind my back the entire time we were together.”

“What a douche,” I mutter but say no more. This is Simone’s time to talk and let it all out.

“Yeah, exactly,” she murmurs before breaking into tears. “How could he do this to me? I loved him, or at least I thought

I did. He never gave me the impression he was fooling around. I'd come home from traveling for work and he was all lovey-dovey—our relationship seemed perfect. I feel stupid for being duped.”

I wrap my arms around my sister. She leans into my embrace, her body wracked with sobs. I say nothing and rock us—if there's anything I've learned after Jacob, it's that words can't always fix things. Sometimes being there for someone is more meaningful than all the words in the world.

Simone lifts her eyes to mine. “What if Cynthia isn't the only one he's been sleeping with? How many other women has he sunk his dick into? *My God*, what if he gave me a disease?”

“Let's not rush ahead of ourselves. I've got a great gynecologist. We can go today and have you tested, rule it out, and put your mind at rest.”

“You'll go with me?” she asks, a tremble in her voice.

I nod. “If you want me there, of course.” She's scared and needs support. Why wouldn't I volunteer?

Simone swipes at her tears. “I had nowhere to go, Jo. I could have stayed at mom's and dad's place, but I didn't want to be alone—not now. I wanted to be somewhere where I felt safe to mourn and not have to worry about everything else.”

“You wanted to be with people who care about you,” I state, totally understanding. I did the same thing when I left Jacob—I went to my parents.

Simone nods. “I put in my two weeks, packed my shit, got in the car, and started driving. I didn't know where I was going at first until I saw I was on I-80 heading east and knew I had to come here.”

“You did the right thing,” I say. “You're going to stay here until you figure out where it is you want to go. We have the room. You'll have your own space to retreat to when company becomes too much. Maceo and Chase are moving your things into one of the open suites as we speak. Stop worrying about

where to go—you're right where you need to be. Fuck, stay forever.”

Simone worries her bottom lip. “Jo...I’m sorry. I was horrible to you...I don’t deserve you. I want you to know I never had a problem with you leaving Jacob. The shit he pulled deserved a kick to the curb. What I said out in the yard about quitting your job the way you did...well, after going through a breakup with a coworker, I understand. It was torture finishing my two weeks.”

“Is that why you were pissed when you found out mom and dad were moving? Because you were going through all of this?”

Simone nods and puckers her lips. “Yeah. I understood why they were coming out here, but it was the day after I caught Trent. Emotions were already high.”

I nod. Her reaction makes complete sense to me now.

“I really am sorry, Jo.”

I smile and wipe away a tear, happy having her back in my life. “Thank you. You *always* deserve your family’s support.”

Simone hangs her head in her hands. “What am I going to do for work? I can’t go back to the bank or any branch of it—Cynthia and Trent will be able to reach me if I do. I could work for a competitor, but I’m sick of the traveling, and with my skills, that’s what they’d want me to do.”

An idea tugs at the back of my brain, but I’m not sure it’s a *good* idea. I’ve already got my dad working for me—I’m not sure if adding more family to the mix would be wise.

I look at my sister and see her distress covering her like a shroud.

Ah, damn my bleeding heart.

If my idea backfires, I’ll deal with the consequences. Simone needs a job and freedom from her old life.

“What would you say about keeping books for my company?”

Simone lifts her head from her hands and gasps. “You want me to be your accountant?”

“Why are you looking at me all weird? It solves your work problem. You get to do what your best at and stay in one place—no more traveling. I get to finally take a breather from my expense reports and cutting the checks—I can finally focus solely on design and managing my crews.” The more I talk, the more I’m convincing myself that I need my sister to take this job.

My sister gives me a small smile. “I’d love to work for you, Jo, but—and I mean no offense—you can’t afford me.”

“Says the woman with no job.”

We’re interrupted by a knock on the door. “Come in.”

Maceo pokes his head into the room. “Sorry for bothering you, ladies, but Chase and I had a question about where to set all of Simone’s stuff in the suite. I don’t want to assume anything.”

“Perfect timing,” I sing. “Get in here and help me convince my sister to do my books.”

Maceo arches his eyebrows and smiles. He waves for Chase to follow. They both take a seat in the wingbacks. “Sounds like a great plan. When are you starting?”

Simone shakes her head at me. “I was telling my sister she can’t afford me. She dinged me with *beggars can’t be choosers*.”

“What if you do the books for both our companies? If it’s a matter of money, taking on my company will make up the difference.” Maceo juts his chin at his brother. “Currently, Chase does the books, and I cut the checks. It was never supposed to be a permanent job for either of us. Chase is busy enough as our intel specialist, and I need to focus my attention on working with clients and strategizing for missions. We’ve already been talking about hiring an accountant for a couple of weeks now.”

Maceo opens his hands wide. “What do you say, *sister*? You want in?”

Simone looks wide-eyed at Maceo, then me, then Chase. Chase holds her stare. My sister gulps and quickly turns her head back to Maceo. “Um, I mean, I guess I could try it out and see—”

Maceo claps his hands together, cutting Simone off, and ultimately preventing her from turning the offer down. “Wonderful! We’ll let you settle in and start fresh next week. Chase can show you the books and walk you through the bills and paychecks. Josephine is probably a lot more organized than our system because, you know, it’s Jo—it won’t take much to learn her books.”

Maceo stands from the armchair. He gives Simone a pointed look, like something dawned on him. “Oh, and you and I are going to have words, little sister.”

“Me?” Simone points to herself, confused. “What did I do?”

“After watching you two wrestle out in the front yard, I’ve determined you’re the reason why Josephine can’t watch porn without gagging when she sees a woman spit on a dude’s junk. Not cool.”

Simone nearly chokes—she’s not use to a man being this direct.

I suppress an eye roll. Maceo can be completely crude at times. “Was that really necessary to share?”

“I. Can’t. Watch. Porn. With. You. Calling your sister out for fucking it up for me is fair,” Maceo says before looking back at my sister. “Now show us where you want your stuff.”

There will be plenty of time for Simone to unpack. Right now, she needs medical questions answered. “Not now, Maceo. Set the stuff in the sitting area of the room.” I look at my sister. “Simone and I have an errand to run.”

Simone gives me a grateful smile, knowing we’re going to my doctor.

Maceo’s black eyes narrow. “What errand?”

Nosy as usual. I wave him away. “It’s nothing, but we do need to leave soon.”

“Okay, lets shower and I’ll take you both.”

Simone throws me a desperate look—she doesn’t understand that Maceo won’t let me out of his sight unless I have one of his men watching over me.

“Babe, I need a different bodyguard.” I don’t elaborate.

Maceo scowls and cocks his head. “More wedding stuff? That I can’t see? Fine. Take Punk—Tony is on assignment watching our favorite Peeping Tom.”

I shake my head. “After how he and Simone verbally trashed each other? No.”

Maceo lifts his chin to his brother. “Okay. Take Chase.” Chase stands from the wingback, ready to take my sister anywhere.

Simone’s eyes go wide. She looks at me, almost pleading for me to intervene. I shake my head at my fiancée. “Chase is too busy to be running us around on a petty errand.”

“I’m not busy today,” Chase intervenes, staring at me in challenge.

Yeah, sorry, Chase—not happening. “I’ll take Flay,” I say quickly.

Maceo grinds his teeth, not understanding why I would shoot down his third in command. “Flay doesn’t typically do your security detail. Why him?”

Because he’s a medical professional and will keep his damn mouth shut. “Neither does Chase. And what we plan on doing Flay will be more suited.” *Please, Maceo, leave this alone.*

Now Maceo looks worried. “Baby, what’s going on?”

Jeez. “Babe, it’s nothing.”

“Bullshit! I want to know why you want the medic with you,” Maceo says with a hint of anger.

Simone speaks up. “Is it absolutely necessary to take a bodyguard?”

“Yes,” both men say with finality.

Simone looks shocked. “But Jacob’s dead—there’s no more threat.”

“There’s always a threat, little sister,” Maceo says. His eyes swing back to me. “Where are you going, Josephine?”

“It’s not for you to know,” I say flippantly.

“The hell it’s not! Two reasons: Esteban and Lorenzo. Now spill!”

I throw my hands in the air. “We’re going to my gynecologist. Are you happy?”

Maceo freezes for a moment before his eyes shine like obsidian. “Baby, you’re doing it already?”

Ah, fuck. He’s referencing my IUD removal, which I scheduled two weeks before the wedding. I need to put the brakes on this before he gets his hopes up.

Maceo rushes in and picks me up in his big arms, squeezing me against him in a crushing hug. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh. My. God. Pixie, I can’t tell you how fucking happy this makes me. And I’m *totally* going. I want to be there to hold your hand.”

Well, shit. So much for him *not* getting his hopes up. He’s going to be upset when I tell him he’s got it wrong, and I absolutely hate letting him down.

“Oh, for crying out loud! We’re not going there for her. We’re going there for me,” Simone shouts.

Maceo pauses. “Pardon?”

“We’re going there for me,” Simone repeats more calmly.

“Why?” Chase demands, suddenly beside my sister.

She jumps, surprised. “Not your business, but you already heard my boyfriend cheated on me. Why the hell do you think I’m going?”

Chase practically snarls. “I’m going to kill him. What’s his name? Trent from Sacramento, who works for Wells Fargo? Never mind—I’ll find him. Oh, and I’m going with you to your appointment. Don’t try to protest.”

Simone does a double-take. “The hell you are! I don’t fucking know you. You’re not invited.”

“I’ll meet you guys out by Maceo’s SUV.” Chase stalks out of the room, yanking his cell from his leather cut.

Simone looks at us with a horrified expression. “What the hell was that about?”

Maceo smirks, his arm draped around my shoulder. “That, dear sister, was a man who knows what he wants.”

Her expression pinches. “Oh, please.”

Maceo only winks at her. He turns to me and smiles. “Perhaps you want to talk to your sister about how we met. She needs to understand what she’s in for.”

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CHAPTER TEN

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Chase and I sit in the waiting area of the clinic while Simone gets her blood drawn and has a pelvic exam. Josephine is with her sister to support her, making me on edge without my eyes on her. Chase isn't much better. He bounces his leg nervously and types away on his phone, waiting for Simone to finish.

My future sister-in-law nearly lost her shit when Chase tried to go in the exam room with her. He begrudgingly backed off, but it won't last long. My brother has got it bad for Simone—I recognize the wild look in his eyes like a reflection in the mirror.

“Got him,” Chase mutters, handing me his phone. A photo ID of Trent Grills fills the screen. The dude looks like a total tool. How the hell did he score a woman like Simone? Must have been luck.

“Fuck,” I whisper with alarm. “Did you hack into the DMV?”

Chase snorts. “I would have if I didn't have a contact at the Sacramento Police Department. But I got the fucker, and I'm going to make him pay for putting Simone through this shit.”

I turn in the plastic chair to give my friend a stern warning. “I know what you're feeling. You're sitting where I was sitting with Josephine three months ago. I'm not going to tell you what to do or to not pursue her. But let me give you a little advice. Go slow with her. Take your time. There's no rush. You may be ready to jump into it with her, but she just bailed on her long-term boyfriend after he cheated—she needs time

to get over him properly. I don't want either of you getting hurt because you rushed things."

Chase gives me a deadpan look. "Right. Like you didn't force your way into Jo's life when she fought back?"

"Not to point out the obvious, but Josephine had already been a year out of her relationship by the time I met her. Simone is brand-spanking new to singlehood. I'm not saying you have to wait long before diving in, but a couple of weeks won't hurt you. You're my brother, but she's my sister now. Hurt her and I'll crush you."

Speak of the devil. Simone comes out the clinic door with a stack of medical brochures in her hand and a Band-Aid in the crook of her elbow where she must have had blood drawn.

"Couple weeks my ass," he mutters before standing to welcome Simone. "Hey, sweetheart. Everything okay?"

Scowling, Simone points at him. "Call me sweetheart again and I'll feed you your balls."

Chase bites his lip to stop his laughter. "What did the doctor say?"

"You're seriously annoying. You know that, right?"

"Maybe I genuinely care about your wellbeing. Is that too hard to believe?"

Simone looks up at the ceiling and sighs. "Fine. He said everything looked good. I should have the results of the blood work sometime early next week."

"Where's Josephine?" I ask.

Simone blinks at me. "She walked out with the doctor after my exam, allowing me to get dressed. She didn't come back out here with you two?"

With a racing heart, I charge into the clinical area. "Pixie," I holler.

"Sir," a nurse rushes around the counter to stop me. "You can't be back here."

“I’m looking for my fiancée,” I say. “She never came back out with her sister.”

“You mean Jo Holland?”

I nod. “Do you know where she is?”

“She’s in room number five with Doctor Stoll.”

I sigh with relief. “Thank you.” I walk down the hall swiftly to room five, not bothering to knock as I enter the room. The nurse chases after me, desperate to stop me.

“What the hell?” a middle-aged man says from between Josephine’s stirrup-legs.

I see red. *Who the fuck is this guy? And why is he all up in my woman’s honey-pot?*

“I’m sorry, Doctor. He forced his way in,” the nurse apologizes, shutting the door and closing us in the room.

“Maceo?” Jo squeaks from her supine position on the examination table.

The guy in the white clinic coat looks at my woman. “You know this man?” He must be Doctor Stoll. My woman never mentioned her lady bits doctor was a dude—not sure I’m cool about that, but Josephine wouldn’t be seeing anyone she wasn’t comfortable with. I’ll learn to deal with it.

“He’s my fiancée,” she explains.

“You’re okay with him being here?” Doctor Stoll asks.

Josephine shakes her head at me with a smile and nods at the doctor. “He wanted to be here.”

There’s a knock at the door and another nurse enters carting in a medical tray. “Ready when you are, Doctor Stoll.”

“Good,” he says. He looks over Josephine’s legs at her. “I want you to relax, drop your legs open, and breathe normally. We’ll make this as comfortable as possible.”

I freeze. “Baby, what is this?”

Josephine bites her lower lip. “When you misunderstood why Simone and I were coming here today, I could see how

disappointed you were. I didn't want to let you down.”

“You're going to feel a pinch,” the doctor says.

She winces and squeezes her eyes tight, clutching at her abdomen.

“Pixie,” I ask with worry, coming to her side.

“Almost done.” The doctor stops talking as he works between her thighs. “It's out.”

Josephine takes in a long pull of air and relaxes. She opens her costal-blue eyes and smiles at me. “And now I haven't upset you.”

Does she mean... “No more IUD?”

Her bright smile grows wider. “No more IUD.”

I damn near choke on my tears. My girl went and removed her contraceptive for me—for us and the family we can start building. I lean over and kiss the love of my life tenderly. “Thank you, Pixie.”

“Oh, my Lord, you guys are the sweetest,” the nurse coos.

The doctor interrupts our little moment. “You may experience some spotting and cramping today, but it's normal. Take some ibuprofen or use a heating pad on your abdomen if the discomfort is too much. You can resume normal activity. Whenever you're ready to start trying for a baby, you're good to go. It's possible to get pregnant right away, but most healthy couples take four to six months. If you have questions or concerns about today or about conceiving, you can always reach out to me.”

“Thank you, Doctor Stoll,” Josephine says as I help her to sit up.

He smiles at her and extends his hand to me.

I smack his hand away. “Get that out of here.” With a giant grin, I pull him in for a bear hug, lifting him off the ground. “You've no idea how happy you've made me.”

Doctor Stoll looks completely startled when I set him back down. He nods and dashes out the door with his nurse,

probably scared shitless I'll kiss him next.

Alone in the examination room, I spin to my woman and wrap my arms around her. The two of us kiss and giggle like school kids.

The cheesiest smile is plastered on my face as I drive the four of us back to the headquarters. I feel like the luckiest man alive, knowing my woman is ready to start trying for kids.

Josephine's already told me we should wait until after the wedding—though she would prefer much later when our home is complete and everyone is settled. I bob my head excitedly in agreement—knowing it's going to happen sooner rather than later since the blasted IUD is out.

The nurse handed me a box of condoms as we exited the clinic, making me grimace. I haven't wrapped up since meeting Josephine, and the idea of having a barrier between us chaffs my ass. I silently contemplate the ways I can make the condoms disappear, but Josephine will freak when it comes to showtime and I'm without protection.

Josephine shifts uncomfortably in her seat, holding her lower stomach. I frown, hating how sore she is. I'd love nothing more than to pamper my woman and her sore hoo-haa, but Josephine insists on working at Lloyd's build. I'm packing her ibuprofen and a heating pad because she's already hurting—at least she can work in her company trailer and sit down for the day.

Back at headquarters, Josephine gathers her computer and whistles for Hades. The dog comes barreling through the house to get to his favorite person. She departs in her Subaru with Hades and Punk following on his hog, leaving me waving goodbye until she's out of sight.

I have work to attend to that has been put on hold with the shit show Bianchi created. I grab a cup of coffee from the kitchen before heading to my office to go through my emails

and make some calls. I'm nearly through all my emails when Gauge comes racing into the room.

"Man down!"

My heart stops a moment before it starts sprinting. I'm on my feet and marching into the tech room with my best friend. "Who is it?"

"It's not good, Atlas. It's Peeping Tom," Gauge says in a hard voice.

Oh no! "The kid? What the fuck happened?"

"Tony was waiting for Tom to get done with his computer coding class when he heard gunfire. He raced inside the building to the kid's computer lab and it was complete chaos. Kids and professors were running everywhere, crying, and shouting for help. Tony kept looking at the faces of the people fleeing, hoping to see Tom. When he wasn't among them, he pushed himself into the lab and found Tom face down on the floor with two bullets in his back. Tom was wheeled into surgery five minutes ago. Tony is there waiting for an update," Gauge says.

My blood runs cold. "Did Tony see anyone in the area belonging to Bianchi's mafia?"

"Negative. Tony said he didn't recognize any of the faces belonging to Bianchi's men—just kids and staff," Ziggy answers.

"Fuck!" I roar. "Are we picking anything up on surveillance?"

"I'm working on it," Chase says with a stoic face. His fingers fly across the keys and his glasses reflect back the images on his monitor. His face tightens. "What the..."

I come to his side and bend to look at the screen. "What did you find?" I ask anxiously.

"I had an image of the shooter on the screen for a moment. I backed it up to slow it down, but the image is gone—like it was wiped clean."

Chase, Ziggy, and Butch all pause for a heartbeat before racing around the room. Chase shouts at his team to hurry.

“What the fuck is happening?” Gauge asks.

“It’s the hacker. He’s trying to erase any footage of our perp. We’re trying to back up all footage before it’s gone,” Chase explains in hast.

“I’ve got the erased image, but it’s encrypted. It’s going to take forever to decode,” Butch shouts. It’s the most I’ve heard him say in one sitting. If he’s talking, it must be huge.

Chase’s fist pumps the air. “Thank fuck, Butch! Start stripping it down. Ziggy and I will handle the rest.”

I take out my cell and call Tony. “Atlas,” he answers, his voice tight with emotion.

Tony left the marines because of the bloodshed. Seeing the kid shot up could have been triggering a PTSD moment. “Do you need to be relieved, Tony? I can send someone else over to wait for news on Tom.”

Tony sniffs. “No, Prez. But I won’t lie, seeing the kid shot up...it’s not an easy thing.”

“The offer stands if you want to step away for a breather,” I say.

“I appreciate it, but I’m going to stick around. This doesn’t sit right with me,” Tony says.

I frown. “What do you mean? It had to be Lorenzo’s doing.”

“Oh, I’m convinced of that, but it wasn’t a hit done by any of Lorenzo’s squad. That’s not how they work. One, they don’t do public—ever—no witnesses and usually under cover of darkness. Two, if the boss asks for a hit, the target’s dead and not fighting for his life in surgery. Three, only a coward shoots someone in the back—Bianchi’s men want to be the last thing you see before you cross over, to see the fear in their eyes when the lights go out. This is far from procedure for my old family.”

Interesting. “If not the mob, who is it?”

“I don’t know, Atlas. I saw nobody other than kids and staff I’m familiar with. Tom sat in the back of the class. The hitman had to come in from the door in the back, popped off two, and fled out the back again. Is there anything on the cameras?”

Frustrated, I run a hand over my face. “The hacker already got to it. Butch was able to recover the footage, but it’s encrypted. It’s going to take time to piece together.”

Tony is silent.

“Tony? You there, bro?”

Tony breathes heavily into the phone. “Put me on speaker.”

I motion for Chase to connect Tony to our intercom. “You’re on Tony. What gives?”

“Now hear me out. There’s no way it was Bianchi’s men—I would have seen them, or Chase and his team would have caught them on surveillance. We’re ready and waiting for them. But the kid had a hit put on him inside his *coding* class where only the professor and students were present—where only people who know or are learning tech. The work was sloppy and risky, definitely not a pro.”

Chase gasps. “Oh, fuck! It’s a kid!”

“And the kid is also our hacker,” Butch says. “It’s why the hacking isn’t up to par—we’re dealing with an amateur. There’s always a trail, though it’s encrypted.”

“*Sonofabitch*,” Gauge shouts. “We’ve been looking in all the wrong places.”

“Pretty Paolo recruited a kid to spy on Josephine and I. Makes sense to recruit a kid to do some hacking as well. Their young, vulnerable, and easy to manipulate,” I say bitingly. “Chase, start checking the surveillance to see who was coming and going in the building before and after the shooting. Cameras were at every entrance and exit. We should be able to make an accurate list of suspects.”

“On it,” Chase says. “I don’t understand how a kid could have accessed our system? Even a skilled hacker would have

difficulty. But a kid? Fuck.”

I frown. “You still think this was an inside job? We’ve investigated our entire crew, inside and out. It can’t be any of us.”

Chase gives me a baffled look. “Unless the hacker was able to get inside my head to gain access to all our security blocks, I don’t see how it’s possible. You’d have to be looking over my shoulder to enter our system. It’s that buttoned-up. But I agree with you—it’s not one of our team members backstabbing us.”

“We’re going to get to the bottom of it, Chase. Don’t worry. This fucker can’t stay hidden forever,” Ziggy says confidently.

I can’t believe this is happening, but I should have. “I should have known better,” I say miserably.

Gauge gives me a scrutinizing stare. “Why do you say that?”

“Bianchi was running his mouth off at the tailor’s and Paolo tried to warn him to hush. I knew he was either warning his boss to control his temper, or to not reveal too much about the hacker and their spy on the trail.” I groan. “This is on me. I should have put more security checks in places after our encounter with Lorenzo.”

I shake my head. Lorenzo and his goons are the fucking worst—using kids to do their dirty work. Kids are precious and should be protected. Tom is a kid. This hacker and a potential hitman is a kid. When I see Lorenzo again, I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop myself from strangling him with my bare hands.

“Stay put, Tony. I’m coming to you. Tom is my responsibility and I failed him,” I say.

Gauge puts his hand on my shoulder. “We all failed him, Atlas. This is not on you alone—it’s on us.”

I know my brother is trying to make me better, but he’s wrong. “My crew, my ward, my fault. Or am I not named appropriately?”

Gauge gives me a sympathetic look. “You’re our leader, but we’re still a team. We’re in this brotherhood together.”

He’s right. I nod to appease him, but I still hold the weight of Tom’s attack on my shoulders.

Ziggy raises an eyebrow. “*Ward?* You recruiting the kid into the family or something?”

I look at Chase and his intel team. “If he pulls through, then yes, I am. We need more tech help. You guys need the manpower. Tom is one of us regardless of the little bastard peeping on my woman. He was forced and was a victim too.”

Chase raises his finger. “I second that notion.” The rest of my men nod in agreement.

“I’ll ride out with you,” Gauge says. “Let’s go see Tom.”

Four hours later, Tom is rolled out of surgery into a recovery room. His parents and little brother sit around his bedside, crying and waiting for him to wake up.

The next twenty-four hours are crucial. One bullet went clean through, but the other punctured his right lung. Traumatic pneumothorax is no joke. Because of the severity of the injury, a chest tube has been put in place and will remain there for several days until the lung begins to expand. Infection is a huge risk, even with antibiotics being pumped through his veins.

I don’t pray often, but I’m praying now in the church chapel by myself. Gauge is stationed outside Tom’s room, keeping watch.

If this kid doesn’t pull through... I shake away the negative. It does nothing but cloud the mind, and right now, I need my wits.

Tom’s family was terrified when we entered the room. I don’t hold it against them—we’re big, rough-looking dudes. I explained that I run a security company, how we don’t take

well to kids getting shot up in our community, and that we'll watch over him until the suspect is in custody. This seemed to calm his parents' nerves, and they thanked us for our protection. I refused to implicate Tom by telling his family of his recruitment into the mob—they have enough to worry about.

I sent Tony home to shower and rest. He didn't want to, but he was covered in Tom's blood from being the first responder on the scene. It was a reminder of what happened to the kid. Tony doesn't need that fucking with his head.

I contemplate calling Josephine and giving her an update, but I hesitate. She could panic and I don't want her worrying any more than she already does. She's getting stronger every day, but after what happened with Jacob...I'm more protective of her. I want to shield her from all the ugly of the world. I know my woman. She will blame herself for this happening to Tom, though it's all Bianchi's doing. I don't want this weighing on her. I'll tell her tonight when I get home and have her in my arms when the flood of emotions crashes over her, to hold her together when the damn breaks.

I finger the rosary I keep buried in my pocket, the one my *abuela* gave me as a child. This kid may not have been my family, but he is now. And a fucking gunshot wound...it hits too close to home with what happened with my parents.

Esteban had sent a group of men to kill my parents and, for whatever reason, I was left unharmed. Maybe because I was an infant and posed no threat is the only reason I'm alive today. Obviously, I have no memory of that moment, but I was an active SEAL for ten years. I've seen what a gun can do to a body. I can only imagine how horrible my parents' deaths were.

Leaving the chapel, I return to Tom's room. I look at his family holding each other as they pray for his life. A pang in my heart has me palming my chest. I never had what Tom has. I never had parents to worry about me. I had my *abuela*, and I'm grateful to have had her, but no family. I was robbed of them.

The more I watch the Guthrie family, the more morose I become. I can't exactly relate to what they're feeling but I do know what loss can do to you and your loved ones. I've seen it with the families of the men who lost their lives fighting beside me for our country. I'd witnessed it every day I grew up with my *abuela* and hearing her cry her nighttime prayers, pleading with God to let my parents be at peace. And again, I'm experiencing it watching this family hurting over a kid I failed protecting.

Fuck. I need my woman. I need to breathe her in and hold her in my arms to know she's safe and with me. Is it selfish to call her and thrust her into this? What if she's not ready to deal with my emotions? I'm not sure if I can wait any longer—maybe I'm the one who needs comfort.

I quickly leave Tom's room to pull my cell from my cut and dial her.

“Maceo!”

I look up and see Josephine flat-out sprinting down the hospital corridor toward me.

She's here.

She's here, and I hadn't even called her. She knew I needed her before I was aware I needed her. Punk must have told her what happened and where I was.

Unable to hold in my emotions any longer, I choke on my own tears. She crashes into my chest, where I cage her in my arms, holding her like my existence depends on her.

“Pixie,” I cry into her hair.

“I've got you,” she whispers against my chest. And she does, she *really* does.

Here I am this retired Navy SEAL biker, and I need the comfort of this pint-size pipsqueak. I should feel embarrassed, but I don't.

Suddenly, it hits me. This is how it's supposed to be. We need to be each other's support system, to be there for each other when shit gets rough and ugly. I've always assumed my

part was to play the dominant role of protector and supporter, but I was wrong. It has to be equal on all fronts. My woman already seems to grasp this, and here I am, only catching on now. Better late than never, I suppose.

I hold her and let her soothe me with gentle words of comfort, absorbing her love with every touch. This woman is my everything. My life. My heart. My soul. And I'm hers.

Fuck, but if that doesn't give me strength and hope, then nothing will.

Tom hasn't woken when we leave late in the evening. Brass took over watch at the hospital, letting Gauge, Josephine, and I head home for some rest.

The mood is somber when we enter the headquarters. Everyone is lounging around the gathering area, waiting for any updates. Punk brought Hades home. He runs to us when we enter the house, rubbing his massive head against our legs. He knows something horrible has happened, and he wants to comfort us.

Josephine was my rock at the hospital, but now that we're back home, she's crashing hard. Between her sister's arrival, removing her IUD, working long hours on Lloyd's build, and comforting me for several more hours at the hospital, she is sore and exhausted. I want to pull my woman upstairs to our bed and curl around her, but Chase catches my attention. He nods for me to follow him.

Reluctantly, I release her hand and let her sink into the couch between Opal and Punk. Gauge gives Opal a quick kiss before following me back to Chase's lair.

"Do you have an update on the shooter?" I ask once we reach the room.

"Negative. Butch is still working on it. Ziggy is going through the rest of the security footage, putting names to faces.

He's nearly done. There's something I need to bring to your attention and you're not going to be happy," Chase says.

Great. More bad news. "What is it?"

"It's Esteban. He's in the country. FBI is hot on his heels, but he was last spotted in Nevada heading east."

"Fuck!" I shout. I flip one of the fancy computer chairs Josephine bought for the room.

Gauge runs a hand through his hair. "It can only mean he's making his way to Colorado."

And heading right for us.

Aside from my personal vendetta to take out the man who murdered my family, my crew and I have been actively hunting him. We've done numerous drug busts on his operations in the states to make him pissed alone. The latest plot of his we foiled was when he abducted the governor's daughter. We were hired by the state to go into South America and recover her. We not only rescued the kid being ransomed, but saved the governor from signing off on a bill making it easier for illegal drugs to come into the state.

Gauge turns to me. "We need to jump on this, Atlas."

"With what men?" I fume. "We're already spread thin. Stage, Eagle, and Reaper are out of state working a security gig and won't be back for another two days. Chase needs his team. I promised we'd provide security to Tom until the shooter is caught. I can hold off scheduling jobs, but it's not going to help us at this second."

Gauge turns to Chase. "How many men does he have with him?"

"According to sources near the border, four men plus Esteban," Chase says.

Gauge looks back at me. "Two-man job. We go in and get the fuck out."

I'm biting at the bit to go right now, but I hesitate.

Tony's words roll around in my head—the real threat is in my backyard. Bianchi put a hit out on Tom tonight, possibly because he discovered he flipped sides, or maybe because he feared what Tom could reveal if caught. Clearly, the man has no problem taking another life, and I wouldn't put it past him to come after my crew or me.

“Atlas?” Gauge asks.

I shake my head. “I can't leave the war on our doorstep to go start a battle with another enemy.”

“Then I'll take Punk,” Gauge says.

“No. I'm not putting two of my men in harm's way. Esteban is my problem. I need to lead the attack.”

“You can't be in two places at once, Prez,” Chase points out.

“I know. But I can't ask any of you to go after Esteban for me.”

Gauge sighs. “Is it Jo? Are you worried about putting her at risk?”

“Of course it's about her, as well as the rest of this family,” I nearly growl.

“I don't want to fight with you, brother, but you either trust your crew to take care of Esteban and watch over the family and your woman, or you don't trust us at all. Which is it?” Gauge challenges.

I look at the ceiling. He's right. We can't pass up an opportunity to let Esteban escape. I either go with him now or assign one of my brothers to assist Gauge.

Deep down, I know I can't assign anyone else—Esteban is my problem to deal with. My brothers are more than competent in guarding Josephine and keeping the family safe.

I give the order. “Let's get our bags and go. Chase, you're in charge 'till we come back home. Have Punk and Tony with my woman at all times. Keep a three-man rotation on Tom and contact me with any updates on his condition or information on the shooter. We should be back in a couple of days.”

Gauge nods, striding from the room. I follow close behind and come back out to the main living space. Punk and Opal are watching Netflix with Josephine asleep between them. I bend over to lay a gentle kiss on her head, knowing it may be a while ‘till I’m able to give her another.

Punk lifts an eyebrow to me, sensing a change in the air. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Gauge and I are leaving in twenty.”

Hearing Gauge is going on assignment, Opal stands from the couch and goes to him. He pulls her aside and whispers to her. She gets teary-eyed, but nods her head. Gauge pulls her into an embrace, and I look away. I want to be able to do the same with Josephine, but I can’t.

Punk looks at my sleeping beauty. “Do you want to wake her? Let her know what’s up?”

I shake my head. “If she knows, she’ll try to stop me.” I don’t add that she would probably convince me to stay too, and with little effort. I don’t want to leave her, ever. But if there’s a chance to cut the head off the snake, I can’t turn down the opportunity.

Lorenzo is a current threat, but Esteban is the constant threat—as long as he lives, we’re all in danger.

Punk’s eyes go wide. “Is it him?” He doesn’t need to say the name—he knows there’s only one person who is deadly enough to drag me away from Josephine and go charging into battle.

I give a curt nod.

Punk’s eyes roll to the ceiling. “She’s going to kill you, ya know? And she is going to be one flaming, pissed-off hellcat to the rest of us.”

I smile, knowing the description he paints is accurate. “Her night episodes are few and far between. Could you stay in the room with her?”

Punk gives me a cheeky grin. “Are you asking me to sleep with your Pixie?”

Smug prick. He knows exactly how to get under my skin. “Wipe that smirk off your face. Call her by my pet name, and I’ll end you. You get the couch and wear fucking clothes. You don’t crawl in our bed unless you have to. I want someone there for her if she needs it.”

“Why does Jo need someone with her at night?”

Punk and I look over our shoulders and notice Simone, her face pulled together, scrutinizing.

“Night terrors. Violent ones. She can get physical and lash out. At times she needs to be retrained to avoid hurting herself or others,” I answer. “It started after Jacob kidnapped her.”

Simone looks over at her sister and straightens her shoulders. “I can sleep with her. If you haven’t noticed, I’m more than capable of restraining her.”

I shake my head. “She gets freakishly strong—even I’ve struggled at times.”

Simone shrugs. “Maybe if someone is in bed with her, she will subconsciously know that she’s not alone and won’t have an episode.” She pauses and looks at Punk. “But if she does, I guess this moron can assist if I need it.”

Punk flashes a megawatt smile. “Awesome. I get to sleep with two sisters.”

“The fuck you do,” Chase says angrily, coming up behind me.

Punk’s shoulders rise and fall with silent chuckles. “You guys make it too fucking easy.” He raises his hands in surrender. “Alright, since I don’t want two brothers pissed at me, I promise to only join the bed if need be. I swear I won’t molest your women.”

Simone scowls at Punk. “What do you mean by ‘your women?’”

Punk looks quizzically between Simone and Chase. When the realization hits, a mischievous smile spreads from ear to ear. “Have you not filled her in, bro? Oh, this is fucking gold!”

Chase glares at his best friend but says nothing.

“What’s the moron talking about?” Simone demands, her voice raising an octave.

Punk swings his smiling face back to Simone. “Oh, Priss, didn’t you know? You’re officially off the market with a big warning sign reading, ‘property of Chase,’ tattooed across your forehead.”

Simone scoffs. “That’s absurd. I don’t *belong* to Chase. I don’t belong to anyone but myself.” She laughs some more, but her laughter slowly dies as she takes in our stoic faces. Her gray eyes go wide when she looks at Chase, staring back at her with lust-filled eyes.

Punk giggles like a little kid. “Oh, this is going to be fun. Where’s the popcorn when you need it?”

Gauge and I have been gone a week, chasing Esteban all over the west like a game of hopscotch. We’ve cut him off a hand full of times from entering Colorado, but we’ve yet to be in a position to take him out. We’ve gambled on our latest destination in Fish Lake, Utah, but our sources in the FBI have been spot on thus far.

Fishlake National Forest puts us in a perfect offensive position from up high on the summit, excellent for taking out Esteban’s car from afar. It’s rather desolate here with aspen trees encircling open mountain meadows. It’s normally lush, but with fall on the horizon, everything is dried out.

I miss Josephine. I contemplate calling her again, but I know she won’t answer. The morning after I left, Josephine woke to find me gone. She called me up, demanding I bring my ass back to headquarters. I tried to explain I couldn’t, that I needed to kill him, and she lost it. She hung up on me and has refused to answer my calls or text messages since. I still try, knowing she won’t respond, but she will know she’s at the center of all my thoughts.

I finally found a free moment to reach out to Punk.

“How’s everything going?”

“About as wonderful as you can imagine,” Punk grouches. “That was a real pussy-move you played, bailing on Jo to avoid her backlash.”

Annoyed, I roll my eyes. I don’t need his attitude at the moment. “Yeah, well, I am what I eat.”

“*Gah!* Dammit, Atlas!” I can imagine Punk is doing a full-body shiver.

I laugh. “Sorry, bro. Is it really bad?”

Punk snorts. “Why is it you always piss her off the most when you’re gone, and I’m always on the receiving end of it?”

I kick the dirt at my feet, grimacing—he’s not far off the mark. “Yeah, I owe you one.”

“You owe me *more* than one, bro,” he counters. “You owe me a dozen. Maybe more with the way she’s carrying on.”

“Has it been bad at night?” I ask, worried she may be having a fretful sleep on top of being in Napoleonic mode.

“No. The nights have been uneventful with Simone spooning Jo. All are fine aside from Chase demanding to sleep in the room too. Thank fuck your couch is a pull-out bed—that asshole would have made me draw straws to see who got the floor. Can you believe my best friend doesn’t trust me to be alone with his girl?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “You insinuated you would be sleeping with both sisters, so yeah, you earned a jealous brother.”

“Come on, Prez, you know me. I was screwing with him.”

I sigh. “Punk, when you finally get your own woman, you’ll understand jealousy is nothing to fuck with.”

Punk chuckles. “Figured if you kick the bucket during this operation, I’m next in line for Jo. I mean, I’m with her all the time, I’ve slept in her bed, she already takes her anger out on me—might as well make it official after your wake. I’m going to rename her *Tink*, like Tinker Bell—fitting pet name.”

I know he's trying to bait me and damn him, because it works. "When I get home, I'm going to remove your balls and burn them."

Punk busts a gut. "Jesus, Atlas! I'm joking, you sick fuck. Not sure if you're aware, but that's incest, bro. Burn my balls?! Jo's already beaten you to the punch. She's got them in a death grip and twisting them."

Oh, boy. "How bad is she?"

"Where should I start? Well, the morning after you took off, I woke up to a glass of water being dumped on my head at five in the morning, demanding to know where you were. When I informed her you left to go after Esteban, she proceeded to beat Chase and me with a pillow 'till the room erupted in feathers. She ordered us to clean it up, saying it was our fault for it happening—and that was day one!

"Because I'm her bodyguard, I've had to run ten miles with her at a sub-eight minute pace daily. Hades snarls at me the whole time—her hellhound has a sixth sense of knowing when you've pissed off his person.

"When I wanted to watch the Rockies, she and the bunnies took over the living room and put on *Magic Mike*. She asked me what I wanted for lunch the other day, and I said anything but pizza. What do you think she got? Pizza! And last night she insisted I do a foot soak with her and Simone—she knows I hate that kind of shit, regardless of the wonders it does on my feet."

Jeez. My woman is relentless. I want to argue he enjoys the spa treatment shit, but now is not the time to push him.

"Oh, and to top it off, she's making me take her and all the girls to the mall this afternoon. Opal passed her GED, and they're 'celebrating' with retail. Thanks a lot, dickhead."

I run a hand over my face. Josephine is a spitfire naturally, but when she gets a hair up her ass, she can be a real pill. "Okay, I deserve you fucking with me."

"You're damn right," Punk huffs.

I look over at my best friend, still focused on the horizon. “Opal passed, bro.”

Gauge smiles with pride but keeps his eyes on the task at hand. “That’s my smart cookie.”

I’m half afraid to ask what else Josephine has been doing. “What’s Josephine doing now?”

“She’s out behind the garage, firing at bottles and pretending it’s your head. Tony is with her. Lucky fucker—gets to do the fun shit while I’m stuck with mall duty,” Punk complains.

“Take Tony and another brother when you go to the mall. If all the girls are going, you’ll need more eyes on them.”

“Sure, fine. But you should know you’re in for hell when you get back home. Good thing the pull-out couch is comfortable because that’s where your ass is going to wind up—I’ve got fifty on it against Eagle.”

“Fuuuck,” I groan, knowing I’m on pussy-lockdown once I get back. I want to hear more about my woman, but there are other pressing matters we need to address. “Any update on Tom?”

Tom woke the day after we left for this mission. By mid-week, doctors had removed the tube in his chest. He’s been steadily improving each day, thank God.

“PT should be released from the hospital this afternoon. He’ll be recouping at his parent’s home. I have Brass, Flay, and Triple doing a rotation on his protection detail.”

I frown. “PT?”

“Yeah, PT for Peeping Tom.”

I throw my head back and laugh. PT is a nickname that is going to stick if Tom chooses to sign on with Mercy Ravens. I sober as I ask my next question. “And where are we on our hacker?”

“We have a compiled list of potential shooters from Tom’s attack. Chase is going through that list and seeing if there are

any connections between Tom and/or Bianchi. It's a slow process."

I'm dreading my neck question. "Has Josephine been going to Heather?" We need to make sure that the front is still in place.

"Yes, she has. She met with Heather twice this week, and the counselor followed through on her end from what Chase has seen. Hacker accessed it yesterday. There's another update on the counseling."

I chock my head, intrigued. "Which is?"

"Jo asked Heather for the contact information of Heather's counseling student. She called him up and he came out to headquarters. He sat with Jo for an hour, getting up to speed with everything. The poor kid looked nervous as fuck when he walked into the club with our crew there. I guess he decided it was worth the extra credited hours because he set up a meet for next week."

I breathe a sigh of relief. The obsessive worry I had about Josephine not following through with her counseling had weighed heavily on me. I'm proud she took the initiative and sought out the student.

Punk lowers his voice. "Do you have a lead?"

I look over at Gauge, watching the highway through high-magnification binoculars. "Yeah. We're finally on the offense now."

Punk blows out a breath. "I don't like this two-man show. Chase and I should be there with you guys."

"I need you both at home. Chase has his hands full and can't leave his tech team to sink or swim, and I need you there as point on security."

"We need to be there with you, and you fucking know it. It's the four of us, always," Punk gripes.

It makes me feel good to hear my brother speak this way. I feel the same about them, as well. "We're handling this from afar, no need for more manpower."

“Prez?” Gauge catches my attention.

“Need to go, Punk. We’re on.”

“God speed, brother,” Punk says and disconnects.

I pocket my phone and lay on the ground, getting my bearings through the scope of my high-precision rifle. I’ve already accounted for wind, angle, light, and because of the distance, the curve of the earth. We’re well hidden at a half-mile away from where I plan to take the shot, laying against the ground in camouflage.

Before I was made Captain, I was a sniper back in my early SEAL days. My specialty was highly technical shots. Shooting at a moving target is risky, but it’s our only option. Gauge is my second pair of eyes on this operation, much like back in the day when he was my spotter. We’ve always been paired together, and not much has changed. We settle into a comfortable silence.

“Car is approaching at roughly seventy miles an hour. Two miles out,” Gauge whispers.

I make a few adjustments and try to control my pounding heartbeat. I’ve anxiously waited for this day since I first learned of Esteban’s involvement in my parents’ murder.

Would I love to watch the life leave his eyes? Absolutely, but it’s not an option. You play the cards you’re dealt, and right now, our best bet on killing him is by taking out his car. I need to bed my emotions for the moment. When the fucker is dead and gone, I’ll allow myself to feel.

“One-point-five,” Gauge says.

The car is in my scope. With how fast he’s traveling, I need him closer to hit the engine block.

“One mile.”

I steady my breathing and send a tiny prayer to my parents.
This is for you.

“Target in range.”

I pull the trigger and watch my shot connect right through the engine, disabling the car. The driver swerves dangerously, realizing they're under attack. The car hits the guardrail, soars through the air, landing on the passenger's side. It rolls end over end before stopping, upside down.

Another car has come into range behind the first and it slows. A sinking feeling forms in my gut. The other times we cut off Esteban, he was in one vehicle—probably to avoid unwanted attention. So why is there another vehicle, similar in make and model to the first, here in the middle of fucking nowhere?

“Do you see him?”

Gauge looks through his binoculars. “Possible suspect in the back seat.”

I have no time to make my adjustments to my rifle before I take my next shot. The car is already pulling away from the scene. I'm losing my chance. I open fire on the second vehicle, taking out the windows and hitting the driver.

A man in the passenger seat leans over and takes hold of the wheel. The car takes off. I fire again, but the car doesn't slow, and soon it's cresting the hill into oblivion.

I push off the ground and rush down the valley toward the overturned vehicle. Gauge sprints to catch up.

When we reach the car, I get on my hands and knees, observing the passenger. He's blood-soaked and dead, much like the driver. I reach in and yank the man free of the car, ripping his shirt open in search of any tell-tale signs it's Esteban.

No tattoo of my mother's name across his clavicle. No previous gunshot wound above his heart from where I nearly succeeded in killing him two years ago.

In other words, not Esteban.

This guy is an Esteban imposture. A decoy.

And the second car we knew nothing about had my real target.

I throw my head back, roaring. This isn't the first time a double has taken my bullet, and I hate having failed again.

Gauge lays a heavy hand on my shoulder and yanks me to my feet. "We need to get the fuck out of here." He helps to push me forward, back toward the summit to collect our things, and start our pursuit all over again.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

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This week has been hell. I've been worried sick about Maceo and Gauge going after Esteban, as well as super pissed at Maceo for sneaking off while I was asleep.

Oh, Maceo definitely was right when he told me his reason for not telling me was because he knew I would try to stop him. I absolutely would have tried to stop him. Trained professional mercenary or not, I don't want Maceo going after Esteban without an army.

It's him and Gauge—that's it. Definitely not enough manpower, and pretty much the epitome of stupid in my book.

I threw myself into my work, getting further than expected with Lloyd's barbershop, and even meeting with two potential clients who are looking to renovate their businesses downtown.

When work wasn't enough to keep my mind off of things, I helped Opal study for her GED final exam.

And when that wasn't enough, I screwed with Punk, like I am right now.

"Stop your complaining and get out here," I clip at the dressing room door.

"I'm not coming out," Punk says heatedly. "I look like a fool!"

I fold my arms and square my shoulders. "Either you come out, or I have Tony pull you out."

Punk opens the dressing room door with a *bang* and stalks out, sulking. Tony and Eagle cover their mouths, trying hard

not to laugh. The girls all giggle.

Oh, I've done a fine job. I bounce up and down excitedly, clapping my hands.

I decided I wasn't finished taking my revenge out on Punk for not warning me about Maceo going after Esteban. I've definitely put him through the wringer this week, but using him as a human doll is by far the best payback yet.

Punk stands before us in the GAP wearing a pastel-pink polo with the collar up and khakis—slim-fit, tapered at the cuff, blah khakis. He's a vision of his own personal hell.

"I hate you so much right now," he grimaces.

Lies! I know he loves me as I love him. "Now, now. Let's not be saying things you don't mean. I believe accessories are needed, don't you agree, girls?"

The bunnies attack him with final touches. Candy adds a navy fedora. Red ties a silk scarf around his neck. Ebony places sunglasses on his face. And Opal adorns his fingers with a couple of rings. We all step back and admire our handy work. Punk stares stone-faced back at us.

"What do you think?" I ask him.

Punk shrugs. "The rings are cool, but I'd say we're done playing dress-up."

My sister comes waltzing over with a canvas messenger bag in her hands. "Really? I figured you needed one more thing." She hangs the bag on his shoulder. "This is for calling me *prissy*."

"A purse? Seriously, Miss Priss? Is that the best you can do?" Punk pokes.

"It's a satchel, you moron. And no, it's not the best I can do, but this is." Simone takes a quick snapshot of him on her phone.

Punk's hands fist at his sides. "Delete that shit, now!"

Everyone's cells ping with a text message from Simone with the picture. We all start laughing.

Punk looks at the ceiling. “Fuck my life.”

I take pity on my brother. “Alright, you’re off the hook. I can’t be mad at you forever.” I push him back into the dressing room.

Punk changes and joins me back on the shop floor. “Here.” He places the rings Opal put on him in my hand. “I like these, and after surviving your fit today, I’ve earned them.”

I shrug. “Fine by me. I swiped Maceo’s credit card, and I’m charging everything to him.”

Punk’s eyebrows jump in amusement. “In that case...” He runs around the store and comes back with two pairs of blue jeans, three plain tees, a belt, and a black denim jacket. “Add these. The fucker owes me.”

I walk around the store, not particularly interested in purchasing anything, but waiting for the girls to finish and bring me their treasures. Candy looks uncertain as she eyeballs a rack of what she may deem conservative tops. I mosey alongside her. “Do you like any of these?”

Candy bites her lip and shrugs. “Umm, I’m not sure. I’ve never shopped at a place this nice.”

I frown, not understanding. “What do you mean?”

Candy gestures to the store. “I grew up near Cloudcroft, New Mexico. My parents are what you would call hippies who lived off the land. They also were junkies.

“Dirt poor, no food—my clothes were secondhand. I left when I was fourteen and started working the truck stops ‘till I was taken in by my pimp. Most of my clothes were purchased through him to serve his clients. After the MC took me in, I felt guilty having them give me money to buy anything. I would go to Walmart and buy the barebones.”

Candy looks back at the racks of clothes. “I feel like this place is too good for me.”

Sweet Jesus.

Candy’s story slays me. We may have gotten off on the wrong foot, but I don’t dislike her.

I clear my throat. “Well, that’s absolutely not true. You definitely are good enough. Do you want my help? I’m not a fashion expert, but I can throw an outfit together.”

Candy looks at me with her eyes bugging out. “Why do you want to help me?”

Again, I don’t understand her. “Why wouldn’t I? I know I’m not your favorite person, and we didn’t exactly hit it off at the start, but we turned a corner after...after I was... after Jacob.” I struggle to finish, gulping. “We’re family.”

It’s the simplest and easiest answer, in my opinion, but Candy looks touched by what I said, blinking back tears.

Wanting to save her some embarrassment, I ask her again. “What do you say? Want to chance yourself with my fashion critique?”

Relieved, Candy nods, and I smile. “Okay, the first thing is some basics. Let’s get you to try on some jeans and a couple of solid-colored tops, and we’ll go from there.”

An hour goes by with Candy staying put in the dressing room and me bringing her clothes to try. Somehow, my sister got recruited into helping me while the rest of the girls lounge in chairs *ooing* and *aahing* when Candy comes out to model.

We check out—or more appropriately, I check out since I’m buying everything. Aside from Punk, each of the girls got a couple of things, but Candy had the biggest haul with six outfits.

I see her eyeing a mint-green dress, which is sweet and feminine. With Candy’s bubble-gum-colored hair—now tamed thanks to my mom’s moisturizing treatment—she would look flattering in it. I swipe it off the rack when she doesn’t notice and add it to the mountain of clothes.

The rest of the time, our group window shops around the mall, chatting and having fun.

Ebony makes sure to walk directly in front of Tony, swinging her hips like a pendulum, and hypnotizing Tony’s eyes to stay glued to her ass. It’s like an invisible leash is between them, with Ebony tugging Tony along and him

following her like a love sick puppy. I smirk at their hilarious courting ritual. One of them is bound to make a move one of these days, but I'm not sure who will cave first.

I'm contemplating a wager with Punk, when my sister links her arm through mine. "I'm glad you're here," I tell Simone honestly.

She looks at me and smiles. "I'm glad I'm here too. I could maybe do without Chase eye-fucking me every time I'm near him, but I'm happy."

I laugh because she's not far off the mark. "Chase is a great guy. Super smart, handsome, big, and strong—not a bad guy to be checking you out. And that long, tawny hair...when he has it in a man bun—*yum!*"

My sister gnaws on her bottom lip. "I kind of dig his Buddy Holly glasses. It's like a reverse sexy librarian thing."

I snort. "Figures you would have a thing for hot nerdy guys."

Simone nods, looking off in a daze. I stop and look at her. "Simone? Are you crushing on Chase?"

"Shush!" she says, looking around to make sure no one heard me.

I laugh. "Well, this should be interesting. And I guess you're good to go since Doctor Stoll gave you the all-clear." Simone got her test results two days ago, and thankfully, she's STI free. "Tell me you're at least giving yourself some time before actually pursuing a relationship?"

"Who said anything about a relationship? I was just thinking of a roll in the hay," she says.

I shake my head. "Yeah, good luck. These MC boys don't do casual once they've got their sights locked on someone. If you sleep with him, you're stuck, sis. More importantly, you're not going to be upset with it when it happens."

My sister scoffs. "Oh, please. It's only sex."

"I said the same thing, once upon a time. Next thing I knew, Maceo showed up at my condo, wined and dined me,

disappeared for three weeks, returned on his hands and knee confessing his undying love. Another three weeks later, he put a ring on it.”

My sister blinks. “Back up and go slower.”

I tell her how Maceo and I met, our tryst out on the trail, and everything that happened after.

Simone fans herself. “Holy-moly, that’s hot! And completely irrational—what the hell were you thinking? Having sex with some dude you just met?”

Seriously? She’s judging me when she’s contemplating jumping Chase’s bones, and she’s been here a whopping week? “Let me tell you a story about a pot and a kettle.”

“Fair enough, though we’re miles apart when you compare us,” she says. “I may be daydreaming about it, but I definitely don’t have the balls to pursue it.”

I shrug. “That’s alright. Chase does, and if you and I are related at all, you won’t be able to resist.”

She rolls her gray eyes. “Your lack of confidence in my ability to refuse him hurts my pride.”

“Whatever,” I say as we start walking again. “Hey, I have a question I’ve been meaning to ask.”

Simone looks into one of the store windows. “What?”

“Mom bought an extra bridesmaid dress, and I need a maid of honor.”

Simone freezes and looks at me. “Are you asking me to be your maid of honor?”

“Yeah, I am. Would you mind?”

Simone looks like she might cry. “Would I mind? Jo, I’m fucking honored. Come here and give me a hug.”

My sister and I are in the middle of an embrace when Punk comes beside us, pouting. “Hey, Priss, lay off my sis. She’s my hug buddy, and I don’t share.”

Simone puts a fist on her hip. “Seriously? She’s my *biological* sister. You’re the add on.”

Punk brushes her off. “Family is what you make of it. Blood means shit.”

The two get into a heated debate about who’s more my *real* sibling, and I lose interest.

I wander toward a boutique I’ve never seen before. It displays all things shiny and soft and feminine. I’m instantly attracted to the giant crystal chandeliers throwing sparkles around the intimate space.

Captivated, I meander into the store and fall in love. Imported silk scarves, Italian made handbags, and trinkets galore. My eyes are having a difficult time settling on what to look at first.

I’m drawn to a rack along the wall where one of a kind handmade clothes hang on display, but my nose catches a whiff of something exotic. I look around the space and notice along the back wall, shelves of scented oils. I don’t wear a lot of perfume—a dab on my wrists and under my ears on my neck, sometimes one between my cleavage and behind my knees if I really want to ramp up Maceo—but I love to tease my senses with new scents every now and again.

A saleswoman smiles when I approach the back counter. “*Ciao, bella!* Welcome to *Giuseppina’s*. Would you like to sample some of our latest scents?”

I smile and nod. “Yes, please.” I sit on a stool at the counter.

The saleslady offers me a few scents, and they’re lovely, but nothing is holding my interest.

The clerk taps her bottom lip. “I may have something that will catch your attention, or, more importantly, your man’s attention.” She takes a bottle from the shelf and slides it across the counter to me with a knowing smile.

Picking up the bottle, I open it and wave my hand above the bottle to waft the scent. I frown and look at the clerk. “I don’t smell anything.”

The saleslady juts her chin out. “Place a dab on your wrist, rub it in, and smell it.”

I do as she says and lift my wrist to my nose. My eyes pop. “It’s like I walked into a citrus grove.” I sniff again. “*Mmm*, I like this. What is it?”

“A pheromone oil with a little something extra. It releases your natural scent to attract the opposite sex. Women typically fall into one of three categories—musky, floral, or fruity. Depending on where you place the oil, the scent may change. And when you’re in the mood, it can become stronger. Drives men wild.”

“I’ll take six!” The girls will have fun with these for sure.

The sales clerk laughs and starts packing my bottles. “Six bottles! You don’t need much. A little goes a *looong* way. Between you and me, it’s pretty potent, and I’m not entirely sure if it’s legal. Not my concern; I just work here. But a dab will do ya.”

Oops! Too late. I’ve already placed it on my usual spots where I wear perfume because I enjoy the smell so much. “Umm...does it matter if I use more?”

“It only heightens your scent with each drop,” she explains.

Currently, I’m at a dab times four—wrists and neck. “Will it be offensive?”

The clerk shakes her head. “No. A little extra attention from the guys is never a bad thing, right?”

“Pina doesn’t need extra attention, she already has all of mine,” Lorenzo coos from behind the counter, smiling at me. “*Ciao, amore mio*,” he greets me and shoos the clerk away.

My head feels foggy, and I blink to make sure I’m not imagining Lorenzo in front of me.

Well, fuck my luck. Lorenzo owns *Giuseppina’s* and filled it with all things I would love. This store is the perfect trap, and I’m in it up to my knees. And of course, he would name the store after me.

I should leave, but the saleslady was in the middle of completing my transaction, and Lorenzo is now in possession of my credit card.

Fuck it. I'll cancel the card. Staying near this dangerous man is not worth it.

Before I turn to leave, Lorenzo's two goons, Luca and Paolo, appear. Lorenzo gestures with his head for Luca to move to the front of the store, and Luca goes to guard the entrance.

Lorenzo turns to Paolo. "Stay in the back and wait for the shipment. Luca can handle watch." Paolo disappears behind the shops back doors, cutting off all points of escape.

My stomach drops. I'm trapped.

Lorenzo smiles wickedly, knowing I'm stuck. "Don't worry, Pina. I'm not holding you prisoner and I won't stop you from leaving. I only wanted to steal a moment with you."

Feeling uncomfortable but determined to hold my ground, I fold my arms across my chest. "Are you following me? Shouldn't you be at one of your casinos?"

Lorenzo gives me a sly grin, blatantly ignoring my questions. He slowly inserts the credit card in the chip reader. "And what did you find that you like? Perhaps I can gift you something similar."

I wish I could bite my tongue and say nothing. "You need to stop sending me things. I've told you many times, I can't accept them."

Lorenzo raises an eyebrow in challenge. "Before Maceo had you on his radar, you would keep my flowers. It's safe to say he's the one who has a problem with it."

I tap my foot impatiently. "Can we just wrap this transaction up?"

"Oooh! I struck a nerve," he teases.

I shake my head angrily, and it only makes him laugh more. He finishes my transaction and hands me my credit card

before rifling through my store bag. His grin becomes wolfish. “And what sweet scent does your skin give off?”

Before I can react, Lorenzo takes hold of my wrist and lifts it to his nose. His eyes dilate ‘till his brown irises are nothing but black pupils.

Oh, shit. This isn't good.

Lorenzo sniffs the air like a bloodhound, circling the counter, my wrist still in his grasp. He comes closer to me like a possessed man ready to rut. I raise my other hand to push him away, but he grabs my other wrist too. I'm stumbling backward before he pushes me against the wall.

He leans into my neck and breathes me in. “*Hai un profumo così buono.*”

I have no idea what he's saying, but I'm positive it's completely inappropriate. I'm overwhelmed with a horrible sense of déjà vu. This whole situation with being restrained reminds me of how Jacob attacked me.

Fear rises up in my belly and I panic. “Lorenzo, *stop!*”

He transfers both my wrists to one hand and runs his free hand through my hair, grinding himself against me. “Pina, I *need* you. *Ho un debole per te.* Leave the Neanderthal and be mine.”

Gah. Gross! Having Lorenzo's erection pressed against my stomach makes me want to vomit. Jacob had done the same thing before he tried to rape me. My heart is racing, sweat builds around my temples.

No. I can't afford to have a panic attack now. *Think, Jo! Think of the combat training Maceo has been drilling into you.* “Lorenzo, let me go. I mean it. Stop it right now.”

His hands tighten around me, not painfully, but definitely a warning. “I know you like it rough. I know you like to be dominated. And all the sexual exhibitionist activity—fuck, Pina—I will do it for you. We can start here, right now. *Spogliati!*”

Enough! I raise my knee and crack him in his nuts, not once, but twice in rapid succession.

He grunts and immediately lets go of me to cup his bruised balls. I shove him away and quickly grab my shopping bag, stepping out of his reach. “Don’t touch me!”

Suddenly another set of arms snakes around my waist, trying to restrain me. Defensive instincts kick in when this person goes to lift me off the ground.

Quickly, I curl my foot around the inside of the guy’s calf, preventing him from moving me. With my hand holding my shopping bag, I swing backward between his legs connecting with his manhood. The guy lets go, and I pivot, kicking my foot out into his gut. I see it’s Luca as he flies backward into the wall, hitting the back of his head with a muted *thump*, before sliding to the ground knocked out cold.

Holy shit! I did that. I took two men out. I take a moment to calm down and steady my breathing. I’m okay, I’m safe, and apparently, I’m a fucking ninja.

I look up in time to see Punk running past the shop window. He stops and spins in a circle with his hands on his heads, looking frantic before his eyes land on me.

He sprints into the store and quickly takes in the situation. “The fuck?!” He grabs me and swings me around his back, hiding me from Lorenzo’s view. He seems like he’s about to read Lorenzo the riot act when he sniffs the air. Punk turns to look at me, his blue eyes dilated.

Ah, shit! What have I gotten myself into?

“Punk!” I shout to bring him back to the frontline.

He shakes his head, trying to clear his lust-clouded mind. “Christ, Jo! What’s going on, and why do you smell so yummy?”

I slap him in the chest. “Focus, Punk. Lorenzo was all over me.”

That gets his attention. Punk strides forward, grabbing Lorenzo by the lapels of his Italian suit, and gut punches him.

“Dirty bastard. You lay your hands on my brother’s extremely delicious smelling fiancée?” Punk shakes his head again. “The fuck you wearing, woman?”

“It’s pheromone oil—Pina’s natural scent magnified. It’s fucking intoxicating,” Lorenzo practically slurs with a wide smile, like my proximity is making him drunk on desire.

Punk pinches the bridge of his nose. “Oh, my God, Jo! You need to back away before I lose my shit and do something stupid.”

I back up a good ten feet and try to make myself as small as possible in an already small space.

Tony and Eagle run into the store to investigate what’s going on. They don’t make it but a few feet through the threshold before both heads turn to me, their eyes full of hearts.

Shit. I’m in so much trouble when Maceo finds out.

Tony inhales and stares at me with wild eyes. “Is that you?”

Punk bobs his head while still holding on to Lorenzo by his suit. “Yeah, it’s her—smelling like every guy’s kinkiest wet dream come true. Some natural pheromone shit. Makes you want to grab her by the hips and gobble her up.”

Punk slaps himself hard across his face, making us all jump with surprise. “I’m sorry, Jo. I can’t fucking think straight, I swear. I didn’t mean what I said, but you do smell like limoncello, and I want to have a taste. *God*, I’m going straight to hell!”

I hastily pull out some wet wipes I keep on standby in my purse and begin rubbing away at my skin where I dabbed the oil. “There. Is it better?”

Tony cups his nose with his palm and shakes his head with alarm. “You made it worse.”

“You still smell like sex,” Eagle answers, licking his lips and immediately hangs his head. “Atlas is going to kill us.”

“Prez isn’t going to kill anyone except for this asshole,” Punk says, shaking Lorenzo’s love-sick, limp body in one hand. “The prick tried to get frisky with Jo. Not sure if he was his normal douchy-self or if it’s because Jo’s catnip—either way, he’s going to pay.”

Lorenzo swings his head toward me and winks. “Come sit on my face, Pina. I’m dying to see if you taste as good as you smell.”

Oh, dear lord! This is extreme, even for Lorenzo. “I think it’s the latter.”

Tony nudges Luca’s body with his foot, making the mobster groan in pain, and shakes his head. “You can’t give him the benefit of the doubt,” Tony says. “He’s a snake and he’ll strike when you least expect it.”

Lorenzo crooks a finger at me. “Giuseppina, come set my snake loose.”

Punk drops Lorenzo with a loud *thunk*, knocking the air from his lungs.

“Sick motherfucker.” Punk runs both hands over his shaved head. “You guys, I don’t know what to do here. Part of me wants to beat the shit out of him, and part of me kind of understands he’s coked-up on Jo’s pheromones. Jesus, sis, why is it so strong?”

Tony nods. “Right? Are you in heat or something?”

I sneer at him. “I’m not a dog, asshole.”

“I think he means ovulating,” Eagle offers, refusing to make eye contact with me.

I had my IUD removed last week. I guess I could be ovulating, but doubtful. “I’m pretty sure I applied too much oil.”

Punk opens his arms. “What do you want to do, Jo? If you want me to beat his ass, I will. If you want to high-tail it out of here, we’re gone. We can have you file a police report, and maybe you can get a restraining order.”

Lorenzo is leaning upright on his elbows, devouring me with his eyes. The oil definitely ramped upped his libido, but the yearning was always there.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

My eyes land on Punk. “Can we leave, please?”

Punk’s long strides close the distance. He wraps a lean arm around me and leads me away.

“I’ll see you soon, Pina. And I’ll be counting down the minutes ‘till you’re with me for good,” Lorenzo shouts, determination set in his tone.

In the parking lot, the guys do rock, paper, scissors to see who will be stuck chauffeuring me.

I offered to drive myself, but they all said no. Me wandering off from my security detail is already going to have them in enough hot water when Maceo finds out, and being in a car without one of them will only compound the problem since they’re supposed to have eyes on me at all times.

None of them are eager to be trapped in a car with me when I smell like forbidden fruit. From the way Punk hangs his head, I’m guessing he lost. I sit in the back of the car as far away from him as I can—I hate making him uncomfortable.

The drive to the police station is tense. Punk chants to himself. “She’s your sister. She’s your sister. She’s your *fucking* sister.”

Simone side-eyes him dully from the front passenger seat. “It may help if you didn’t refer to her as your *fucking* sister, moron.”

Punk groans and adjusts himself through his jeans.

Simone sniggers. “Exactly what did you put on to bring *‘all the boys to the yard’*?”

I pull a bottle out to examine the contents. “Pheromone oil. Apparently, it’s not diluted because it’s potent as all get out.” I hand the bag with the remaining bottles to my sister. “I bought one for each of the girls since it sounded fun.”

Simone digs through the bag with an excited smile. “For real?”

Punk’s hand flies out and snatches the bag from my sister, shoving it between his legs, and far out of reach.

“Hey, moron, I was looking at those,” Simone snaps.

Punk wags a finger at us. “I don’t think so. I’m already having indecent thoughts about one sister—I don’t need to add another sister into the mix. That shit is more lethal than an atomic bomb and fucks with men’s heads and dicks. Wars have started over less shit. The Bianchi mob pushes illegal drugs, and I’d bet any money this shit is laced with something. It’s getting locked up when we get back to headquarters.”

Simone huffs and folds her arms over her chest in annoyance. She looks over her shoulder at me, where I have the bottle I was examining in my hand. I raise my finger to my lips and slide it into my bra. Simone presses her hand to her mouth to stop her laugh and faces back around.

The police station is a disaster. I should have gone home and showered first. The entire time Punk barks at all the male officers to avert their eyes, reminding them I’m Atlas’s *old lady*. Detective Luke Quire has a difficult time looking at me without blushing and shifting in his seat.

If I knew I was going to be applying the *elixir of sex* to myself, I would have at least done it behind closed doors where only Maceo would enjoy it.

Maybe Punk is right, and the pheromone oil is laced with drugs. Pheromone oil alone isn’t supposed to do what this shit is doing.

The salesclerk said she wasn’t sure if it was actually something ‘legal,’ and Lorenzo mentioned to Paolo to wait out back for ‘the shipment.’ What if Lorenzo is using the store as a

front to sell illegal drugs? It wouldn't surprise me. I'll have to mention it to Maceo.

I give Luke my story, but I can tell from his grim expression that I'm out of luck.

"I'm sorry, Jo, but there isn't enough evidence to be granted a restraining order since you're unable to prove Lorenzo Bianchi is a threat to your physical or mental health," Luke sincerely apologizes. "You have no documentation. No witnesses. No doctor's report. It's your word against his, and the Bianchi name has deep pockets and deeper connections with the judicial system. We can file, but a judge will deny it."

Punk nearly flies into a rage, and Luke threatens to arrest him to get him to settle down. Infuriated, but keeping a lid on it. Punk grabs mine and my sister's hand and marches us out of the station, muttering curses at every officer in the building.

When we get back to headquarters, Punk escorts me inside like we're going into battle. "Back the fuck up, all of you," he yells at his brothers, making sure they give me a wide birth.

He snaps his fingers at me and points upstairs. "Shower. Now!"

Hades growls at Punk and the MC brothers, warning them to stay away from me. He clomps to my side and nudges me toward the stairs.

Mortified and pissed off, I stomp back to my suite and slam the door. I go right to my dresser, open the top drawer, and bury my weapon of *man's destruction* beneath my panties. It's definitely going to come in handy one day.

After a thorough shower, I get dressed in some lounge pants and a fitted tee. I've got no plans, and I'm afraid to leave my suite in case I have any residual sex oil on me. I'm going over plans for Lloyd's build this coming week and absently petting Hades when my mom comes busting into my suite with a trail of garment bags being hauled behind her.

"Doors open, come on in," I chide, sitting up in my bed. "Whatcha got?"

My mom beams. “The bridesmaids’ dresses. The bridal boutique called to let me know my gown was in, so I picked up all the other dresses too. I already notified the girls; they’ll be in shortly.”

“The dresses are already done? Wow! That was super-fast. How is your mother of the bride dress? Did you try it on?”

“Yes, I tried it on. Fits perfectly.”

“Good. I’m glad.” I bite my lip, looking at my mom as she sorts out the garment bags. “Hey, mom?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

My mom pauses and stares at me with wide eyes. She blinks rapidly, her lips puckering like she’s trying to stop herself from crying.

“I’m sorry I’ve been a total bitch since you and dad arrived. I was hurt and I took my anger out on you harder than dad. When everything happened with Jacob, I assumed you would have understood me and been my biggest supporter since you’re my female role model. It hurt when I discovered I was wrong, but I want to move past it and start over.”

My mom pulls me into a hug and holds me. “I want that too. I love you, Jo.”

“I love you, too, mom. Oh, and I owe you the money for the extra bridesmaid gown. Simone’s going to be my maid of honor.”

Mom chokes and pulls me into another big hug. “Oh, I’m glad you girls are close again.”

We’re both waving our tears away as the girls enter the suite. Mom hands out the garment bags—Ebony’s two dresses and the other girls’ one dress. Simone goes in to use my bathroom to change, and Opal disappears across the hall to hers and Gauge’s suite. Ebony whips off her clothes in the center of my room—no shame at all—and opens the first garment bag.

She sighs, fingering the no-no corset dress. “I wish we were wearing these.” She opens the next bag and pulls out the official bridal gown. With a look of disgust, Ebony throws the dress over her head. She’s a real knockout in the gown, whether she likes it or not.

Opal comes running from across the hall. “Ladies, we have a problem.”

Opal stands in my sitting area wearing the no-no corset dress.

Aw, fuck!

Simone comes out of my bathroom. “Not that I don’t look killer in this dress, but I’m surprised you picked something this seductive, and mom was okay with it.” We all look at her, modeling the same no-no dress, with horrified expressions. “What? Is something wrong with it?”

Opal and Ebony look wide-eyed at me, and I look at my mom, who is trying to hold back the flood gates, but the damn is about to burst.

Mom breaks first—giant tears stream down her face and wails escape her throat. Simone runs to her and starts getting teary-eyed, too, having no clue what’s happening. Opal grabs her head, chanting, “Oh, my God,” over and over. Classic Ebony is laughing her ass off at the irony of the whole situation. And I’m trying to bring order back to the group.

How the fuck did this happen?

I honestly could care less if the girls wear the no-no dresses—they’re at least the emerald color I wanted—but I know my mom does. Meaning by default, I care.

There are only three weeks ‘till the wedding. What the hell am I going to do?

I run to my wedding binder and pull out the receipt for the dresses. I compare the numbers to the tags on the dresses and see they were ordered correctly at the time of purchase. Somewhere something got screwed up in their database.

I jolt with realization and start hollering. “CHASE!”

It sounds like a herd of elephants running up the stairs. Chase enters the room first, followed by Punk and Tony.

Tony immediately sees the issue. His eyes swing to Ebony and appraise her in her sexy, yet fully-covered, demure bridesmaid dress. He lets out a gust of air. “Thank God.”

Ebony smirks at Tony and sashays over to the couch where she holds up her own no-no dress. “Guess what I’ll be wearing?”

Tony’s face turns an angry shade of red. “The fuck you are, woman.”

She throws her hands in the air. “We need to match, Tony. It’s not like it’s a choice anymore. I don’t know why I’m arguing with you about this. I’m going to make sure it fits.” Ebony begins to yank her gown over her head.

Tony’s blanches and quickly darts across the room, tackling Ebony onto the couch, and preventing her from removing her clothes.

Ebony slaps at him. “What the hell, Tony? Get off me!”

“And let you strip for the other men? Not a chance. Stay down,” Tony snarls, wrestling Ebony.

Punk is too busy consoling Opal to care about much of anything else. She’s the fragile little bird of the group, and if word gets back to Gauge about his girl being in tears, we’re all in for a tongue lashing.

Punk grabs a tissue from the end table and hands it to her. “Opal, why are you crying?”

She hiccups. “I’m crying because Stella’s crying because now she thinks the most beautiful wedding is going to be ruined, and I’m afraid Jo might start crying and make me cry more. I don’t want anyone to cry—it breaks my heart.”

Punk hugs her and pats her back, giving me a ‘what the fuck do I do about this’ look.

I shake my head. My room has become utter chaos filled with inconsolable people.

And then there's Chase.

His eyes are glued on Simone, kneeling by our mother's side, trying to soothe her. Chase takes slow, deliberate steps toward my sister and pulls her to her feet. She looks a little startled when he cups her face and delicately brushes her tears away with his thumbs. His eyes slide over her body at a leisurely pace. Their chemistry is off the charts. I need to intervene quickly before they start going at it in my suite.

I push my way between my sister and Chase, turning into a full bridezilla. "The hacker is fucking with my wedding. I want the bastard found and flogged."

At the mention of the hacker, Chase snaps out of it and gives me his undivided attention. "What did he do?"

I wave at my sister's dress. "*This*. This is what he did. He fucked with my bridesmaids' dresses." I slap the receipt against his chest. "And here's the proof. My order is correct on this. The order had to have been tampered with after I made the purchase."

"It's *ruined!*" My mom wails dramatically. "The whole fucking wedding is ruined. How am I going to show pictures of my little girl's wedding to anyone when the bridesmaids are wearing *these* skank-tube-tops as dresses?"

Sweet Jesus! My mom must be losing her mind if she's swearing like me.

Ebony manages to push Tony off of her and sits up on the couch. "Stella, calm down. This isn't the end of the world. The dresses are fine."

My mom snaps her head around to Ebony, bearing her teeth. "You! I blame you for this disaster. If you hadn't picked another dress, none of this would have happened."

Ebony looks like she's ready to throw down. "Excuse me?!"

Frustrated, I pull my hair. I can't have everyone getting pissed off at one another and causing more problems—that's what Lorenzo and the hacker wants. "Mom, it's not Ebony's

fault. The MC has been having issues with a hacker working for the mob for a while now.”

My mom’s and Simone’s jaws drop. “The Mob?!”

Lord, take me now—I can’t deal with this.

“It’s under control,” Chase says evenly. “I’m going to dig into this and hopefully find a trail to our hacker, but in the meantime”—Chase takes out his wallet and holds out his credit card—“order yourself some new bridesmaids dresses. There may be enough time to get them if you rush-order again.”

Simone takes his credit card and raises an eyebrow. “Shawn Brighton?”

Chase nods. “My name—my *real* name. Bianchi and this hacker won’t know it’s me, hopefully.”

My mom swipes the card from my sister and shoos her back into the bathroom. “Hurry and change. We don’t have time to fuck around. We need to head back to the boutique and get this shit straightened out.”

What a crap-tastic day all around. After the dress-fiasco was taken care of and the new dresses ordered under Chase’s real identity, we came back to headquarters and crashed.

It’s early evening, and we’ve eaten dinner as a massive family. With the kitchen cleaned, I’m chilling on one of the couches in the living area with Punk. Some DIY show is playing, but it doesn’t hold my interest the way it normally does. Something else has grabbed my attention entirely.

I’m pretending to watch the television, but I’m secretly snooping on Punk texting with Maceo. The operation was a bust of catastrophic proportions, and my man is raging. The trail has run cold on Esteban, and he and Gauge are on their way home. From where they are currently, I know they’ll be arriving back home around midnight.

A deliciously evil plan starts to formulate in my head. I was super pissed when I woke up last Saturday to discover Maceo had peeled off on this cockamamie operation without telling me. My planned punishment for him was to banish him to the couch in our room, but after the shit day I've had, I'm in desperate need of an angry fuck. Knowing Maceo is as enraged as I am, means he'd be giving it to me hard and rough the way I love it.

I fake a yawn and excuse myself, claiming to be going to bed.

Punk smiles at me. "Sleep tight, sis."

I notice he doesn't say he'll be joining me as my night terror officer, meaning he's not planning on entering my suite. This can only mean that Maceo will be home to fill in for the job. I quickly let Hades outside to do his business. He finishes and runs back inside to snuggle back on the couch with Punk. I make my way upstairs. It takes everything in me not to sprint and give myself away.

When I get in my suite, I notice Simone is already asleep in my bed. She's been sharing a bed with me since Maceo's been gone. I guess it's helped. I didn't have night terrors at least.

I shake her. "Simone. Get up."

She frowns in her sleep and rolls over.

"Simone! Wake up!"

She opens her eyes and scowls. "What's your deal?"

"Maceo is coming home." I jump off the bed and open my dresser drawers looking for something kinky to wear.

Maceo has a love for lingerie—obsession, really. He even got a Victoria Secret credit card just to get the perks. I'm not complaining. If he wants to splurge on panties for me, who am I to deny him?

She leans upright on her elbows. "I thought you were going to hold out?"

I dig to the bottom of my underwear drawer and pull out the pheromone oil. “I was, but...”

Simone sits straight up. “Are you sure that’s wise? I’m guessing he’s packing donkey dick, and you may not be able to walk tomorrow.”

I throw my head back and laugh. She’s not far off on the donkey dick comment. “Shut up and help me.”

After buffing and moisturizing, Simone helps me with my hair. She gives me a hug and wishes me luck before going to her room. I apply lip gloss, but no makeup—Maceo likes me most when I’m natural.

Grinning, I slip on my lingerie and dab the pheromone oil on my trigger spots, going a step further and applying a drop to the insides of my pelvis.

As it gets closer to Maceo’s arrival, I set the mood in the room—dim lights, candles lit, covers turned down, and some soulful tunes that Maceo loves to dance to. For such a rough and tumble man, Maceo sure loves softer music.

Giddy, I sit back on the bed and wait for my man.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

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I t's nearly midnight when Gauge and I arrive back at headquarters. I'm beat, sore, and tired from being awake for almost two days straight. And I'm pissed—so over-the-top pissed, I could spew fire.

I had Esteban—fucking had him. For one blissful moment, he was dead until he wasn't anymore.

Fucking doppelgängers.

Gauge and I were fast to get back on Esteban's trail, but it went cold. Like a rat, Esteban knows when it's time to go underground and hide in the shadows. He won't be resurfacing anytime soon.

I've barely crossed the threshold when Hades launches into my arms and lathers me with sloppy kisses. "Hey, big boy. I missed you too." He whines for more love 'till I squeeze him in a big hug.

Some of my men are still awake and shooting the shit in the billiards room. Still, it's relatively quiet for a Saturday evening. I assume some of our brothers went out to Mickey's, one of our local bars, for a casual hookup. The bunnies have been holding out lately, forcing the guys to find willing partners elsewhere.

Not that Opal was on the market to the rest of the guys, but she and Gauge are official now. Tony's unrequited love for Ebony has made the men give her a wide berth, much to Ebony's displeasure. Tony is a big fucker, and nobody wants to be on his bad side. Red, the quiet and leggy red-head, only goes for the burliest of my men, leaving a lot of my brothers

out of the action. And Candy has been strangely absent from her usual scene.

I don't dwell on it for long when I notice Punk sitting alone in the main living area by himself, nursing a stiff drink. I crash on the opposite end of the couch he's on.

Punk turns to me. "You want to talk about the operation some more?"

"Fuck no," I mutter. "You know everything from the text messages. No reason to repeat it."

Gauge steamrolls past us, taking the stairs two at a time. "None of you assholes better bother me for the next twenty-four hours. I'm going to be too busy giving *all* my attention to my girl."

Punk groans and lays his head back against the couch. "I need to get laid."

I swipe his drink from him and throw it back, savoring the slow burn. "Go out and find a sweet little thing. I'm home now—you're off the hook."

My brother rubs at his eyes. "After today, I'm too tired to go out and put the energy into convincing anyone to take me home. Ebony used to be my go-to bunny, and now she's off-limits. I'm not bulky enough for Red. And Candy...full stop. No, it's Jill and me tonight."

I raise an eyebrow. "Jill?"

Punk raises his left palm to me, outlining the letters of *Jill* on his fingers. I shake with chuckles.

With a sigh, Punk settles deeper into the couch. "Everyone in our group is partnering up. You, lucky fucker, have Jo. Gauge has his precious Opal. And Chase is going to have his hands on Simone soon enough. Kind of hate how the dynamic is changing, but I'm happy for all of you."

I feel a little sad for him. Punk had a woman once who he was willing to move heaven and earth for, but she did him wrong in the worst way—with his brother. The family sided

with his younger brother, and Punk settled for a new family—*our* family.

“You ever consider finding someone else?”

Punk snorts loudly. “Why the fuck would I do that? Look, what you and Jo have is special and rare—hold on tight to her, because they don’t make them like her very often. I tried my luck at a forever kind of love, and it wasn’t meant for me. Not all of us are destined to wind up with someone.”

He curses and adjusts himself through his pants. “Fucking wood.”

I side-eye him. “Why are you tenting your jeans?”

Punk looks to the ceiling and shakes his head before looking me straight on. “If I tell you what’s all happened since we last spoke on the phone, you need to promise me not to flip the room. Jo will kill you if you trash the place.”

Great. I rub a hand over my face and nod, prepared for the worst.

Punk tells me the events of the day.

A mixture of emotions is running through me. One, I’m dying to get a look at the picture of Punk prepped out in the GAP. Two, I’m angry Josephine inadvertently slipped away from the guys in the mall. Three, I’m intrigued about this pheromone oil. Four, I’m both pissed off at my brothers and feel sorry they were under Jo’s spell. Five, I’m livid with Bianchi forcing himself on my woman, but fucking proud of her for beating his sorry ass. Six, I feel let down by Quire and the police for not issuing a restraining order. And seven, when I get my hands on this fucking hacker...

I hang my head in my hands, unable to process all of this at once. “I’m not sure if I should laugh, cry, or kill Bianchi.”

Punk nods, understanding. “Imagine trying to process it in real-time with your woman smelling like a fucking fantasy. Dude, I’m sorry about whatever I said or acted like around her—it wasn’t me. I’m mortified—she must think I’m a creep.”

“Josephine would never believe you’re a creep, and trust me, the girl knows creeps. As for your actions, I’d say you’ve suffered enough for it,” I say, eyeing his crotch. “But you better not jack off to daydreams of my woman, so help me God, I will not be cool with it.”

Punk sniggers and raises his right hand. “I swear I won’t rub it out to mental images of my sister, you perverted bastard.”

We both start laughing, the day’s events making us slap-happy.

I smile, pondering how potent my woman’s aroma must have been to do the damage she caused. I’m a damn connoisseur of all my woman’s natural scents, knowing how delicious she can be. I can only imagine what the pheromone oil did to magnify her potency. She must have been enthralling.

“Man, your thoughts are loud.” Punk reaches into his cut and produces an eyedropper bottle with an Italian label. He slides it down the coffee table toward me. “Here it is—the ultimate weapon of women and the demise of all mankind.”

I pick up the tiny bottle and open it to smell the contents.

“It doesn’t smell like anything until you apply it, I guess. Jo bought a shit ton, but don’t worry, I confiscated it. It’s locked up in the safe back by the offices. We cannot afford to have any of the women living here getting their hands on this stuff. They would bring this whole crew to our knees.”

“What do you think it really is?”

Punk scratches his head. “I think it’s pheromone oil laced with uncut Poppers.”

That would make sense. Poppers are an *intense* liquid drug that gives an instant high and causes extreme euphoric effects. They’ve been used as sexual enhancers for years. Add the pheromone oil, and you have yourself a new form of Ecstasy.

Curious, I take the eyedropper and place a dab on my finger before applying it to my neck. I lean over to Punk. “What do I smell like, bro?”

“Get the fuck out of here, Prez. I ain’t gonna sniff your damn neck.”

“What? You afraid you’re going to find me attractive all of a sudden? News alert—you already know I am. Stop being a turd and smell me.”

Punk glares at me but leans in to take a whiff. He sits back and looks at me quizzically, his eyes slightly glassy. “You smell like nature—like a pine forest in winter or damp hiking trail covered in leaves.”

“Really? That’s awfully specific. Josephine always tells me I smell woody.” I dab a drop on my wrist and sniff for myself.

Punk snaps his fingers. “That’s it—woody. Give me some of that shit, I want to try it.”

The two of us take turns sniffing each other and applying pheromone oil to different parts of our bodies to see if it becomes more potent or changes the scent.

I smell Punk way more times than I care to admit. The more I inhale, no more I swear I’m getting high on the shit. “You still smell like laundry soap and sawdust.”

Punk’s face tightens with confusion. “Is that a scent women like?”

“The fuck if I know. Maybe it doesn’t work on men the way it works on women.” I place the cap on the bottle, stand, and stretch. “Here. Put it with the rest. I’m going to bed to snuggle my woman, well, if she doesn’t kick me out.”

Punk stands too, tossing the bottle in the air and catching it. “I’m going out and doing a trial run on this shit. See if it attracts the ladies. Don’t wait up for me.”

“Not tired anymore?”

“Too curious to sleep now.” He gives me a salute and heads out of the house.

I drag my ass upstairs, my head feeling foggy. Hades pads next to me, looking at me like he’s saying, ‘you’re in a shitload of trouble.’ I pray Jo won’t put me in the dog house. I

open our door and Hades gallops toward his bed. I brave myself, stepping over the threshold.

This is not what I expected to come home to.

I'm greeted with dim candlelight ambiance, Bill Withers' *Ain't No Sunshine*, and my sexy little kitten sprawled out in the latest negligee I bought her.

Smiling like I won the fucking lottery, I close the door behind me, and I'm hit with the most intoxicating, delicious scent ever.

It's like I'm lying face down in a lemon orchard with the love of my life sprawled underneath me and her sweet arousal taking up residence in my mouth.

My blood spikes. It feels like electricity is coursing through my nervous system, shocking me in the most pleasurable way imaginable. Her delectable scent wraps around my nose and tongue 'till all I smell is her sex. My mouth is salivating.

Christ, it's like she's somehow made the atmosphere heavy and thick, robbing me of air and sanity. I'm on cloud nine.

All I see is her—costal-blue eyes framed by dark, long lashes, pouty lips begging to be kissed, her petite body calling for mine to wrap around hers.

My cock is instantly erect, pointing at Josephine like a dowsing rod, showing me where I need to go.

My mind is racing with a possessive need for domination.

Claim her, love her, fuck her. Now. Take her now. Remind her she's yours. Fill her up and do it again when she screams for more.

My bag falls from my hands, and I'm hurdling the wingbacks to get to Josephine. Her gemlike eyes dilate to black pupils the closer I come.

“Maceo,” Josephine moans, arching off the bed, like she's already experiencing an intense orgasm.

Fuck, but those sounds she makes always do me in. My dick is already slick with precome, soaking through my boxer briefs.

In a nanosecond, I'm on top of her in our bed. Our mouths clash—lips, teeth, tongues all seeking the same equal footing. Fuck, but she tastes amazing. She always tastes good, but tonight the mint of her mouth coating around the sin of her tongue, is pure heaven. She moans and I sweep my tongue in to claim her mouth as my home.

My home. My woman. My everything. Mine.

Dizzy and lightheaded, I break the kiss for air, but not to rest. My hands have been roaming all over her toned body while we were kissing, rolling and pinching her perky nipples, and cupping her nice, full ass. But now my hands seek more flesh and less clothing. As much as I love the lingerie, it needs to go—*now*.

Taking the front of her negligee with both hands, I yank my hands apart, tearing and shredding delicate lace and satin like it's paper. Her small yet full breasts spill out, making my mouth water. I lean forward and suck one dusty-rose nipple into my mouth, sucking and nipping at the tender flesh. Josephine whimpers and withers beneath me, spurring me on. I give her other nipple equal amounts of attention. My tongue and mouth travel back and forth between her breasts, sucking noisily.

Josephine fights with my shirt, desperate to get her slender hands on me. I break contact for a second to whip my shirt off before I'm back on top of her. My kitten's greedy hands travel all over my chest, nails scraping over cut muscle. I groan. I love it when she claws me up, marking her territory—I wear her scratches proudly. She tugs on my nipples, making a growl building in the back of my throat rumble through my chest.

My woman looks at me, her eyes holding mine for a beat. Josephine stretches and kisses her lips tattooed on my chest. *Fuck*, it may as well be her lips on my soul because that's how deep this feeling goes. She owns me, heart and soul.

Needing more, my baser instincts kick in and I rub myself against her hot center.

“*Oooh*, Maceo! I need you,” Josephine purrs, her pussy grinding hard against me.

My hard-as-steel cock is screaming at me to free it and bury itself in Josephine’s tight, silky heat, but my mouth is practically drooling to get a taste of her pussy.

I’m a visual man—seeing my woman with her legs pushed up, and V’d out, displaying her bare, wet sex to me is one of the best visuals imaginable. Tasting her on my tongue does something inside of me—makes my cock thicker, longer, and my orgasms more intense.

Needing to taste her, my fingers slip into the front of her lacy thong. I pull, snapping the delicate material from her succulent mound. Josephine moans with anticipation, lifting her hips, chasing my fingers. I hiss as my fingers slip through her dampening folds, excited to find her sopping wet.

“You’re dripping for me, baby. You want me?”

“I *need* you,” Josephine says with a guttural voice.

Happy to oblige, I sink two fingers inside her velvet clutch. Soft and warm, her pussy grips my fingers, milking them. I groan. “God, your snatch is magical.”

I finger fuck her, strumming and tweaking her clit with my thumb, for what seems like seconds before Josephine’s lithe legs begin to shake, and she grinds down hard on my hand.

“*Maceo!*” Josephine’s pussy pulses around my fingers and pulls them in deeper.

“You’re so sexy when you come,” I say huskily, pulling my fingers from her and bringing them to my mouth. I suck clean the cream coating my fingers, enjoying the sugary taste of her.

But there’s something different—an underlining citrus tang, similar to her skin, which I have never tasted in her juices before. I’m not sure why the taste difference, but I *love* it. I’m feasting on a dessert, and I want more.

Slipping down her body, I throw her legs over my shoulders and dive in to devour her sex like it's a lemon meringue pie. Her feminine scent is always stronger when I go down on her, but tonight it's tenfold, heady. I can't seem to help myself from scraping my face all over her mound. I take turns between flicking her clit with my tongue barbell and forking it to fuck her pussy.

Josephine mewls, her fingers lace in my hair, fighting to push me away and pull me closer all at the same time. A gurgled cry escapes her lungs as her body tenses and bows, shattering around my tongue. I gulp and swallow her womanly juices, needing her essences to fuel me.

Half-crazed, I raise my eyes to my Pixie, lust thickening the air around my head. She lays flat and panting on the bed, eyes closed, trying to recover.

Oh, but I won't let her rest for the next round. My cock is straining against the zipper of my jeans, dripping with the need to be inside my woman.

Claim her. Sink inside her to the hilt. Plow her into the bed.

I quickly unfasten my jeans, not bothering to free myself clear of the garments, only pushing them down enough for my cock to spring free.

Josephine sits up and comes forward on her hands and knees to lick a stripe from the base to the tip of my dick. I suck air as her tongue swirls around the tip of my cock, lapping at the snail trail of precome leaking out of me.

Her mouth is every man's dream come true, and I nearly nut in her mouth when she swallows me to the back of her throat. She pulls back once, twice, with her tongue running along my frenum piercing, and I have to grab both sides of her face to stop her. I don't want to come in her mouth—I want to be buried deep inside of her and fill her.

I pull myself from her mouth with a wet pop and tackle her on the bed, hooking one of her legs over my hip. My free hand cradles her neck to hold her in place. I demand her attention,

waiting for her bright blues to land on mine. Her eyes meet mine, sparkling and eager, and I buck forward into her heavenly sheath. We both gasp at my ferocity.

This will not be a gentle romp in the sack or a quick fuck. This is going to be a long, hard, and rough rutting. Like two unbridled animals mating, we will join, and nothing will stop our desire.

I'm not an idiot. It's apparent she's applied the pheromone oil like I have. I'm confident my woman was all for an angry fuck tonight after the stunt I pulled, and she figured I'd be unable to say no if she was wearing the oil.

Little does she know that I will *never* refuse an offer to have sex with her—*ever*. Sex with Josephine always brings out my primordial side, but this is more—it has to be the oil. There's no other explanation for our animalistic instincts.

Or maybe there is.

My woman does smell stronger, but it's different, more potent. Her cream and sugar taste hinted with tangy citrus was exceptional. Could it be because she's... *Holy hell!*

My heart races with what this means. It's the start of everything for us.

It explains why I didn't want to shoot my load in her mouth and be balls deep for the deed instead. My subconscious already recognized what was happening with my need to ravage her before my mind could comprehend.

Mate her. Breed her. Fill her up with your seed.

Setting a grueling pace, I release her neck and grab hold of the headboard, pummeling deep into her lusciously tight heat. Harder and harder, I thrust into her, tilting my hips in order to hit her G-spot.

When I hear Josephine groaning, I know I'm tapping her good. I want to roar like a damn lion, pride filling my chest for making her feel amazing.

My mind races with how to conduct this perfectly. It's imperative that we climax together for optimal success.

Josephine's blue eyes are dark and hooded, her mouth set in a perfect little O. Pants and moans pour freely from her as her pleasure races to the summit, and I'm chasing right after her.

Higher and higher we climb, skin slick with sweat and slapping against each other with increased tempo. My knuckles are turning white from my death grip on the headboard, and I can feel the cords in my neck popping to the surface. There's only so much more I can take before I burst.

My woman loses control when I talk filthy. The filthier I make it, the sooner she shoots off—time to turn on the saucy poetics.

Licking my lips, I lean forward to capture her lips in a scorching kiss. Moving on, I pepper her face with kisses before curling my head into the crook of her neck, sucking and nipping at the citrus taste of her skin.

My lips travel to her ear. "I want to feel your juices coat my balls while you milk me dry with your tight little pussy. I want your magical cunt to pull the pleasure right out of me and into you. Come for me, baby." I bite down gently on her neck and it does the trick.

Josephine gasps. Her body quivers and convulses around my inflated, hard cock. I have to fight against her tightness to pump deeper into her. I curse, shaking to hold myself up as her pussy clamps around me like a vise. I'm on the brink of a blackout when her snatch pulls me in, hitting the back of her cervix.

Suddenly, I'm lost, flying over the cliff in the arms of my woman, my hopes, my future. Ropes of my come shoot straight to her womb, already open and waiting for my seed to establish residency.

Exhausted, I collapse on top of my Pixie, but I don't dare pull out of her. I seat myself snug against the back of her sex. There's no way I'm pulling the plug on this operation.

After a few minutes, Josephine wiggles and strains underneath me, letting me know she's uncomfortable. I roll us

to our sides, but I'm not allowing myself to slip out.

This close to her, breathing her scent in and knowing what I know, I find myself hard again in mere minutes.

Ready to pump her full with more of my seed, I roll 'till I'm on top of her. I go to move my legs and I'm trapped, my jeans and underwear tangled around my ankles, unable to break free with my boots still on.

"Fuck!" I try to pull away to remove my remaining clothes, but Josephine locks her ankles behind my ass, preventing me from going anywhere. Her legs are fucking strong and can hold on for dear life.

Oh, I am totally taking advantage of this.

"You ready for more, Pixie?"

Josephine bobs her head. "Yes, please. I need you again."

She's begging, and I can never refuse her needs. My rock-hard cock is more than happy to oblige.

I roll us to the edge of the bed 'till she is straddling my lap. My palms slide under her firm ass, supporting her weight as I stand from the bed. I don't take us far, just to the wall the bed rests against. Pressing her toned body against the cold, smooth surface, Josephine gasps and arcs her back up, thrusting her teardrop breasts into my face.

"I love your tits." I bury my face between her cleavage and piston my pussy-greedy dick further inside of her.

Wanting to see how my Pixie responds, I lift my face to her and watch as her eyes roll into the back of her head.

"Baby, look at me," I command. I need her full attention.

Josephine opens her eyes, dark blue with desire.

I lean into her, giving her no choice but to look directly at me. "You're mine, Pixie. I love you so fucking much."

Josephine gifts me with a dazzling smile. "I love you, too. Now fuck me, *Atlas*."

Whoa! Hearing her call me by my club name usually annoys me because I like it when she calls me by my birth name. It's only for her. But hearing her say Atlas right now, it's smoking hot.

We're Atlas and Pixie—ride or die.

“Oh, I'll fuck you all right. You won't be able to walk straight tomorrow,” I promise, driving myself deeper.

Several minutes of manic ramming and grunting sends us both teetering closer to the edge. Josephine's nails drag up my back into my hair, yanking slightly against my scalp. *Hot damn*, I love it when she gets rough. I groan, my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

“M—Maceo. I'm close,” she whimpers.

Thank God, because I can't hold on much longer. “Let go, baby. I got you.”

My permission is all she needs to trigger her release. And like before, her release gives birth to my own. I pump her full, and she sucks it deep, making my heart skip a beat.

This is really happening and it's all because this beautiful, wild woman loves me and I love her.

I brush her hair from her damp face and kiss her with no intention of ever stopping.

I just pumped a couple babies in my woman's womb. I know it—I feel it deep in my bones, deep in my marrow, deep in my soul.

Josephine is carrying my children. Mine!

I look down at my Pixie sprawled across my chest, drooling slightly, and I smile. I certainly fucked her into a coma.

We went at each other until sunrise before crashing. I've been lying here wide awake since, running my hand along her

spine. The only noise is Hades snoring in the corner, dead to the world.

A part of me wants to scream from the rooftop that I'm going to be a father, but for my own safety, I'm keeping my mouth shut.

Josephine was pretty insistent on waiting until after we got married, suggesting we wait 'till we're moved into our new home. That was never my game plan, but even I wasn't anticipating getting her knocked up this soon. I mean, I wanted to, but I didn't dare mention it.

There's no way to undo what happened between us last night, and there's no reason to mention it to Josephine and make her sick with worry about getting everything done in time before our twins' arrivals.

Twins. We're going to have twins.

Will we have all boys, or girls, or one of each? Will they be tall like me? Will they have their mother's beautiful eyes? I honestly don't care. As long as they're healthy, I'll be happy.

I breathe in deep, inhaling my woman's pheromone, still clinging to her. It's dimed some from wear and tear, but it's still potent. I'm definitely going to make her shower before I let her out of the suite.

It's bad enough knowing all my brothers were lusting after her yesterday—I won't be able to tolerate seeing it in action. There's only one man who disrespected her yesterday, and I will be taking care of him.

Who the fuck does he think he is? Forcing himself on my woman!

I'll kill Bianchi, I know it. It's only a matter of time before he's a dead man. I may need to go over Detective Quire's head and handle business the way the 1% MCs do. It's a last resort, but it's an option.

My eyes trace over Josephine's elfin face, serene in her sleep, and my heart starts to skip. She's perfect in every way. How in the world did I get so lucky to have a woman like her?

I'm about ready to roll Josephine on her back, wake her with kisses, and sink into her again, but my cell buzzes somewhere in the room.

Carefully, I untangle myself from my sleeping beauty and go in search of my phone. I find it on the floor by a heap of my clothes and Josephine's torn negligee. I see it's Punk calling.

"Morning, Punk," I hum quietly, unable to reign in my giddiness.

"Atlas! Oh, thank fuck, you answered. I need you to come and pick me up, quickly."

I'm instantly panicking. "What's wrong? Are you okay? Has something happened?"

"It's complicated. Pick me up...and bring clothes."

"Bring clothes?"

"No time for questions, Prez. This is serious." Punk rambles off his location. "Use the app to track me in case I have to flee quickly." He hangs up and I'm left stunned.

I race into the bathroom to take a leak before I throw on my discarded clothes. I walk next door to Punk's room. Luckily, his suite is unlocked. I go to his dresser and pull out jeans and a shirt—*these look nice and new, when did he go shopping for himself?*—unsure what all is needed.

Hell, I'm hoping he means his clothes and not clothes for someone else, like a woman.

Ten minutes later, I'm pulling up in my SUV to the location he gave me. Cutting the engine, I take in my surroundings. I'm at the far end of a subdivision with a row of backyard fences facing me. I don't see him or anyone around. I pull out my phone, tracking his location. His phone confirms he's in the back of the property, but there's no sign of him. I decide to call him.

I hear the jingle of Punk's ringtone before I see him—launching over one of the backyard fences.

He's sprinting full throttle in my direction in his biker boots, leather cut, and nothing else. He's bare-ass naked, with

his dangly bits bouncing all over, racing away from the house where a scantily-clad woman has come out on her deck. She sees Punk and starts to chase after him, growling like a wild animal.

“Start the truck! Start the *fucking* truck,” Punk yells.

Holy shit! I turn the SUV over and throw it into drive. As soon as Punk has the door open, hurling himself inside, I’m hitting the gas.

In the review mirror, the woman in pursuit screams at the top of her lungs and drops to her knees.

I’ve seen a lot of things in my thirty years, but this is something else. “What the hell is going on?”

Punk is in the passenger seat, sweating and panting. “I swear she was trying to kill me.”

“*Excuse me?*” I’m ready to turn around and make a citizen arrest.

Punk shakes his head, trying to catch his breath.

I’m a bit freaked out. The woman didn’t look entirely stable. “Who the fuck was that?”

Punk gulps. “That was Mora.”

“Mora who?”

“You know, Mora. Mora sex, Punk. Mora oral, Punk. Give it to me, Mora. And I didn’t mean kill in the literal sense, but fuck me to the point she breaks me. I tried to leave forever ago, and she went full *Fatal Attraction*.

“Took my clothes and hid them—thankfully, I had taken my boots and cut off at the front door last night. My keys and phone were with them. She locked us in her bedroom, talking all wild about us and hearts and flowers. I was afraid I was going to have to restrain her in order to escape. I talked her down and retreated to the bathroom to call you. Fuck, I can’t believe I shagged her last night. The sex was great, amazing even, but she would not let up.”

I bust a gut and throw his clothes at him. “Fuck, bro. You said you wanted to do a trial run, and now you got your answer—the liquid crack works on men too.”

Punk looks over at me, wide-eyed, tugging on his pants. “Are you serious?”

I laugh some more. “Let just say the night I had was similar to yours. My little kitten swiped one of those bottles without you realizing it. I never went to bed. Your call interrupted me dipping into double digits.”

Punk blinks, gobsmacked. “Double digits? For real? Damn, that shit is potent—and dangerous. Last time I experiment with an unknown substance.”

“It was the best night of my life. She was insatiable. She would have let me take her ass if I wasn’t focused on filling her womb with my offspring.”

Punk pauses mid dress, his head and arms stuck in his shirt. He quickly yanks everything in place. “Atlas, tell me you didn’t?”

I smile like the cat who ate the canary.

Punk shakes his head. “You’re fucked when she finds out you didn’t use a rubber.”

“So we’re going to have the kids a little earlier than planned, big deal.”

“Atlas, you ass, this is a big deal—to her. She had all these plans for you two. Wedding and honeymoon with drinking and being reckless. Finishing your family’s home to welcome your newborns. Getting her parents settled. Helping her sister adjust to the new job.”

A flare of annoyance runs through me. Punk is putting a damper on my good mood.

“You’ve got to come clean and tell her you went bare.”

Groaning, I lean my head back against my seat. I know he’s right—I just don’t want her freaking out about one more thing. Stress isn’t good for a pregnant woman. “Fine, I’ll tell her.”

Satisfied, Punk nods. “Swing by Mickey’s Pub. I left my bike there last night.”

I pull a U-turn and head downtown.

Arriving at Mickey’s next to Punk’s hog, I flash him an evil grin. “What favors will you owe me for keeping my mouth shut about your naked run this morning?”

Punk throws me a glare. “Taking your woman’s shit the past week has more than earned me your discretion.”

I chuckle. “Fair enough. Your race of shame is safe with me.”

Punk mutters under his breath, but I hear him say, “Somehow, I doubt it.” He’s right—I’m totally going to be sharing this juicy gossip with Josephine.

After dropping Punk off, I swing by the café and grab coffee and scones for my woman—to lessen the blow I’m about to deliver. I run next door to the florist while I’m at it, buying the largest bouquet of flowers they have. It can’t hurt, right?

I’m back home ten minutes later, coaxing my woman awake with kisses. She groans and rolls toward me. I smile at her grouchy face. “Morning, beautiful. I come bearing gifts.” I lift the coffee and scones for her to see.

Josephine smiles and slowly sits up. “Well, this is unexpected and totally sweet. Why did you do this?”

I pull the flowers from behind my back and present them to her. Her mouth falls open in shock before she pulls herself together and beams at me.

“I wanted to spoil my woman after gifting me with the best night ever.”

She giggles, taking the flowers from me, and leaning in to give me a kiss on my lips. “It was the best night, wasn’t it? I should be showering you with presents too.”

Oh, but you did, Pixie. You gifted me with the greatest gift of all—fatherhood.

I rub the back of my neck. “I have a confession to make, but I don’t want you to be upset.”

Josephine’s smile instantly falls. “I swear if you’re leaving to go after Esteban again, I’m going to knock you out and tie you to the bed.”

A laugh rumbles in my chest. Considering she took out both Lorenzo and Luca yesterday, I wouldn’t put it past her. “I admit I was a dick for running off on assignment when you were asleep, but baby, you know you would have stopped me from going. I’m not strong enough to say no to you. I’m sorry if I upset you. Please, stop taking your anger out on Punk—he was only covering for me.”

My woman sighs. “I don’t want you leaving me to go chase after that monster. I worry enough about the assignments you do, and those people don’t know you. Here’s a man who knows you and knows you’re gunning for him. It would crush me if something happened to you because of him.”

I don’t want to discuss Esteban right now—he has no right to be in this moment of ours. “I understand, baby. I know you don’t like it, but you know if he’s around, I will go after him.”

“Yeah, I know, and I know why you have to.” Josephine sighs heavily. “Is that what you wanted to confess?”

Alright, here goes nothing.

I straighten my shoulders and hold eye contact with Josephine. “Pixie, last night was wonderful, but I have to tell you that we weren’t...*careful*.” I brace myself, waiting for hellfire to rain down on me.

Josephine’s face flashes with annoyance right before she flicks me between the eyes.

“Ow! What the hell, Pixie?!”

“Are you seriously trying to mansplain this shit to me? Maceo, I love you, but you’re an idiot sometimes.” She throws back the covers, revealing her nakedness—my mouth waters,

hungry for more of what we did earlier this morning. “Like the mess you made of me and the bed wasn’t evidence enough? Babe, I’m well aware and I don’t care.”

My eyes bulge. “Really? You’re not upset?” *Hallelujah!*

Josephine shakes her head, sitting on her knees, and throws her arms around my neck. “No, not at all. I mean, yeah, it would be nice to hold off until we’re in the new house, but I don’t regret last night. And come on, it’s not like I was ovulating. It’s way too soon.”

My jaw ticks. She’s making this way too easy for me to get out of trouble. I battle with myself about letting this go or pointing out the obvious.

Fuck me! Punk said to be upfront. I know he’s right.

My hands run up her warm, slender sides, making me groan when my fingers touch her soft skin. “Baby, Doctor Stoll said we could get pregnant right away.”

Josephine shrugs, undeterred. “He also said most healthy couples take anywhere from four to six months to get pregnant.”

But we’re not like most, love. We’re the exception and it already happened.

I’ve said everything I needed to say. I admitted to not using a rubber, and I said we could be pregnant—she’s not going to believe me if I tell her I know she was ovulating based on scent alone. I wipe my hands, free and clear.

Speaking of scent... “Where is it? Where’s the pheromone oil you hid from Punk?”

Josephine gives me a side-eye. “Yeah, I’m not telling you. It’s mine and I’m keeping it. If you want your own, go to *Giuseppina’s* and ask for the pheromone oil with the little something extra. Sounded like Lorenzo had a shipment delivered there yesterday.”

Interesting. Is Bianchi so cocky he would actually use a store in a mall as a front to sell his drugs? This is Lorenzo—of course, he’s that arrogant. I file that tidbit away.

“There’s no reason to have it. I don’t need it to go all barbarian. I do a fine job of it all on my own.”

Josephine smiles. “Don’t presume I didn’t notice the difference in your scent when you entered the room? *Please*. This is another fine example of the great Maceo saying, ‘do as I say, not as I do.’”

It always makes me chuckle when she calls me out on my shit. She’s the only one who has the courage to put me in my place. “Can we promise each other to never leave the room with it on?”

Josephine taps the tip on my nose with her finger. “Deal, lover boy.”

Loving how mussed my woman’s hair is and knowing she’s naked in my arms, I strip in record time.

She giggles. “What about our breakfast?”

I climb on the bed and claim her mouth, warm and sweet as always. “It will still be here when we finish. I’ll warm it up for you if you need it.” Wasting no time, I lean in and suck one of her nipples into my mouth.

Josephine moans. “You’re such a horn ball.”

I release her nipple with a wet smack and bring my face to hers. “You love it.”

She nods with a big smile, taking my face in her tiny hands. “I do.”

Her confession turns my hard cock to granite. I slide it home inside of her where I belong.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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“Can you believe it’s two weeks ‘till the wedding?”

I turn to look at Josephine, my eyes roaming over her fit body, watching her dress for the last workday of the week. I’m one lucky *sonofabitch*. This woman has agreed to a lifetime of being my wife.

It’s been nearly a week since I came back from my mission, and it’s been nothing but busy. Josephine has been cracking the whip on Lloyd’s build, and they should be able to finish by next week if all goes smoothly. With Lloyd’s project complete, Josephine will be able to have both her teams tackle our house and her parents’ cottage.

Simone started doing our books for mine and Jo’s companies. She’s awesome at what she does, suggesting ways in which we can save in taxes for both of us. Chase has been on cloud nine having Simone around him, walking her through everything he has done for the books.

The two of them are in this weird dance where Chase draws her in, and she escapes at the last possible second. Chase is *loving* it. He’s all about the conquest, the *chase*—no pun intended—but I don’t doubt for a second, he’ll have her heart soon enough and for good.

I’ve visited Tom twice since he’s been released from the hospital. He’s recouping nicely, but he can’t recall anything useful from the shooting. Being shot from behind made it impossible for him to see his attacker. Chase and I mentioned the job offer to join our intel team once he graduates, and boy, was he excited. It’s safe to say we snagged him.

Josephine's parents continue to help where they can. Jim is still supervising the team on our house while Stella has found her calling being the lunch lady of headquarters—my men love her and her bag lunches-to-go.

Josephine met with Brandon, her student counselor, for the second time this week, making me feel relieved that she's taking her mental health seriously. I don't like the fact he's a dude, but to his credit, he seems very professional.

Things are falling in line quickly for the wedding. The invite responses have been returned, all expenses paid, final touches completed, and the guys' suits are finished. Stella is eagerly hoping the bridesmaids' dresses will be ready in time for the wedding, but Josephine is fine with the no-no dresses as a back-up.

The best part of this week has been the surveillance our team has been doing at the mall watching Lorenzo's store. We've been secretly recording video footage of daily deliveries of the new poppers-laced pheromone party drug he's pushing in the community.

Using the store in the mall to make it look like he's selling perfume is pretty ingenious. Everyone from teenagers to older adults are going in and out of that store, dropping major cash for little bottles of this illegal substance.

When I reached out to the governor, a strait-laced leader, about a possible drug bust on the Bianchi mob, he offered to double our company's pay if we could make our case iron-clad for the FBI to prosecute the entire Denver criminal enterprise. As it sits right now, it's in the bag.

If I can't kill Bianchi, then I'll settle on him behind maximum security bars where he can't hurt Josephine or our family.

"Ground control to Captain Tabares," Josephine teases, waving a hand in my face. "Did you hear me at all?"

Snapping out of my haze, I smile wolfishly. "Sorry, Pixie. I was thinking about how you're going to be stuck with me for the rest of your life...*Missus Tabares*."

Josephine flashes me a megawatt smile. “Don’t I know it. No other place I’d rather be.”

Feeling frisky, I grab her by her narrow hips and pull her flush against me, my hard-on pressing into her stomach. “Let’s play hooky.”

Josephine gives me a look saying, ‘not happening.’ “Maceo, if you want me to get moving on our own house, best not tempt me from Lloyd’s build.”

Frustrated and horny, I pout. “You don’t fight fair. You know I want you working on our house, but I want a day to throw you around on the bed.”

Josephine tries to untangle herself, but I hold tight. “The sooner our house is done, the sooner you can put a baby in me.”

“Babies,” I counter firmly. I don’t add that she’s already carrying our children, and if I’m not mistaken, she is *glowing* already. She’s going to be a knockout bride all knocked up by *moi*.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re incorrigible.”

“What I am is *right*,” I say. “I don’t know why you’re against twins.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

I shrug and shake my head—I truly don’t understand her hang-up. “Explain it to me.”

“Let me put it in some measurable terms for you. You’re six-five. I’m five-two. I weighed less than six pounds when I was born. I saw your baby book when we moved in here—you were damn near ten pounds. Now imagine little ol’ me carrying around two of you in my hundred-five pound body for forty weeks.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop from smiling. All I can imagine is how impossibly sexy and gorgeous she’ll be, round with my children. I get the fear about carrying two of me inside of her, but if she’s worried about carrying them, then I’ll carry her around the entire duration of the pregnancy to

make her feel better. With her filled out, there will be more of her for me to love and worship.

Josephine glowers. “Why are you getting harder? You cannot be turned on by the visual I described.”

I kiss her forehead. “Baby, I will do everything you need and want to make this pregnancy as smooth as possible, I promise.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for when we do get pregnant,” she says, slipping out of my arms to finish dressing for the day.

I’m about to make some off the cuff comment about her already being pregnant, but there’s a soft knock on our suite door. I take quick stock of my woman to make sure she’s decent.

“It’s open,” I say a little too gruffly, hating the interruption.

Candy pokes her head through the door. I’m instantly on edge, raising an eyebrow. Candy anywhere near me is trouble. *She’s been scarce. What the fuck is she up to?* If she’s entering our room, it isn’t good.

“Yes?” I clip.

Candy cringes at my brusque demeanor. Josephine backhands me in the chest. “Stop being a jerk, Maceo. Hey, Candy, what’s up?”

Confused, I look at my woman. Was she replaced by an imposter? After Candy started rumors about Josephine getting friendly with my brothers while I was away, I assumed we were on the same page.

Candy steps slowly into the room, looking uncomfortable and stiff. It’s the first I notice she’s not dressed in skimpy clothing—she’s wearing skinny jeans and a fitted tee. Maybe Candy was replaced with an imposter as well.

“I was wondering if I could have a word with Atlas,” she says in a small voice.

I roll my eyes, knowing she’s up to her old tricks. But Josephine catches me by surprise. “No problem. I need to head out to the build anyways,” Josephine says nonchalantly.

Excuse me?! She cannot mean to leave me alone in our suite with this—for lack of a better word—bitch? The hell with that!

I'm about to protest when Candy beats me to the punch. "No, Jo, please stay."

Josephine looks wide-eyed at her and back at me. I'm beyond curious as to what's up Candy's sleeve. All hunches point to something not good.

Josephine waves at the couch. "Um, sure. Have a seat."

Candy sits and Josephine sits next to her. I choose to stand because I don't want to get comfortable around this woman. For all I know, she's about to ask Josephine and me for a threesome, and I'll need to be ready to throw her out.

With an audible swallow, Candy looks at me. Whatever she sees in my face has her sinking deep into the couch, scooting closer to my woman 'till she's practically in Josephine's lap.

Josephine wraps an arm around her tenderly. "Candy, you're shaking. Is everything okay?"

Candy shakes her head slowly, keeping her eyes downcast. "No."

Josephine shoots me an alarmed look before turning her attention back to the bubble-gum-haired wench. "Hey, it's okay. This is a safe space. Maceo won't get nasty, I promise."

Candy's shoulder bounce. *Is she crying?* "I did something which put the club at risk," she blurts.

At the mention of putting my crew and family in danger, I nearly snap. Josephine stops me by throwing her palm up. I have to give my woman credit—she's way calmer than me after what Candy mentioned. "What did you do, Candy?"

Candy gulps. "I was responsible for giving the hacker access to your database."

"The fuck?!" The treacherous *puta* has some fucking nerve.

Candy flinches. Josephine gives me a pointed look, telling me to back the fuck off. “Can you explain to us what happened and why you did it?”

A soft cry escapes her mouth before she continues. “You both know I worked the streets in Denver before the MC took me in. What you don’t know was who my pimp was. From the time I was forced out of my home by my drug addict parents, I was selling myself to stay alive. I survived for four years on the streets, if you can call it survival. I can’t tell you how many times I was beaten or raped before he found me and made me into one of his *puttanas*.”

“At first, he was my savor, taking me in, feeding and clothing me, putting a roof over my head, and giving me a bed to sleep in. I was beyond grateful, desperate for any form of kindness, and eager to please him. All was fine until I was put to work, forced to service multiple men in one night, sometimes more than one at once. I was beaten and raped, but it was worse than the streets. I was forced to work for him for five years before I escaped to the streets again—the fear of the unknown was less terrifying than continuing to endure the treatment of the whorehouse.”

“Oh, Candy. I’m sorry,” Jo says, trying to soothe our Judas.

Candy takes a wet, stuttering breath. “I had been on the run for a week and found myself in Fort Collins when I met the MC at the local watering hole. I was terrified I’d be forced back to my pimp and leapt at the offer to join the MC as a bunny. I’ve been here for nearly two years. The only reason my old boss didn’t come after me is because he’s afraid of Atlas.”

I pace back and forth, unable to give Candy my full sympathy when I know she’s done something seriously horrible to put us in danger. But Josephine... *fuck*, Josephine is holding on to Candy and keeping her lost soul from falling apart. Josephine has the biggest heart imaginable if she can show empathy to Candy.

I grit my teeth, already knowing the answer to my question. “Who was your pimp?”

Candy looks at me with red-rimmed eyes and tears rolling down her face. “Lorenzo Bianchi.”

Josephine starts crying. “Please tell me Tony didn’t know?”

Candy shakes her tamed pink hair. “No. He must have come back to the Bianchi empire after I ran away. I never met Tony until Atlas called on Bianchi for security protection for you. From what I’ve heard, Bianchi got out of the flesh trade right after I ran away—without his number one whore, business dried up. I doubt Tony knew about the small brothel. Bianchi only shared top secret information with Pretty Paolo and Lucky Luca.”

Candy shivers. “Luca was the worst one—he liked to make you hurt, like it was the only way he could get off.”

Josephine shivers beside Candy, holding her closer.

I’m appalled that Candy stood silently by when I had these men guarding my woman. “Why didn’t you say anything to me about Bianchi when we hired his men on? Dammit, Candy, I would have sent them packing to protect Josephine and you.”

The look she gives me is heart-crushing. “I learned long ago not to question men in power. I didn’t want to be tossed out of the club, making me keep my mouth shut.”

I nod even though I don’t totally understand.

“Bianchi and his men didn’t come out to our rental, so for a long time, I didn’t know,” Candy continues. “It wasn’t until one day when Paolo was dropping Jo off that I noticed him. And he noticed me. I was terrified Bianchi would come for me, but as long as I stuck close to the MC, I knew I was safe, or so I believed.”

I already know where this is going. Candy is a victim in this as much as Tom is. “Who approached you first and when?”

Josephine hands Candy a tissue. She blots at her eyes and takes a shaky breath. “Right after Jo was attacked by her asshole-ex. Those first few days, when she was home and recovering, I and the other bunnies were doing what we could to help. I went to the grocery shopping by myself because Red was busy doing the laundry, and Ebony and Opal were prepping for dinner. Lucky Luca grabbed me when I was on my way out of the grocery store. I was terrified. He threatened to drag me back to Bianchi if I didn’t do as they asked.”

“That would have been around the time I told Bianchi we no longer needed his help,” I mutter.

“To drive his point home, he pushed me in the car and...” Candy sobs. “I would have agreed to do anything to get him to stop.”

Josephine rocks Candy ‘till she’s able to continue with her story. “I was given a burner and told they would contact me. The next day, I got a call and was told to make nice with Chase, to use my charm to get close to him. I refused and told the person to go to hell, but then I was threatened. The person told me if I didn’t follow through, Luca would deal with me. They knew what would scare me into complying.”

Candy sniffles. “My first mission was to get any and all passwords to get through our firewall. They made me connect an encrypted mini drive to his main computer. I didn’t want to use Chase. To be honest, he didn’t make it easy. He guards his computers with his life. I’m just good at being sneaky after years of surviving on my own.”

Candy hiccups and tries to calm down. “My second mission was to create as many problems between the two of you as I could. It’s why I was always running to you and ratting on Jo. I didn’t want to, not just because I knew you wouldn’t tolerate it, but because I like Jo. I think she’s good for you.”

I run my hands up my face and into my hair. At least I know who our mole is and why Candy had been scheming against our relationship. It would be easy to blame Candy for

being a traitor if I didn't know her back story. She's coming clean, but her timing... "Why are you telling us this now?"

Candy snuffles and looks at Josephine. "Jo put things into perspective last week at the mall. She made me feel like I belonged, that I was part of the family. I did what I did to survive, not realizing I was putting everyone else at Bianchi's mercy—that my family was in danger. I wrestled with how to tell you, scared you'd kick me out. I decided this morning my family is more important. If I'm kicked out, so be it, I still had to tell you."

"You're not getting kicked out, Candy, but you have to understand that everyone is going to be hurt and angry when they find out. Maceo and I will do everything we can to show them you were forced," Josephine says soothingly.

Part of me wants to argue, to say Candy has drawn her last straw, and what she did is unforgivable. But when I look at Candy, really look at her, I see a broken and fragile woman who was taken advantage of in the most horrid way. Luca hurt her...he will be the next to suffer slowly, after Lorenzo.

"Of course not, and I'm sorry I threatened you." I sit in the closest wingback and face her, taking Candy's hand in mine. "You did something wrong when you didn't trust this family enough to come to us right away, but you're doing something about it now. If there's anything you can tell us that may help us find this hacker and stop him, now would be the time to share it."

Candy looks cautiously at me, licking her lips nervously. "Well, I may know something, but I don't know if it will help."

"Anything big or small could be the break we need," I say with reassurance. I need her to trust me and open up.

"The burner and mini drive I was given may tell you something but maybe not. I was thinking more of who contacted me on the phone. It wasn't Bianchi or any of his men. The voice was soft and sounded feminine—maybe a girl or young woman. I don't know if it was your hacker or not, but I would look at your list of females," Candy instructs.

A female? We've been referring to this hacker as a dude the whole time, but yes, a young female could be our hacker and our shooter. Already knowing our list consists of more men than women, this news will narrow our search significantly.

I squeeze Candy's hand affectionately. "Thank you. You may have given us the lead we need."

"I did it! I've found our hacker. Take that, *motherfuckers!*"

Gauge and I come rushing from our back offices into the tech area where Chase is doing a victory loop around the room.

My heart beats wildly against my ribs. "Who is she?"

Chase points a remote at one of the main monitors on the wall. An image of a young woman fills the screen. She looks to be about twenty with dark-brown hair and eyes—as innocent-looking as can be.

"Gianna Russo," Chase says. "Nineteen years of age. Graduated grade school four years early—a bonafide prodigy. Super-senior at Colorado State University finishing her second major in computer science with an emphasis on system security. First major under her belt—pre-med. Top of her class and considered brilliant by her professors.

"Gianna has direct ties to Tom and Bianchi. She and Tom have the same major. She was in a different computer coding class across the hall from Tom's when he was shot, but she was out of sight of cameras. Aside from sharing the same major, they worked together at—get this—*Bianchi's Italiano Restaurante*."

My chest rises and falls rapidly. This is it. We finally have her. "Tom said he use to work at an Italian restaurant—we should have known it may have been Bianchi's."

"But we wouldn't have known our hacker worked there," Gauge interjects. "Having those two under Bianchi's thumb

made them easy pickings. Pretty Paolo probably learned Tom was a runner, and that's why he recruited him for the trail detail. But why wouldn't Bianchi ask Tom to be his hacker too? Fewer people involved means less mess to clean up later."

"My thought exactly," Chase says. "I did some more digging, focusing on Gianna's last name. The Russo family has some deep ties to the mob world. Lorenzo wasn't recruiting a temporary hacker—he wanted someone more *permanent*. Hence, he recruited someone already in the family. Maybe the girl wanted in, maybe not. That we can't answer until we have her in our custody."

We have a name, now we need to grab her and bring her in for questioning. "Not a word of this to anyone. We handle this and get it all on tape. I don't want a hair harmed on her head—nothing to come back and bite us in the ass. Bring everyone in aside from Tom's detail. I need Tony's insight—he may have intel on the Russo family."

My brothers nod, agreeing with me. I look at Chase. "Find her location, and we'll set the trap. I want this done tonight under the cover of darkness."

Chase nods and gets to work with his team. Gauge calls in the troops as I strategize for the takedown.

Fifteen minutes later, Tony comes skidding into our tech room. "I came as soon as Gauge told me about Gianna. What do you want to know?"

"Everything," I admit.

Tony nods. "Good kid. Daughter of Nico and Francesca Russo. Has a little brother named Michele. Nico has done a lot to separate himself from the mob, but his family history doesn't exactly allow him to cut ties. He moved his family out of Denver to Fort Collins to create some distance from the main family, and he owns the butcher shop off of Main Street. Lorenzo rarely called on Nico for favors, but Nico never said no to the boss, fearing for his family."

I fold my arms over my barrel chest, absorbing the hacker's background. "Would he have called on Nico when he learned his daughter was going to school for computer science?"

Tony shakes his head. "Nico never said no to Bianchi, but his family came first. He would have moved them into hiding long before handing over his daughter. My guess, Lorenzo approached Gianna directly at the restaurant, and knowing Lorenzo, it wasn't a request."

What Tony says makes sense. "Did you know Tom worked at the restaurant?"

Again, Tony shakes his head. "I never was in the restaurant unless I had to notify the boss of bad dealings in the casino. I was his muscle downstairs and wasn't allowed to show my face above. Bianchi preferred to keep me as his dirty surprise. But I knew Gianna worked there from her pop—he's my butcher and has the best *prosciutto*."

Gauge rubs his jaw. "Why the double major? I mean, I get she's smart, but the two don't correlate."

"Her dad wanted her to have a respectable job, something to get her out of Colorado and away from the family line of business. Gianna only did pre-med to appease her parents. Her passion is computers and has been since she was a kid. She's smart, too fucking smart if you ask me. She was able to argue she was too young to go to medical school when she completed her first major, and was able to negotiate completing another major until she was comfortable pursuing a medical degree."

Chase groans and sinks into his office chair. "Smart enough to avoid us, but still leave a breadcrumb trail? Something doesn't add up."

I agree with Chase. Gianna is young, but if she's as intelligent as everyone keeps saying, she would have covered her trail. We have enough to connect her to all systems hacked. A person who didn't want to be caught wouldn't be this careless.

I grit my teeth and look at Tony. “You believe she was forced into this work?”

Tony gives me a deadpan look. “Nobody willingly works for Lorenzo. You’re either in because of family ties, you’re desperate, or you have a few screws loose. For crying out loud, I joined the marines to get the fuck out of the family, and as soon as I was back home, they sucked me back in—me being banished was the best thing that happened to me. This girl is a good kid. I’d bet my life savings she was threatened. Maybe he was leveraging her family against her.”

Gauge rubs at his jaw. “Why would she be our shooter?”

“Honestly,” Tony says, “Bianchi couldn’t send one of his own men onto the campus without it tying back to him if it went south. A student who is in the same building in similar classes as Tom was the perfect cover. She probably got a lot of hell from Bianchi for failing the attempt, but he had to realize she had no experience as a made-woman.”

I run my hand down my face. “If she’s our shooter, she could be facing jail time for attempted manslaughter.” I feel a twinge of guilt about bringing her in, but justice is needed and we need answers.

Tony swallows and nods his head gravely. “I understand. I wish it didn’t have to be like this, but I get it.”

Chase leans back in his seat. “What do you want to do here, Prez?”

“We bring her in tonight. Find where she lives if she doesn’t live with her family,” I order.

“Gianna has an apartment near campus. She hasn’t lived at home since she turned eighteen. The family does own a rental house on the north side of town. It’s been sitting vacant for a couple months—it’s worth investigating,” Tony offers.

“Good to know,” I say. “I’ll send Reaper out to scout the area and we’ll go from there. Either way, we’ll have answers tonight.”

“All clear east of the property. Over,” Punk says through my earpiece.

“We’re good to go from the west. Over,” Gauge’s voice comes next.

“Nothing to report from the road. All is quiet. Over,” Reaper adds.

I look through my scope, clearing the perimeter in my sights. The rental house on the outskirts of town is an ideal location for our hacker to set up shop. “North is clear. What do you see on the thermal scope, Chase? Over.”

“Infrared heat signature is off the charts. She’s definitely running a lot of heavy-duty machinery inside. I have one infrared body spot sitting in the front room—I suspect it’s our hacker. South side is clear. Punk, the suspect is on your side of the house, do you have visual? Over.”

“Negative. All curtains are drawn. Over.”

Dammit. I hear the slight hum of our drone overhead. “Ziggy, any luck picking up anything from the aerial view? Over.”

“Negative. Over.”

Fuck. I need to make an executive decision. We can either enter the house hoping Gianna is inside, or we can blow our whole cover if it’s anyone other.

“Move in,” I order. “Over.” I set off at a slow run, my feet barely making a sound, and my gun at the ready. I reach the house and slowly make my way to the back door. Gauge has split off and has rounded the house to join me. I test the doorknob and find it’s unlocked. For a smart girl, leaving her door unlocked is pretty idiotic.

“Status? Over,” I whisper through the comms.

“Chase and I are in position at the front door. Over,” Punk’s voice floats through our earpieces.

“Gauge and I are in position out back. Prepare to enter. GO!”

I rush inside with Gauge on my heels, checking each doorway we pass before moving forward. We enter the living space and find Chase and Punk with weapons trained on Gianna. She sits calmly in a chair with her hands up. Her dark eyes are wide and focused on the guns pointed at her.

“Don’t shoot,” she pleads, looking at me. “It’s about time you finally showed up.”

“Please state your name for the record.”

“Gianna Russo.”

“Let me see if I have this right,” I say. I look at Chase, who gives the thumbs-up to the video still being recorded, and I bring my attention back to Gianna. “You were approached by Lorenzo Bianchi nearly ten weeks ago while waiting tables at his restaurant. He pulled you aside and said your computer skills were needed to hack into the Mercy Ravens’ database. Bianchi said it was non-negotiable, and your family’s life depended on your success.”

Gianna nods. “Correct.”

“After four weeks of trying to gain entrance unsuccessfully, you told Bianchi you were unable to obtain access without specific passwords and codes—you needed someone on the inside to grant you admission. Less than two weeks later, you were given a number by Bianchi to a burner phone that was given to Leslie Williams, aka Candy. You were told to contact her and give directions as to how to install the mini drive, what intel she needed to collect, and where to collect it from. You were instructed to threaten her by whatever means necessary to get her to comply.”

“Yes,” Gianna says evenly.

Butch cracks his knuckles loudly, his eyes narrowed on Gianna. *What’s gotten into him?* I shake my head, returning

my attention back to Gianna.

“With Williams’s help, you were able to break through our firewalls and had access to all our surveillance feeds. You had entry to our case files, access to our banking accounts, phone data, and live feeds into our personal properties. Bianchi asked you to search all areas of intel to gain any knowledge of the target—which you have identified as Josephine Holland. You were aware she was attending counseling for her PTSD and hacked into the therapy centers database to gain access to private medical files regarding Holland. You were reporting all personal data to Bianchi at his request for fear of your family being harmed if you did not cooperate.”

Gianna closes her eyes and nods her head, solemnly.

“Please let it be noted the suspect is nodding her head ‘yes.’ Miss Russo, when we discovered our surveillance system had been hacked, you had to find another way to gain information on the target, and you started to track our banking accounts to see what activity was occurring. You noticed purchases occurring in regards to our upcoming wedding. You notified Bianchi, who ordered you to deliberately sabotage orders and appointments. Is this correct?”

Gianna licks her lips. “Yes. I was told to do anything to disrupt the peace and create disharmony.”

“With our surveillance down, you were forced to hack into the city’s security systems to track us, allowing Bianchi to know where I was during fittings and Miss Holland while shopping at the mall.”

“Yes.”

“During my suit fitting, I was approached by Bianchi after you informed him of my location. He revealed too much information on Holland’s planted fake medical info and knowledge of our fornication on the hiking trail along the Cache la Poudre River and the Rocky Mountains.

“Because you are a student of a CSU, you had access to all computer science areas, and Bianchi ordered you to take out Thomas Guthrie, who you claim was also recruited to spy on

Holland. You waited for classes to begin before sneaking across the hall to the computer lab where Tom was taking a coding class. You waited for the opportune moment to put two rounds into the back of Guthrie, slipping out the back to escape detection, and tampering with the live feed cameras in the room.”

Gianna hangs her head. “Yes.”

“Do you have evidence to back up your claims?”

Gianna looks at me with fire in her eyes. “Yes. After our first encounter, I recorded all conversations with Bianchi on my phone. I hacked into Bianchi’s surveillance system and retrieved video footage to back up my timed and stamped dated audio recordings. I have backups hidden and have uploaded everything to the dark web to be sent directly to the FBI if anything was to happen to me.”

I look around at my men. “I think we’re done here.”

“But you haven’t asked me any of the right questions,” Gianna interjects.

“Exactly what am I leaving out, Miss Russo?”

She has the audacity to roll her eyes. “Typical male, always assumes he’s the smartest in the room. Do you not question why I was sitting in my parents’ rental, twiddling my thumbs while you took your sweet time busting in? Do you honestly believe I had no security measures put in place and didn’t know your SEAL team six was outside for over an hour before busting through my purposely unlocked doors?”

I balk, shocked this woman-child has the balls to call us dumb.

She leans across the table, pinning me with her dark eyes. “I’ve been leaving breadcrumbs for you guys for weeks. There was a direct trail from everything I hacked to where my location was. I wanted to be found.”

Chase snorts. “A direct trail? There was a trail, alright, but it was highly encrypted. For someone who says she wanted to be found, you made it damn near impossible.”

“Highly encrypted, are you stoned?” Gianna shakes her head in disbelief. “You were *way* over-thinking it. The code was the simplest encryption, as easy as one, two, three, A, B, C.”

Chase, Ziggy, and Butch all stare at her, mouths gaping in incredulity.

Gianna sighs. “I’m young, but I’m not stupid. If I didn’t want to be found, you would have never found me. I would have used voice distortion when talking on the phone with your MC chick. I would have covered my cyber footprint where a data trail couldn’t be detected. I. Wanted. To. Be. Found.”

Gauge looks baffled. “Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I wanted to protect my family. I knew as soon as I started feeding Lorenzo intel, he would never let me go. I would belong to him forever, and my family and I would always be at his mercy. Unable to come to you directly, I did what I could for you to come to me. But I never suspected it would take you forever.

“I was well aware you were feeding the counselor fake medical information—she had no security setups on her phone. I was able to access the counselor’s cell during your woman’s sessions and listen in. I could have easily told Bianchi, but I wanted him to go down. I fed him the intel you wanted him to have. And still, you guys hadn’t tracked me down. I got sloppier and sloppier on purpose.”

Gianna shakes her head with annoyance. “I figured pissing off your woman with the dress fuckup would set a fire under your ass.”

I rub a hand over my face. “And what about Tom? Next, you’re going to tell me you did everything in your power to not kill him.”

Gianna flinches but recovers quickly. “That’s exactly right, Atlas. If I wanted Tom dead, he’d be dead. My family has been connected to the mob for generations—I’ve known how to use a gun since I was thirteen. Lorenzo knew this much

about me. I couldn't exactly shoot Tom in the shoulder and say I missed—Bianchi would have seen through me immediately. It needed to look convincing. I shot him in the back—on the right side, not the left or the center where I could have hit his heart and surely killed him. I knew aiming high enough would limit my chances of hitting vitals.”

“You've had anatomy and physiology because of your pre-med major. You knew where to do the least amount of damage, yet make it look serious enough,” I say. The girl is smarter than I gave her credit for.

She nods and looks at her clasped hands. “I feel bad I punctured his lung, but it may have been the thing which made my attempted murder plausible in Bianchi's eyes. You need to believe me—I never wanted to harm Tom. He's my friend.”

What a mess. This girl was put between a rock and a hard place. She did everything to bring us to her since the beginning, and we were the ones who failed her.

“Am...” Gianna clears her throat. “Am I in serious trouble? Do I need to get a lawyer? My parents may be tied to the mob by blood, but they're simple law-abiding people with normal jobs. They don't have money to help me out.”

Fuck. Yeah, she's in a lot of trouble and could do serious time. The fact that she kept a record of everything Bianchi made her do, forcing her to partake in illegal activity by threatening her family, with direct ties to him, should help her case. But I don't know if it's enough to get her off the hook.

“We're going to help—” I start, but I'm interrupted.

“The hell we are,” Josephine snaps sharply like the crack of a whip.

My head swivels around fast to my woman standing in the doorway, staring daggers at Gianna. *Ah, hell!*

Punk reacts before my body registers to move my ass, barely getting his arm around Josephine's waist as she dashes in to attack Gianna with her outstretched hands. “Let go of me, Junior!” She steps down hard on his foot.

Punk grits his teeth, holding tight to her. “Calm down, sis.”

I go to take Josephine from my brother and she shrieks when I touch her. “Don’t you dare come near me. You would help her after everything she’s done to us?”

My heart sinks. “No, baby, it’s not like that,” I say quickly.

Josephine bares her teeth in disgust. “Yes, it is. Jacob might have violated my body, but she violated something far more private to me—my emotions, my deepest, darkest fears.”

Shit! Of course, this would be difficult for her. Josephine guards her heart behind a fortress of walls. She doesn’t open up to just anybody. Having been burned one too many times by others has made her cautious before trusting anyone. Her talking about the incident between her and Jacob was difficult enough with her counselor. Having her secrets exposed to not only Gianna but Bianchi too...this may not have been a physical attack, but it was an infringement of something private and precious to Josephine.

“I know you feel like Gianna violated you—”

“Because she did! But it’s not only me. What about her threatening Candy? What about her hurting Tom? What about her putting us all in danger? What about the other PTSD patients whose files were put at risk because of her? What about hacking into your company’s files and accessing confidential information on assignments and clients? This is bigger than her just hurting me.”

Again, I see her point. I try to comfort her, but she slaps me away. “Gianna was forced, like Candy and Tom—”

“Bullshit, Atlas!” Josephine wails.

My swallow is audible, my Adam’s apple bobbing. It’s usually not a good sign when my Pixie refers to me by my club name. I need to handle this delicately.

Josephine points at Gianna. “She wasn’t molested in a parking lot by one of Lorenzo’s men—raped repeatedly for years at the orders of that monster—like Candy. She used that fear against Candy to get her to help infiltrate the Mercy Ravens database. How fucking despicable do you have to be to force another woman into doing something against her will by

threatening to hand her over to her sexual abusers if she doesn't obey? It's not excusable."

I run my hands through my hair and grit my teeth to keep myself from choking up, seeing how this particular bit of intel is traumatic for Josephine. She survived sexual abuse, defending those who have been hurt in the same way. In Josephine's eyes, what Gianna did to Candy is the ultimate betrayal—a woman hurting another woman by threatening sexual violence.

"She wasn't held at gun point like Tom, or lived in fear of not knowing when or where he was going to show up. For crying out loud, she could have killed him. It's not the fucking same and you know it," Josephine seethes.

All my brothers look at the ground and shake their heads—they don't envy my position.

"He threatened my family," Gianna says in a higher voice. "Everyone in the mob knows that he makes good on his threats if you ignore him. I didn't want it to get to that point. I didn't want to hurt anyone—I had no choice!"

"Don't fucking talk to me," Josephine barks. "Don't you dare."

"I'm sorry," Gianna sobs. "I didn't know the damage I was doing by helping him."

My woman's costal eyes nearly glow with hostility. "What did you think he would do with the information you gave him? Hmm? He wasn't gathering intel to write a book. He wanted it to get to me and hurt my family. You sacrificed another family to save you and yours. I don't believe your lies. I don't believe a fucking word that comes out of your mouth. You claim you left an easy trail for the MC to track you down, but that's bull. You left enough of a trail to cover your ass if you were caught. Everything you've said is awfully convenient for you.

"You claim to be brilliant—well, you would have figured out a way to get a message to us. After all, who in Lorenzo's circle would have known? He had no other cyber hacker to check your work. You could have saved yourself, your family,

and kept everyone else safe had you picked up the fucking phone and made the call. You went along with all of this willingly.”

Josephine’s shouts have drawn the attention of the others in the house. Most of my men have entered the tech room, along with Simone and most of the bunnies—minus Candy. I’m sure she is hiding in her room, away from the wrath of my crew.

Gianna shakes her head angrily. “I thought I left enough clues to be found. I didn’t know things would escalate this far.”

My woman doesn’t let up on her attack. “You should have realized your tactics weren’t working the longer it took. You should have tried harder to contact us. But you didn’t. I believe you enjoyed being the mastermind behind all this havoc. You let your ego get in the way of doing what was morally right because deep down, you’re as seedy as the family you’re affiliated with.”

“That’s not true,” Gianna cries. Tears and snot run down her young face in torrents.

Tony tries his hand with Josephine. “You don’t understand, Little Jo. The things the circle was forced to do all out of fear was a strong motivator.”

Josephine bares her teeth at her friend. “Your right, I don’t understand!”

Tony tries to reason. “If you knew half the shit I was forced to do, you may not be talking to me right now. What Gianna says is true. If the Don gives an order, you follow it or face the consequences. Who do you think was the one forced to follow through with those threats? My hands are just as dirty. I was his top button man—a made-man by the age of fifteen.”

My woman puckers her face. “You’re nothing like them. You’re reformed. You’re righting your wrongs. Apples and oranges, Tony.”

“Jo, I was in her shoes,” Tony admits, gently. “You think when I was assigned as your bodyguard while working for Bianchi that I wasn’t feeding him intel on you and Atlas’s crew? I had no choice.”

Josephine isn’t convinced. “You withheld a lot of information from him the longer you were with me—you told Atlas as much. This bitch has done nothing to prove that to me—to our family. She has had more time than you did to see the error in her ways.”

“Only because she wasn’t in a position to right herself,” Tony says soothingly. “You and I formed a bond because we were face-to-face. Our bond got stronger after fucknut-Jacob came after us. Gianna didn’t know you as a person the way I did, but she was getting there. She knew the counseling sessions were doctored, and she kept that shit under wrap. She was doing the little she could without exposing herself to Bianchi.”

Josephine looks away heatedly, but I can tell she can see some reasoning thanks to her friend.

Aching to comfort her, my fingers reach out to stroke Josephine’s face, but Tony steps between us. “Atlas, don’t. Not right now—she needs a minute—it’s too raw. You need to deal with Gianna.”

He’s right. I can’t let my emotions navigate me at the moment. I need to be the captain—the MC president—and do my damn job. It kills me to ignore my woman, but I can’t lead if I’m not focused on taking down Bianchi.

Ever since I’ve been involved with Josephine, I’ve been terrified of screwing up like I did during my first mission after meeting her. I nearly lost her because I wasn’t thinking of anything but my job. Now my job is in jeopardy because all I think about is her. I knew I needed to find a balance between the two for some time, and today, I’m forced to follow through with making the tough choice of picking what is the top priority at this moment.

Hell, I want to hold her and she won’t let me. It’s like Tony said—it’s too fresh, and Josephine always needs time to cool

down. I need to start recognizing that she has to internalize her emotions before she can deal with them. I hate it, but it is how she processes her feelings, and I need to respect it. The only time I should start to worry is when she's burying her issues, only then should I step in and help her confront them. I can't force it any earlier or she'll resent me.

Punk and Tony have set it up for me to make the choice easier. They stopped her from acting out and were able to reason with her to a degree. Josephine may not understand at this moment, but I pray she will with time. After all, I'm doing this for her and our family.

Josephine's gaze locks with mine. It's the moment I acknowledge she's not running. Josephine is standing her ground and facing all this shit head-on. This would be a celebratory moment if it wasn't for piss poor timing.

Seeing my woman in pain is cutting me the fuck up inside, but I have to draw the line and do what's right. Whatever she reads on my face is not what she wants to see. She turns her gaze away from me and I see her walls going up, forming towers around her heart.

This isn't something that will be fixed by me saying sweet nothings tonight as I hold her in our bed. Saying sorry will fall on death's ears. I'm in for a long silent treatment, and I pray that's all.

Sensing my will is crumbling, Gauge lays a supportive hand on my shoulder, halting me from backing Josephine instead of Gianna. Gauge nods at his woman.

Opal steps forward, pulling Josephine away from Punk, and wrapping her arms around my woman in the comfort she needs—the support I'm unable to give.

Simone narrows her eyes at Chase and me before following Opal and Josephine out of the room. Ebony and Red trail after.

Punk gives me a beseeching look—he wants to go with his sister.

I shake my head. "I need you here."

Punk's jaw ticks, but he makes no move to leave. He looks at Ziggy with pleading eyes.

Ziggy nods, understanding Punk's unspoken request. "I'll text Jared."

The room seems to settle, knowing Josephine will have the support she needs, allowing us to get down to business. I turn back to Gianna. She's still weeping, but now she looks scared. Before Josephine went off, I'd been ready to offer my assistance, and Gianna had sensed it. Now she may be wondering if I'm still willing after the accusations my woman threw out.

"We're going to do everything we can to show that you were a victim in this game Bianchi is orchestrating, but I'll be upfront with you. If Tom wants to press charges, there may be nothing I can do to help. Everything you've confessed will help your case, but I'm not a lawyer—you may need to do some time," I admit.

Gianna looks to the ceiling, blinking her eyes to ward off more tears. "As long as Bianchi goes down and my family stays safe, I'll do the time. What can I do to help?"

What can she do? It's more like what should I do?

What I should be doing is handing her over to authorities—have them take down Bianchi, trusting the system to do what's best.

As a Navy SEAL, I had to trust our system—orders were orders, and my hands were tied from doing the right things when I was a Captain. Once again, I feel like a military man with his hands tied, unable to do what I feel is best because it's deemed illegal.

What I want to do is keep Gianna on-sight, orchestrate an attack, and take out Bianchi and his inner circle. It's what we do, it's what we're good at, and it would all be done within hours. Having Bianchi go through the legal system could take years, with no guarantee he'll do hard time.

But can I go in and take him out without it blowing back on my men and me?

Not only does Detective Quire and his station know our beef with the Italian mob, but the governor and the FBI are well aware of our mission to dismantle his organization. I would be suspect number one, and they would work their way down the list of my crew. This is not something we can do under the radar.

I pace back and forth, my brothers clearing the way, sensing I'm about to blow my lid. "Fuck," I mutter. With my hands on my hips, I turn to face my men and one scared young woman. "Chase, call Detective Quire. We need to do this by the books. Bianchi's organization is bigger than him. We can do more good by going after all of it."

Gianna's tears run down her face, her shoulders slump forward as she cries.

I squat to her level. "Quire is a friend of mine. He's been itching for an opportunity to take Bianchi down. He's going to get you the best deal he can. You're a small fish in a big pond—trust me, the DA wants the bigger fish. They want Bianchi—hook, line, and sinker. I'll call my navy friend who's a lawyer. He owes me a few favors, and if I ask him, he'll take you on pro bono. If nothing else, I can call in a favor to the governor. I'll do what I can."

She snuffles and nods her head, ready to meet whatever fate comes her way.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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JOSEPHINE

My sister crawls into my bed, wrapping her arms around me, and spoons my back.

It has always been like this for us. We had separate rooms growing up, but we always ended up in the same bed together each night. I was a horrible sleeper and would wake up scared. My sister would hear me creep into her room, lift the covers for me to crawl in next to her, and snuggle me ‘till I dozed off.

Simone kisses the back of my head. “I got you, squirt.”

I know she does as I lay on the bed staring out the windows, unmoving. Opal sits on the edge of the bed, staring at me with a worried frown on her face, and I can hear Ebony and Red talking in low whispers somewhere in the room.

Hades whimpers from his XL twin mattress—he hates it when I’m withdrawn like this. I would love to cuddle and reassure him, but I’m not in a good place right now. I’d only upset him more.

I hear the suite’s door open and close. Jared comes into view and crawls in the bed to face me, sandwiching me between Simone and him. Jared doesn’t say anything—Ziggy must have filled him in and sent him to me, for which I’m grateful.

Something shifted between Maceo and me in the tech room. Maceo made an executive decision to do what was right for the entire family, knowing I would have a difficult time understanding it, and for once, I didn’t run away from an overwhelming situation. I stood my ground, said my peace,

and vocalized what I was feeling without the need to flee for safety. It was ugly and heated but necessary.

I'm angry with Maceo and his men for helping that traitorous bitch, but deep down—like bedrock deep—I know it's the right thing to do. I don't have blinders on. It's clear Gianna's a victim. However, my emotions are not able to cope with her betrayal. After having everything I revealed in my private counseling sessions exposed to not only her but Lorenzo, I can't exactly roll over and take it.

I can overlook Tom peeping on us because we took the risk of having sex in public, knowing that could happen. I can overlook Candy's betrayal because, as a survivor of assault, I relate to her fear. But Gianna...she did more damage than all of them.

She gave Lorenzo access to our surveillance feeds and private information on the club and its clients. She gave Lorenzo opportunities to ambush me and fuck with my head. She followed Lorenzo's orders and nearly killed Tom. She used a sexual assault victim to do her dirty work and threatened to report her insubordination back to her abusers if she failed. She put all of us in danger and never once tried to stop it.

And then I think about all the other patients from the mental health clinic. Their files may not have been hacked, but the system holding their extremely private information was. Any other outside source would be able to access all of it, and it did. It took Chase five minutes tops. All these people were at risk of having their information compromised due to Gianna creating a hole in the system. These people are like me, suffering from anxiety or depression, and fighting their own battles with PTSD. How would they react to this breach of privacy? They're probably a few who would not handle the information well at all.

A call, a simple fucking call to the MC, would have changed everything if she had just tried. Maceo and his men would have sheltered her and her family. She read through their files and knew what the club does, which means she

would have known, as a security company, they could have protected her and her loved ones.

What she did to me is bad enough, but she came after the club. She came after *my family*.

I lost it when I heard Maceo offer to help. For once, I didn't hold back or hideaway. I popped the cork and let it all out—let her and everyone in that room know what I was feeling and thinking, though I knew that the outcome would probably not change in my favor.

It couldn't have been easy for Maceo. In fact, I know it wasn't. I could see the turmoil written all over him as he struggled to do what was best. He's been having difficulty doing his job without me influencing him. He cannot exactly lead his men while being ruled by his feelings for me. It was only a matter of time before his priorities came to a head. Maceo is a good and loyal man, and he will always do what is best in the end.

Maceo and I are a team. We're supposed to have each other's backs. But today was a rude awakening because Maceo looked past my emotions and reasoning, as well as all of Gianna's transgressions, and decided she was worth more as an informant than simply wiping his hands clean of her. It hurts that he can look past my broken heart and be fair with this young woman, but it is what's right. She's an invaluable source for taking down Lorenzo. He is, after all, our target.

Still, I'm not ready to forgive. Not yet. Acceptance will come with time—time and counseling. But not today.

Jared wipes away a rogue tear rolling over my nose. "We got you, Jo." He hugs me while Simone squeezes me from behind. I have my best friend, my sister, and the rest of the MC girls comforting me—I'm thankful for small blessings.

The police came and escorted Gianna back to the station for more questioning. I didn't actually see it happen, but Red

filled me in from what she could see from the balcony of the stairs.

Lorenzo Bianchi is sure to go down for all of his illegal activity, but what Gianna's fate will be remains to be seen. I don't want to feel bad for her, but sadly, I do. She's young and has a long life ahead of her. It would be a damn shame to have to live out some of that life behind bars instead of using her cyber intelligence for good use.

With the show over, several pairs of feet march toward the suite, the heaviest of them all belonging to my man. I feel him enter the room before I see him—the air between us always cracks with electricity when he draws near, positive and negative energy colliding.

Jared makes to move off the bed, but I cling to his shirt, refusing to let him leave. I'm not ready to deal with Maceo. Simone senses my reluctance and intertwines her legs with mine, forging a twisted pretzel that can't be undone without snapping us apart.

Maceo's face contorts with sadness. He groans, closing his eyes for a moment, like he's absorbing what I'm feeling through the air. When he opens his eyes again, they're swimming with emotion. He sits at the foot of our bed and lays a heavy hand on my leg. I can't help but cringe at his touch.

Yeah, I definitely can't cope with him yet.

Gauge moves to pull Opal away, but one death glare from her, and he backs right off. "Okay, gorgeous," he says quickly. His eyes swivel around the space 'till he decides to ease his butt down in the corner of the bedroom, settling in for the long haul.

Punk grabs one of the wingbacks and drags it over to our bedside, plopping his ass down. He gives Maceo a dirty look before nodding at my sister. "Time's up, priss. I call dibs on being the big spoon next."

I can't see my sister's reaction, but I bet any money she's rolling her eyes. "Since you asked nicely—No! I'm not giving you my slot."

Punk pouts but switches his focus on Jared. “Jared, my man. I think it’s bother-sisters bonding time.”

Jared snorts. “You only want to live out your fantasy of being in bed with two sisters.”

Punk’s shoulders shake with silent laughter.

I feel Simone move her hand right before I hear the crack of skin-on-skin. “Stop touching me, Chase. I’m not budging.”

Chase huffs his annoyance and I hear a thump. “Then I’ll sit my ass right here next to you, Numbers.”

“Numbers?” Punk’s face creases in confusion. “Because of the accounting thing? I like my nickname way better.”

“Your nickname sucks,” Chase fires back. “She’s not a priss, and you would know it if you weren’t such a dick to her.”

Punk laughs and points at my sister. “She calls me ‘moron’—I think the tradeoff is fair.”

“Enough,” Maceo says in a firm, but quiet voice, ending the argument between the best friends. Maceo nods at Jared to get up, but Jared only shakes his head, knowing it’s too early for my fiancé to cuddle me. Flustered, Maceo runs his fingers through his thick black hair.

Ziggy comes into view. “Babe, come on. Let Atlas comfort his old lady.”

Jared looks at Ziggy, deadpanned. “She’s not ready.”

Punk raises his hand excitedly. “I’ll take over.”

Jared rolls his eyes, rolling out of bed. He looks sternly at Ziggy. “I’m not leaving until I know she’s okay.” Ziggy gives a curt nod, understanding it’s not up for debate.

Punk fills in the vacated spot, wrapping his long arms around not only me but Simone too, pulling us tight to him like one unit. He tucks my head under his chin. “I’m sorry,” he says softly, like he had been aching to get it off his chest. I sniffle and bury my face into his shirt.

Maceo practically moans as he watches us—he’s never been good about sharing me with others. Well, too damn bad. I need this right now.

“What are you doing here?” I hear Ebony hiss.

“Checking on Little Jo,” Tony says, coming into view. He looks at me and gives me a rare smile. “There she is. How are you doing?”

I shrug.

“I know that was hard for you. It was hard for all of us, but it’s the right thing, which I’m guessing you already know. You’re tough, Little Jo—one of the toughest people I know. You’ll get through this, and we’re here to help.”

“Is there room for one more?” Reaper hollers from the hallway.

Maceo runs a hand down his face and sighs. “Sure. The more the merrier.”

Reaper comes clomping in the room and plops on the bed, making it bounce and dip from his weight. Simone squeaks with surprise right when I feel another set of arms encircling us from behind.

Punk shakes his head. “Dude, do you have a death wish?”

Maceo glowers at his burly brother. “Don’t get too comfy with my woman.”

“Mmm. This is nice,” Reaper says, hamming it up. “We should do this more often. Hey Opal, come crawl on top. It will be like old times.”

“The fuck? Don’t you dare invite my woman into bed,” Gauge snarls.

“And get your hands off my woman,” Chase growls.

“I’m not *your* woman, Chase,” Simone snaps back.

“The hell if you’re not,” Chase counters with a tone of finality.

Reaper’s laughter quakes the bed. “Ah, good times.”

Uncomfortable and overheated, I twist in the sea of bodies and limbs. My heavy eyelids crack open and take stock of my surroundings. I'm still sandwiched between Punk and Simone, but Reaper has been replaced with Chase spooning my sister's back.

A loud snore alerts me that Reaper isn't far. I sit up and my theory is confirmed. Reaper lays on the floor next to the bed with Hades snuggled against him, snoring as loudly as Reaper. Red is lying against Reaper's chest on his other side. Opal and Gauge are crashed in one corner of the room. Ziggy and Jared are in the other.

I crawl out of bed and navigate my way around all the sleeping bodies into the seating area, finding Tony and Ebony lying on top of each other on the couch. Tony has a big arm thrown around Ebony, caging her against him. Eagle is in one wingback while Stage is in the other, mouths hanging open and dead to the world. There are people all over the place, but none of them is the person I'm seeking.

Where are you, Maceo?

Making my way to the door, Hades must've sensed me leaving. He appears at my side, rubbing his head against my hip, letting me know I'm not alone.

I open the door, poking my head into the hallway. I hear a voice floating up the stairs from the main living area. The deep baritone notifies me it's Maceo and he sounds less than happy. I tiptoe to the railing with Hades by my side and I peer below.

The love of my life sits on one of the couches, elbows on his knees, one hand holding his cell to his ear, the other rubbing his forehead. My father sits in one of the loungers next to Maceo, watching him silently.

Flay comes into view and is greeted by my mom coming out of the kitchen with a brown bag meal. Flay takes the bag from mom and bends to give her a peck on the cheek before heading off to relieve Triple from Tom's guard detail.

“What the fuck do you mean he wasn’t there when you raided his place?” Maceo shouts into the phone. “Luke, I gave you everything on a silver platter. All you had to do was steamroll in and take him down.”

Oh, no! Maceo must be talking with Detective Quire about Lorenzo. *Please, God, please don’t let this be as horrible as my imagination perceives.*

Maceo stands, growling, and paces the room with the phone at his ear. My dad stands and goes to the bar in the billiards room. Mom wrings a dishrag in her hands, watching my fiancé with worried gray eyes.

“Luke, it was wrapped up with a fucking bow. I gave you all our evidence. I handed you his hacker. I even gave you the evidence on his latest Poppers party drug, the location of where he sells it, and how the fucking shipments are coming in. I’ve done everything and more. Where the hell is he?”

Maceo pauses, listening intently to Luke’s response on the other end. His eyes widen before narrowing. “How the fuck am I supposed to know where he is? I have Brass out scouting the city, and two men doing surveillance on Tom Guthrie—everyone else is here on lockdown. Am I supposed to send out more of my men to do recon work for you now? What the hell are your people doing? And don’t tell me they have better things to do when your whole damn station has been waiting years to nab the bastard.”

Another pause before he responds with a snarl. “No shit, there’s a leak in your organization! You better put men and women you trust with Gianna’s security detail before someone gets to her in the damn cell.”

Maceo paces some more before he barks out another response. “Don’t worry about me doing anything stupid. Whatever I fucking do, I’ll be sure to clean it up all nice and tidy, you can count your ass on it.” Maceo hits the end button and throws his phone against the couch where it lands with a *thud*. His Goliath body falls back into the couch cushions, his head leaning against the back. “FUCK!”

My dad comes back into the room with two tumblers and a bottle of Blanton's. He sits next to Maceo and pours out two large servings, sliding the glass across the coffee table. "Here, son. You need this."

Maceo takes a long pull of the bourbon and presses the glass to his forehead. "Tell me I did the right thing turning everything over to the authorities. Because right now, I'm second-guessing every call I made."

My dad sips his drink. "You did the right thing, son."

Maceo isn't convinced, shaking his head. "Did I? I've got my crew on lockdown, a young woman behind bars possibly in danger, and your daughter can't stand to look at me. There was part of me that wanted to handle the situation in-house, but I didn't want blood on my brothers' hands. It's one thing getting myself involved in illegal activity and whole holy other dragging down my men with me."

Dad lays a hand on Maceo's shoulder. "Jo will come to her senses, don't worry. It may take time, but she'll come around. Your men will go where you lead them. They know you wouldn't make that call unless it was the only way to deal with the issue. As far as this hacker is concerned, I don't know what to say. You warned the detective to sort his house out, and that's all you can do."

Maceo sets his tumbler aside and puts his head in his hands. "You didn't see the way Josephine looked at me—the hurt and anger I made her feel by helping Gianna."

Maceo jabs his thumb at his chest. "I caused her pain—me! I'm the one who's supposed to love and comfort her when her heart is breaking, not all those people in our room."

Oh, Maceo! My heart is breaking watching my man fall apart.

Once again, my dad tries to reassure him. "My daughter loves you. I know she'll understand if you give her time. Tomorrow is a new day, and with it, new opportunities to mend hurt feelings."

Maceo stares sinisterly at the wall. “Getting the police involved was piss poor mistake. I should have gone rogue when I had the chance and finished him myself. Josephine has been through enough with one asshole, and now, there’s another on the loose. Fuck, I should be out there hunting him down.”

“Dear,” mom says quickly. “You only involve yourself when you have no other choice.”

“What exactly did the detective say?” my dad asks.

Maceo sits back. “Everyone was rounded up, aside from Bianchi and his two closest in command—Pretty Paolo and Lucky Luca. Detective Quire believes someone tipped them off.”

“Well, no shit,” mom snaps, throwing her dish rage on the counter.

Maceo raises his arms. “That’s what I said. Who the fuck knows where they are now? They could be in Denver, out of the state, or back in the motherland.” Maceo points off in the distance. “As long as that prick is out there, Josephine’s in danger. I’ve already got one fuck head I need to worry about—I don’t want to add another to the list.”

Mom’s eyes widen with alarm. “What do you mean ‘another to the list’? How many people do you have coming after you?”

Maceo groans, his fingers pinching the bridge of his nose.

Before Maceo can respond, my dad waves off my mom. “Stella, not the time or place. The boy is letting off some steam, leave him be.”

Mom isn’t easy to brush off. “If it affects our daughter—”

Maceo’s head whips to mom, his eyes intense and steely. “Stella, I won’t let anyone near Josephine. Not Bianchi, not anyone.”

My mom folds her arms and straightens her narrow shoulders, her face deadpan. “Well, considering the circumstances, I believe you should *handle it*.”

What?! Did I hear my mom correctly? She couldn't possibly mean...

Maceo quizzically studies my mother, deciding if she's serious. My dad sits there with his blue eyes bugging and his mouth hanging open. Their thoughts are in sync with mine.

Dad jumps to his feet with a livid harrumph. "Stella! Have you lost your marbles? You don't egg the boy on when he already has one foot out the door. There's no turning back from something like this. You can't ask our future son-in-law to murder someone."

"Why the hell not?" Mom asks. "If I had the means and the opportunity, I would take the cockroach out myself. No one hurts my family and gets away with it. You saw the look on our little girl's face when the girls took her upstairs. This dickhead keeps hurting our daughter and causing her problems. Not to mention the horrors done to Candy. The police don't know where he is or how to find him. Why shouldn't Maceo use his skills to track him down and finish him?"

My dad grabs my mom by the shoulders and shakes her a little. "Jesus, Stella, because it's wrong."

"Not in my eyes. I call it justifiable," mom states coldly. When she doesn't get my dad's approval, she turns to Maceo. "Screw it. I'll do it. Give me a gun."

Maceo stares at my mom for a long moment before answering. "Are you shooting straight with me, Stella? You don't care if he's taken out with vigilante justice?"

My dad's voice elevates in pitch. "She's talking out of her ass. Ignore her. You listen to me—"

"When it comes to my family, I don't joke," mom talks over dad. "Now, give me a gun."

Maceo straightens his shoulders. "No need, Stella. I protect my own." He stands from the couch and goes to the nearest safe, ready to prepare himself for battle. My mom giving him her blessing is all the motivation he needs to take up arms.

Shit, shit, shit!

“No,” I scream, running down the stairs as fast as my feet will carry me. Hades starts barking, sensing my duress.

Maceo’s looks in my direction. He gulps, realizing I overheard everything. “Pixie?”

I want to run to his arms—God, do I want to. Instead, I throw myself in front of the safe, spread-eagling across the opening. “I forbid you from going on a wild goose chase and risking your life over this asshole.”

Maceo’s face contorts with anguish and burning fury. “Your mom is right. The system isn’t working. The longer we sit back, the deeper he goes to stay hidden. He’s not done coming after you. He’ll come at us again and again until he finally gets a lucky break and grabs you. I won’t let him.”

Maceo shakes his head angrily, taking me by the shoulders and easily moving me to the side to gain access to the safe. “Over my dead body. Nobody takes what’s mine. I can’t risk losing you again.”

Desperate to break his irrational train of thought, I scale his tall frame like a monkey climbing a tree, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck. I bury my face into the crook of his neck and plead. “Maceo, no. Don’t do this. Not like this, not without a plan, your brothers, and justifiable homicide on your side. Stop, think, please.”

Maceo’s broad chest rises and falls with adrenaline, but I can start to feel it slow as the seconds tick by. He’s gradually coming down from the high of doing ultimate damage—like Hulk returning to Bruce Banner. His arms encircle me in a crushing embrace, burying his face in my neck. “Baby,” he whimpers.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper. My hands stroke over his back, hoping to calm the beast inside of him. Hades whines at his feet, nudging his big head against Maceo’s tree trunk legs, letting him know he’s there too.

Maceo pivots us and freezes. I follow his line of sight and see Gauge, Chase, and Punk ten feet away. Tony, Reaper,

Ziggy, Jared, Eagle, Stage, and Butch all stand on the stairs—waiting for their president’s orders.

Gauge clears his throat. “Chase got an alert on his phone—we know the cops lost Bianchi. We’re ready to ride with you if you go.”

I try to squirm back on my feet, but Maceo isn’t having it. His hand under my ass squeezes while his arm around my back goes on lockdown. With a severe look, he addresses his men. “Ravens.”

“HOOYAH!”

“It’s late. Let’s gets some rest. We regroup tomorrow at 0700 hours. We’ll formulate a plan of action in the morning. Meeting adjourned.”

“HOOYAH!”

Maceo steps forward with me wrapped around him. His men part the way as we head upstairs. I catch a glance at my parents. My dad looks relieved, but my mom is stoic.

Hades runs ahead of us and bunts the door open with his head. Ebony is still passed out on the couch, sawing logs. Simone is still asleep in our bed. And Opal and Red sit on the end of the bed, holding hands, waiting for news.

“There’ll be no war tonight, ladies. You can go rest now,” Maceo says with reassurance.

Opal lets out a long sigh of relief and Red nods.

Gauge comes in behind us. “Come on, gorgeous. Let’s hit the sack.” Opal looks at me for confirmation. I smile to put her worries at ease. She takes Gauge’s hand and follows him across the hall.

Red heads out too, but before she makes it a step toward hers and Candy’s room, Reaper wraps his heavy arm around her and pulls her the other direction to his suite.

Tony walks in and appraises Ebony, sprawled out and snoring. He shakes his head, yanks her up, and throws her over his titan-size shoulder, all without waking her. “Where’s her room?”

“Three doors down to the left,” Maceo says.

Tony salutes and heads out with Ebony.

I turn to look at my sister and nearly jump out of Maceo’s arms. Chase somehow snuck past without me knowing, and he’s holding my sister in a threshold carry. Simone curls into his chest, clinging to his shirt, making Chase rumble with approval.

“Behave yourself,” I warn.

“For her, always,” Chase says with a wink.

Maceo doesn’t wait for the door to fully close before he’s walking toward the bed and sprawling me out.

Silently he removes his clothes, making my heart sputter. With his eyes ablaze, he reaches for me and helps me out of mine. He crawls on the bed, wrapping his muscled arms around me, pulling me to his chest. Maceo’s heady woodsy-fresh scent smells stronger without his clothes on. I breathe him in, letting his scent saturate my senses.

I feel his tears slide over my forehead, and I blink my own away. This moment calls for tenderness, for apologies, and words of acceptance.

“Baby, I’m sorry—it’s not enough to rid you of the pain Gianna and Bianchi put you through, but it is sincere. If I believed she wasn’t coerced into doing it, I would have turned her over to Luke without helping her. I never wanted to hurt you on top of everything,” he whispers against my head.

I sniffle, all my sadness coming to the surface. “I understand and accept it, but I’m hurt. By her, by you. I understand when someone is under duress, they can do things they normally wouldn’t. Not knowing the person makes it easier to justify their actions. This is what I suspect Gianna was facing, but I can’t see past the betrayal right now.

“What Jacob did to me was horrible, and having to go to counseling to talk about it is like reliving the nightmare all over again. Revealing my fears and vulnerabilities is extremely difficult, and having it revealed to a man who has

no good intentions, makes me feel defenseless on a level that messes with my head.

“What Candy did was wrong, but I could relate to her fear since I’ve been assaulted myself. What Tom did was wrong, but we always knew there was a risk of being caught having sex in public. If we didn’t take those risks, Tom would never have been recruited.

“I know Gianna is a victim, and her family was threatened, but I feel she was Lorenzo’s puppeteer. Had she cut the strings, she would have saved us all this trouble. Obviously, she’s smart. Why didn’t she figure out a way to reach out to us?”

Maceo holds me tighter. “Fear has a way of preventing us from thinking clearly at times. Perhaps she was paranoid she’d be caught, not realizing the only one who could uncover what she did was herself.”

The truth is we’ll never know what she thought because we didn’t live what she went through. She’s another pawn in Lorenzo’s game, and all my anger should be direct at him. “He isn’t going to leave us alone.”

“You know I’m overprotective as hell about you,” he chokes out. “Every time I think of Bianchi coming after you, I lose my shit. This is fucking déjà vu with Jacob all over again. I can’t go through that another time. I can’t die another death, Pixie.”

I gulp. “I know.”

Maceo tilts my chin ‘till I look at him. “You need to understand I have to end him. I won’t risk putting you or our family in danger any longer. Please, tell me you understand?”

I nod because I do understand. Lorenzo needs to be stopped.

Maceo gaze smolders as he looks between my eyes and mouth. “I protect what’s mine, you hear? I need you on your best behavior. You need to do your part. Don’t give the guys a hard time when they guard you. Let Jared and your dad finish Lloyd’s build. You can work on-site on our home near the

club, where we can put you in the panic room if it comes to an all-out war.”

I start to cry, worry gripping my intestines and making me nauseous.

Maceo grips my chin, not painfully, but enough to get my attention. “You need to understand how serious this is, baby. Tell me you’ll listen?”

I close my eyes, tears squeezing out of the corners. “I’ll listen.”

No more words are spoken when Maceo captures my lips with his—passionate and searing. His mouth is hard and demanding, forcing his tongue past my lips. I gasp and he sweeps his tongue in to dance with mine. My lord, he tastes divine—like fine bourbon, heaven, and sin.

Our tears mix and our need for each other takes over. Wanting him to consume me, I cock my hips and rub my sex against his muscled thigh. I’m sopping wet with need; the evidence is clear from the wet trail I leave behind on his leg.

“Naughty kitten,” Maceo purrs like a jungle cat. Rolling me under him, Maceo drives forward inside me, ‘till we’re pelvis to pelvis, and stills.

Good golly, I nearly combust on impact.

He only waits for me to exhale before he starts rotating his hips, pulling back, and pumping forward. I don’t hold back the moans building in my lungs from the pleasure he’s producing in me. The sounds escaping me are animalistic, fueling the beast that lives deep inside of Maceo. His dark brown eyes dilate to black, he growls with need, and pounds into me faster.

Needing to feel closer to him, I wrap my legs around his hips and my arms around his neck, running my fingers over the shaved sides of his head and into his thick black hair on top. He moans and leans forward to kiss me.

Again, and again he hits that secret spot buried inside me only he can reach. His heavy balls slap against my ass in a deliciously painful way. Warmth seeps to every extremity of

my body when he kisses me, pouring all his love into me from his lips.

I won't last long. When he gets all carnal and territorial, I immediately go into overdrive. He makes me needy. I ram my hips up, meeting him thrust for thrust.

My toes curl, my legs shake, and the air in my lungs stills right before I'm tumbling into sweet oblivion. *Oh my...* My pussy convulses and clamps down on his hard-as-nails cock. "Maceo!"

Maceo swallows my cries with his mouth and pumps once more before I'm filled with his warmth. He groans loudly, pulsing inside me, all the while my body continues to pull him deeper.

We hold each other 'till our breathing settles and the last of our aftershocks have faded. The heady musk of our sex perfumes the air and envelopes us in a cocoon.

He sighs into my ear. "I love you, Josephine. I'm sorry I hurt you, but ultimately I'm doing this for you, to protect you from him."

"I love you too. And I know you never meant to hurt me, but I don't want to talk anymore about Gianna or Lorenzo."

Without breaking our connection, Maceo positions us on our sides. He tucks my head under his chin and hums with satisfaction. I swear on all the bourbon in the world he isn't going soft, and it's pretty clear he has no intention of pulling out.

As tired as I am, I'm uncomfortable with the dampness between my legs. I squirm and he swats my bottom playfully. "Don't even think about breaking the connection." He nestles his head against the pillow, closing his eyes, and leaving no room for negotiation.

Too bad for him I'm not a pushover. "Maceo, I know what you're doing."

"Mm?" He feigns drowsiness.

I shove against his chest, but he holds on tight, refusing to slip out of me. Irritated, I huff. “Listen, you alpha asshole, I know you’re trying to get me pregnant, but I’m not going to bed sopping wet and chafe all night.”

With his eyes still closed, a broad, cheeky smile stretches across Maceo’s face—the kind of smile he uses when I’m not privy to some inside knowledge. He must sense my eyes burning a hole in him because his brows furrow as he opens his eyes. “No?”

I glower. “Yes, no.”

Maceo pouts, crestfallen. “Aw, come on, baby. Give me a little longer, at least. I thought you were going to put me on pussy probation for a month. You can’t blame me for wanting to be as close to you as possible.”

When I shove against his chest this time, he allows me to escape to the bathroom. I shake my head. “You need to get better about wrapping up. Getting pregnant is not on the timeline ‘till after the house is done, and it will definitely happen if we keep this up.”

He mumbles something which sounds awfully similar to ‘you already are.’

My head pops back into the room. “Excuse me? What did you say?”

Maceo looks at me innocently. “Nothing.”

I waggle my finger. “I’m not pregnant.”

Maceo looks at me with a searing gaze, his eyes trailing to my lower abdomen and back to my face. His lips curl into a stupid grin that would melt the clothes right off my body if I was wearing any.

I guess we’ll agree to disagree.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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“What do you mean you can’t officiate the ceremony?”

Father Castelli shutters a sigh. “I cannot in good faith perform the wedding between you and Mister Tabares. I’m a man of God, and it’s my opinion you’re being forced to marry this man under false pretenses.”

I cover my free ear with my other hand to hear the priest better, blocking out the noise from the construction around our new house. “And why would you presume that?” I already have a damn good idea, but I want to hear him admit my suspicion.

Father Castelli doesn’t answer my question. “I’m trying to save you, Jo. Turn away from this risky path.”

I laugh bitterly. “Unbelievable.”

“There’s no reason to rush into a marriage. Atlas is a dangerous man and doesn’t have your best interest at heart.”

“I cannot believe you’re backing out a week before the wedding,” I shout, causing Hades to growl at my feet.

My voice has caught the attention of Tony and Punk, who stand less than ten feet away from me, surveying the surroundings for any potential threats. Punk cocks his head and covers the difference in three strides. His brows pull together, trying to determine if a threat is on the other end of the line.

“Josephine, my mission is not to upset you, but protect you. I can’t ignore Atlas’s nefarious activity,” the father says

in earnest.

When I started planning our wedding, Maceo had mentioned wanting to include many traditional elements of his heritage into the ceremony—a way of including his deceased parents and *abuela*. Maceo came from a devout Catholic family. I was raised Catholic, but more recreational, like around Christmas and Easter.

Having a priest was pretty high on the list of things I wanted to give Maceo, and now, I have no priest and no time to find a backup. I don't buy the bull about canceling over Atlas's so-called illegal doings. I do believe the priest is deep in the pockets of the Italian mob and he's been ordered to back out of the ceremony.

“Oh, yeah? Well, you can tell Lorenzo to go fuck himself.” I stab the end button. I pull on my pigtail braids, stomp my feet, and scream. Letting it out is way better than holding it in, according to my new counselor.

Punk's eyes widen at my temper tantrum. He grabs me by my shoulders. “Jesus, Jo! What's up?”

“Lor-fucking-enzo, that's what,” I snarl, gnashing my teeth like a wild animal. Hades mimics my actions, upset because I'm upset. “He got to Father Castelli and he's backing out of the wedding!”

Punk runs a hand over his shaved head. “Aw, fuck! Atlas is going to flip when he finds out.”

Punk isn't exaggerating. The past week has been a nightmare with Lorenzo meddling in our wedding plans from wherever he's hiding.

Monday, our DJ backed out. Luckily, Ziggy and Butch came to the rescue, buying heavy-duty speakers and creating an awesome playlist for our reception.

Tuesday, the tent company we were renting from claimed they overbooked and were unable to provide a tent. I was pissed initially, but I dragged out a saw table and created a trellis system over the patio where we could hang the outdoor lights I had ordered—crossing my fingers for good weather.

Wednesday, the cater and our cake baker backed out. I was losing steam between managing our build and teleconferencing with Jared and my dad on the last week of Lloyd's barbershop project. Maceo stepped in and called in another favor to the governor. Now our reception will be catered by none other than Chef Jordan—the jolliest cook ever.

Opal, the sweet angel that she is, volunteered to make our cake. She has been making cakes for all the guys' birthday's since she joined the club—and they are tasty.

Thursday, damn near broke my heart. My florist called with word her shipment of flowers would not make it in time for our wedding. I broke down—the one thing I *really* wanted for our big day was no longer available.

My mom rallied all the girls together with a massive trip to the craft store. Sobbing, I made flower arrangements for the bouquets, boutonnieres, and centerpieces with the girls' help, minus real flowers and foliage. As lovely as they turned out, it wasn't the same, not by a long shot. Maceo held me, reassuring me our wedding would be beautiful and perfect no matter what.

And now it's Friday, and I'm dealing with this shit.

“Where the fuck am I going to find someone to officiate our wedding this late in the game? I needed that priest, goddamnit!”

Punk snorts at my choice of words. “We'll find someone, sis, I promise.”

I shake my head. “There's no priest who'll fill in for Father Castelli for the same reason he backed out.”

“She's right,” Tony says behind me. “Bianchi family ties to the Catholic church run deep.”

“Why does it need to be a priest? Why not have someone in the family do it? That'll mean more to Atlas and you than having some stranger marrying you guys,” Punk suggests.

“I could do it,” Tony offers.

Say whaaat?! “Are you seriously offering to officiate our wedding?”

Tony smirks. “How hard could it be? I can get my license online. I’ve been to a shit-ton of weddings and funerals—more funerals than weddings—but I can recite the garbage verbatim drunk. I can totally pull this off.”

My eyes prick and my bottom lip quivers. I’ve been crying a lot lately—the shit keeps building up. *Get a grip, Jo!*

Tony looks me over with an uneasy expression. “Ah, fuck! You’re not going to cry on me, are you?”

I throw my arms around him and start blubbering into his chest. Tony has no idea how much weight he unloaded from my shoulders.

Tony wraps his beefy arms around me. “It’s okay, Little Jo. I’ll start the process tonight. Shit, I even got the perfect suit for the occasion.”

“Well, that was the easiest wedding-planning catastrophe fix to date,” Punk says, fishing out his cell from his cut. “I’m still notifying Prez.” He steps away to make the call.

It’s nearly noon and many of my workers are finding shaded areas to sit and eat. I tug on Tony’s arm. “Let’s head over to headquarters to grab some lunch.”

Hades runs ahead of us, eager to beg for scraps. Tony too, doesn’t need to be told twice—at the mention of food, he’s practically yanking me along. He’s like a bottomless tank and never passes up an opportunity to feed his belly.

“That’s it! You’re Tank!”

Tony stops and looks at me. “Come again?”

“Your club name is Tank,” I say with a giggle.

Tony frowns a moment, mulling it over, before smiling. “Not bad, Little Jo.”

My mom is in her element in the kitchen at headquarters, putting double-decker club sandwiches on the counter for

anyone to grab. We load our plates with sandwiches, fruit, and salad.

Tony places a noisy kiss on my mom's cheek. "Thanks for the grub, Mama Holland."

Beaming, my mom pats his cheek and joins us at the table. She tries to discretely hand Hades a sandwich under the table, but I notice and smile. Others come and join us for lunch. Everyone freezes when we hear a loud crash in the back offices.

Mom grabs my arm. "What was that?"

I rub my temple to ease my headache. "That was my fiancé finding out our priest ditched us. Tank's going to officiate our wedding now."

Mom's face furrows. "Who?"

Tony thumbs his massive chest. "Me. Tank."

With a sigh, mom leaves the table and returns with Tylenol, placing two in my hand. "This mobster interfering is getting out of hand," mom snips, knocking back her own Tylenol.

Maceo storms into the main room with Gauge beside him. He locks eyes with me from across the room before marching over to me, bending, and placing a dominating kiss on my lips—the kind of kiss that lets me know he loves me and will take care of everything. When he breaks the kiss, his eyes smolder with intensity. He nods a thank you at Tony, and Tony nods back.

He straightens to leave, but I grab his hand. "Where are you going?"

"To get some answers from the priest," he spits, his venom not aimed at any of us. He looks over at Tony. "Are you moving in this weekend, Tony?"

"It's Tank," I correct.

Maceo looks confused. "What?"

Tony waves his hands at himself. “I’m Tank. Jo named me.”

Maceo smirks and nods his head, approving. “Fitting.”

“And yeah, I’m moving in tomorrow,” Tony mumbles around his food.

When Maceo found out Tony’s lease was coming to an end, he pretty much insisted Tony move in with the family. He wants to keep all his men as close as possible—his way of protecting his brothers. Tony requested the room next door to Ebony—as if the rest of the guys needed any more warning to stay away from her.

“That means you’ll be patching in, brother,” Gauge says pointedly.

Tony nods. “I’m well aware. This is the family I choose.”

Satisfied with his answer, Maceo pecks the top of my head and leaves with Gauge to get whatever information they can from Father Castelli.

Melancholy, I lean back in my chair, my appetite disappearing like my waistline will when I get pregnant. “Lorenzo’s not going to stop. Tomorrow it will be something else to screw with the wedding.” And each day Lorenzo will up the antics ‘till he gets the result he wants...or the person he wants. I shiver.

Tony gently pats my hand from across the table. “He won’t get you, Little Jo. He’d have to come through here with a semi to break our walls.”

I want to believe Tony, but I can’t stop the uneasiness settling in my stomach.

Shit, I’m going to be sick.

I race upstairs to my room with Hades on my heels and barely make it to the toilet before my lunch comes back up. My mom must have run after me because I feel her pull back my braids and rub soothing circles on my back.

When I’m done, I close the lid and flush the toilet, resting my head on the closed lid. Mom hands me my toothbrush. I

stand, taking the toothbrush, and scrub the nastiness out of my mouth.

“Perhaps you rest this afternoon? I’m afraid with all the stress with the work projects, wedding fiascos, and this douche Bianchi, you’re wearing yourself thin. You don’t want to get sick before your wedding next week. I’ll call your dad to fill in for you over at the house,” mom suggests.

I’m about to protest, but mom already has her cell out and phoning dad. Hades seems to like the idea of resting and pads off to his bed.

Emotionally exhausted, I make my way to the bed and pull out a floor plan I’ve been working on for a shopkeeper downtown. Punk waltz into my suite and hands me my backpack and laptop from the build site. “Are we crashing in here for the rest of the day?”

“Mom freaked out when I threw up. Now I’m on house arrest,” I answer, powering on my computer.

Punk puts the back of his hand to my forehead. “You sick, sis?”

I shake my head. “Stressed.”

“I’m sorry. Maybe mama bear is right. Let’s Netflix and chill the rest of the afternoon, start the weekend early.”

“My thoughts exactly,” mom says, walking over to Punk with a heaping plate of food and a giant drink.

He grins and takes the offering. “Thanks, mom!” He settles on the bed next to me and turns on Netflix. “Put work away and watch a chick-flick with me. You know I can only indulge my guilty pleasure with you.”

Ain’t that the truth. When Punk confessed his love for rom-com, he made me pinky swear never to tell the guys. Knowing they would harass him, I crossed my heart and promised. It’s kind of our thing now.

“I can do both,” I say, typing away on my 3D design program illustrating the trendy woman’s boutique. I’m

currently trying to figure out the best layout to add more than one changing room in the small store.

My mom brings one of the wingbacks into the bedroom and sits next to us with her Kindle. Punk's 'mama bear' comment is pretty spot on. She would always set up shop in mine or Simone's rooms when we were sick, to keep a better eye on us. "Simone is coming to join us."

Not five minutes later, Simone comes in with snacks and throws them on the bed, crawling in on the other side of me. I eye the candy, unsure if my stomach can handle it, but it's candy—I never turn down the sugary garbage. We chew on Twizzlers and decide on *Sixteen Candles* for our afternoon entertainment.

"What's the hype with Jake Ryan? I mean, I guess the dude is good looking, but not gaga good looking," Punk muses aloud.

"He's fucking hot," I say, faking a swoon against the pillows.

"Definitely," Simone agrees dreamily.

Punk gives an exaggerated eye-roll. "Please. John Bender from *Breakfast Club* is way more spank worthy."

Smiling as I work, I look over at my brother. "You're only saying that because Bender is a bad boy like you."

"Damn straight," Punk says, snapping off a KitKat and handing me the other half.

Simone cocks her head at the screen. "Jake Ryan kind of looks like Atlas." All three of us cock our heads to examine Jake Ryan for Maceo comparison.

I shake my head. "Nah. Maceo is way hotter and buffer."

Punk grins. "If Atlas is Jake Ryan, then Jo's the heroine, Samantha Baker."

I snort. "Definitely not. I'm not that innocent."

"I didn't hear that," mom says with a disapproving scowl, scrolling through her Kindle.

“Sure, you are,” Punk teases me.

“Would that make you Ted, The Geek, in this storyline?” Simone smirks. “Samantha’s annoying, younger sidekick?”

Punk glowers at Simone. “Nerdy blue-eyed kid, who grows up to be a hunk in real life? Sure, that’s me. I’m guessing you’re Caroline Mulford, the prissy chick from the movie?”

Simone sneers. “I am not the blonde bimbo.”

“Of course, you are! That casting call has you written all over it. If I’m The Geek like you say, you’re totally the bimbo,” Punk continues.

The two of them banter back and forth ‘till I can’t stand it. “You guys do know The Geek and Caroline hook-up in the story.”

Both of them gasp and lean away from me like I coughed Coronavirus on them.

“Gross, sis. That’s incest,” Punk grouses.

“I agree it’s gross, but we aren’t related, moron!”

“Sure, we are. Jo’s my sis. Stella’s my mom. Making you, by default, my evil step-sister.”

“Why you—” my sister starts, but Punk cuts her off.

“Plus, I would never poach my best friend’s woman,” he adds with a devilish grin.

Simone’s eyes double in size. “I’m not Chase’s woman!”

Punk breaks out laughing. “Oh, man. You totally are. Might as well accept fate.”

My mom sighs, tired with the petty adolescent squabble. “Kill them with kindness, Simone.”

“Hate to break it to you, Stella, but neither of your girls inherited the kindness gene.” Punk chuckles. “They inherited the queen-bee gene.”

“You better be referring to our imperialness and not our bitchiness,” I warn, failing to hide my smirk.

Punk shakes with laughter. “More like royal bitchiness.”

Simone bares her teeth, but before she can retaliate, my cell buzzes. Recognizing the number, I raise a hand to silence the room. “Hello?”

“Hello, Miss Holland. It’s Emily from Bellezza in Bianco Bridal Boutique. Wanted to let you know your new bridesmaids’ dresses are in. I went through each garment bag personally and it is indeed the correct dresses this time.”

I let out a sigh of relief. At least my mom is going to be happy. “Thank you, Emily. I’ll have someone swing by today.”

My mom looks at me, her eyes full of hope. “Please tell me it’s a wedding miracle?”

“*Your* wedding miracle, yes. Dresses are done and ready,” I answer.

Mom springs from her seat, racing around the room, shoving her feet in her shoes, and putting the chair back.

I sit up in bed. “Mom, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m moving my ass and racing into town to grab those dresses before Bianchi snags them.” Mom snaps her fingers at Simone. “Chop, chop, Caroline.”

Annoyed, Simone wrinkles her nose. “Me? Why do I have to go?”

Mom looks ready to blow a gasket. “Because your sister is on lockdown and you’re her maid of honor. Now move. We need to get there pronto.”

Simone rolls her eyes but gets off the bed. Punk doesn’t look pleased. “Stella, maybe you should send one of the guys over or at least have one of them go with you. Atlas wants to keep the herd close.”

My mom huffs. “The only one required to have a bodyguard is Jo. Simone and I are perfectly fine running over there and grabbing those gowns. Hell, I’ve been going to the grocery store daily by myself and nothing has happened.”

Punk scratches his head. “I don’t know, mom.”

But Stella does what Stella wants. She plants a kiss on Punk’s smooth head and spins out of the room with my sister. Punk pulls out his phone and logs into the crews’ security app.

I cross my arms over my chest. “You’ve got to be kidding! When did Chase put tracking on my family?”

“Shush, angry sprite. He got permission first before installing it. He learned from Prez’s fuck up.” He pokes his tongue against the inside of his cheek as he studies his phone. “They’re en route. Do you feel like going to the gym downstairs with me, or you want me to chill with you some more?”

Typically, when I’m in the house, I don’t need security detail—Punk chooses to hang out with me as opposed to going off and doing his own thing.

“Go ahead and get your workout in. I’m going to keep plugging away at this mock-up. I’m not presenting to the client ‘till after Maceo and I are back from our honeymoon, but if I can get it done now, it’s one less stress later on.”

Punk doesn’t look eager to leave me alone. I nudge him. “I can’t get into any trouble here.”

With a resounding groan, Punk gets up and heads for the gym.

A half-hour goes by with me working in silence. I manage to get fairly far on my layout plan when my phone buzzes. Simone is calling. *That can’t be good.* Maybe there’s a problem with the dresses after all?

I answer. “Before I ask what’s wrong, how bad is it on a scale from one to ten?”

“A ten plus,” a smooth, accent responds.

Dread floods my system. “Lorenzo?”

“Yes, Pina. Mmm, how I’ve missed you. Have you missed me?”

I hop off the bed, racing to the door, ready to scream for one of the guys.

“Before you do anything drastic, I must warn you. I’ll do harm to your lovely mother and sister if you notify Atlas or any of his men. I’m sorry I have to frighten you with threats, but your fiancé has left me no other choice. He shouldn’t have handed over Gianna to the FBI or gotten involved with my drug trafficking—he put all this into motion.”

I hear whimpering and muffled screams on the other end of the phone. “Please. Don’t hurt them. They’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Calm, Pina. They won’t be harmed as long as you do as I command,” Lorenzo coos.

“Anything,” I say without hesitation. “Just name it.”

Lorenzo’s husky chuckle makes my skin crawl. “Leave him. Come to me willingly and be mine.”

I gulp down my revulsion. “Lorenzo—”

I hear Simone scream in fear, stifled yet loud enough. I recognize that sound. It’s the same sound I made when Jacob tried to force himself on me.

“Luca, leave her be,” Lorenzo warns, his voice holding a hint of humor. “Do not play with her unless I say so.”

My blood runs cold. Lucky Luca—the most sadistic henchman in Lorenzo’s inner circle. The man who spent years beating and raping Candy for sick kicks.

He’s touching my sister. He’s hurting her. Oh, God, no, please, no!

“Don’t you dare let that pig touch her,” I scream into the phone.

Lorenzo laughs. “Luca is like a hog in rut, but I promise I won’t let him hurt her.”

My mind is running on a loop with horrific images of what is happening to my sister. “Send me a picture. I need a picture to confirm that you haven’t harmed them.”

Lorenzo sighs. “Very well. You should be receiving it now.”

My phone pings with a text message. I immediately click on the image. There my mom and sister are bound and gagged in chairs. Their hair and clothes are ruffled, and their faces are streaked with tears and mascara. The image is horrendous, but not as horrifying as seeing Lucky Luca standing behind my sister with his hand down her shirt.

Flashes of Jacob molesting me in the back of a dirty van flood my head. The fear I felt when I was at my most vulnerable was the most excruciating emotion to experience. Seeing my sister in a similar situation makes me burn.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt them!”

“I haven’t laid a finger on them, Pina,” he says smugly. “And they aren’t hurt.”

“Unwanted touching is hurting. If you allow those fuckers to touch my sister or my mom, you’re no better than Jacob,” I snarl.

Whatever I say gives Lorenzo pause. He snarls. “I’m nothing like that monster.”

“Doing nothing while my sister is being violated is the exact same thing Jesse did when he helped Jacob kidnap me. Your hands are still dirty,” I snap.

Lorenzo growls with irritation. “Take your hands off the goods, Luca. No more touching.”

“Promise me no one will hurt my mom and sister. Promise me you’ll let them go unharmed, and I’ll come to you,” I beg, unable to hide my trembling voice.

Lorenzo sucks in a ragged breath. “Pina, I’ll promise you the world if you’re mine. If you wish for me to let them go unsullied, I’ll grant it. But you must come to me first. It’s important that you make this the choice you want. I’ll not take you by force like Jacob. I don’t manhandle women, certainly not you.”

Truly, I cannot understand how he believes he's any better than Jacob. They're cut from the same cloth from what I can see.

Giving me a choice? Is he serious? Not much of choice when my only option is to hand myself over for the release of my mom and sister. Of course, I will do it willingly, but it's not what I want—far from it.

“Why are you doing this? You don't love me. You only want to possess me like a thing, like an acquisition,” I cry into the phone.

“Oh, you're wrong, Pina. Yes, I wish to possess you—mind, body, and soul. But I love you. I have since the day you met me to go over the casino project. And I can love you more than what the gutter rat pretends to, if only you allow me.”

My head spins and my stomach threatens to revolt again. There's no other option but to give into Lorenzo's demands. My mom and sister are in danger. “What do I need to do?”

“Pina,” he purrs. “You've made me a very happy man. I'll send you my location. Memorize the map, leave your phone and all evidence of your life with him behind, and come to me.”

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek. “It won't be easy sneaking away. You know I'm in a fortress meant to keep you out and eyes on me at all times, right?”

“Think outside the box, *bellissima*. Where there is a will, there is a way. I texted you the address. Do you have it?”

With shaky fingers, I check my messages. “Yes.”

“Do you know where you're going? Can you find it?”

I gulp. “Yes. I know where to go.”

“Hurry, *il mio amore*. We need to leave tonight. Don't make me wait any longer than I already have. And don't bother to call this phone again. It's being disposed of. If I discover you have informed anyone of any of this, I'll hand over your family to my men.” The line goes dead.

Springing into action, I throw on my shoes. Grabbing my keys from my backpack, I notice my rings. I remove my silicone band and the chain around my neck with my engagement ring. I kiss the ring and place it on Maceo's nightstand along with my phone. "Forgive me, Maceo."

I go to leave and turn back to my phone. I look at the text with the address, copying and pasting it into Maps. I set my cell on the nightstand with the location on display. It may be too late for me, but Maceo and his men should be able to find my mom and sister by the time they learn I'm gone.

I run and open the door of our suite, leaning my ear out to listen. The house seems still. I make a beeline for the staircase down to the main living area and pause when I see Stage and Triple making their way up the stairs, laughing and oblivious to me.

Retreating, I race to the other end of the hall where a second staircase leads to the ground level. With the number of people living here, I was not okay with having only one set of stairs. A second exit was needed for safety reasons, and thank God, I did it. I fly down the back stairs and come out by the club's offices. Maceo and Gauge are gone, leaving only the tech guys. I peak my head around the doorway and see all three of the guys hard at work, faces bent, and backs to me.

My heart pounds as I sprint to the patio doors. Every time an access door opens, an alert is sent to the tech team, but there's a way to override the system.

Working with Chase while building this headquarters was vital in order to understand his security needs. Chase said even the club needed an evacuation program if they were ever under attack and had to escape without alerting the perpetrators.

I punch in the override code on the keypad by the door and quickly sneak outside. I crouch and peek over the stone wall toward the garages.

Shit. Eagle is outside, polishing his bike right by the garages, and Reaper is making his way from the mechanics' shop to Eagle. There's no way to get to my Subaru without either of them noticing. And by some luck if I could, there's

no way I could make it off the property without activating the security gate to open. Chase will be all over that.

Fuck. I didn't think this through at all. I look at the keys in my hand and notice I have all the work keys on my chain.

Thank you, God!

I wait 'till I'm sure Reaper and Eagle aren't looking in my direction and make a mad run for the build site two acres over. I cut through the dense foliage and tall grass to avoid detection instead of the cleared trail.

"Please don't let a snake pop out. Please don't let a snake pop out," I chant to myself as I race through the overgrowth.

Luckily, I come out by the build site snake-bite free. I'm not surprised the site is already shut down for the day, seeing as it's late afternoon on a Friday.

I race to the pickup truck we use to run errands in. Starting the engine, I drive off the lot and make my way to the road from the other end of the property. It's the road we made on the hundred acres for the heavier construction rigs and delivery trucks to use. There's no fence around this gate and I'm able to drive around it. I make it to the main road and peel off in the direction I need to go.

Hang on, Mom and Simone, I'm coming.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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I'm not above beating information out of people for the greater good, but I draw the line at slapping around a urine-soaked priest.

If Abuelita Lucia knew what I was up to she'd be shaking her fist and throwing her wooden kitchen spoons down from heaven at my head. I send up a silent prayer. *Look away, abuela.*

The beady-eyed bastard knew we were coming as soon as he heard the roar of our hogs rolling up to Saint Joseph's Catholic Church in the heart of the city. He rushed up the steps of his parish as fast as his pudgy body would take him.

Gauge and I did a quick sweep of the sanctuary, finding Father Castelli hiding in one of the confessionals. I grabbed him by his clerical collar and hauled him out, slamming his fat ass down on one of the pews. He yelped with fright.

And that's when he released his bladder.

Good. I want him scared, real fucking scared. This asshole upset my woman and backed Bianchi—he can sit in his own damn filth while I question his sorry ass. I'm not going to pound on him, but he doesn't need to know that.

“Fuck.” Gauge wrinkles his nose at the strong ammonia scent. “I hate it when they piss themselves.” I smile without humor.

“Father,” I say coldly, my eyes deadly. “You've upset my bride and it's not acceptable. I know Bianchi forced your hand,

but don't assume for a second I won't twist the damn thing off unless you give me the information I want."

The priest raises a shaky hand. "Please. Don't hurt me."

"Then make sure to answer my goddamn questions," I threaten.

The priest does the sign of the cross and starts praying. "What do you want to know?"

I crouch to his level, giving him nowhere to look but in my black eyes. "Where's Bianchi?"

Father Castelli licks his dry lips nervously. "I don't know."

Wrong answer. I pull my switchblade from my cut.

The priest eyes my weapon wearily. "I swear, I don't know where he is!"

With a flick of my wrist, I reveal the gleam of my blade.

Father Castelli gulps and turns a nauseating shade of green. *Fucker better not puke on me.* "Wanna try again? It's been a long time since I've stuck anything as squishy as you."

"Okay, I'll tell you what I know, but I have no clue if it's where he's hiding. I overheard his two bodyguards saying something about the 'rails' and needing to be 'ready to load.' I didn't ask for clarification since I wasn't privy to the conversation."

Gauge and I share a knowing smile. "The Great Western railway corridor over in the industrial park. He's moving his goods out of Fort Collins," Gauge states.

We leave the roly-poly Judas and his urinal-coated church.

"Well, that was an easy interrogation. He didn't even give an effort. Kind of disappointing," Gauge says with a chuckle, throwing his leg over the seat of his Harley. "I was ready to make him squeal."

"Next one, brother," I say with a grin. I pull my cell from my cut and call Chase. He answers on the first ring. "We have a location. See if you can get access to any live feeds at Great Western Industrial Park."

Chase grumbles. “That’s three-thousand acres, Atlas. Want to narrow it a bit. It’ll make my job a hell of a lot easier.”

“He’s moving merchandise. Check along the rail system.”

Tapping fingers across a keyboard is the only response Chase gives before he disconnects. I dial Josephine to tell her the good news, that we finally have a lead on the douchebag, but she doesn’t answer.

I hate when my calls to her go unanswered. I try again. Sometimes she misplaces her phone or is wrapped-up in her work. Again, no answer.

Growling, I try again, making Gauge laugh at my impatience. “Third time’s the charm, right?” Nothing.

Uneasiness wants to take up residency in my stomach, but I need to stay focused. Jumping to horrible conclusions will do me no good. I left her in good hands in a fucking fortress filled with the highest level of security.

I dial Punk. “What up, Prez?”

I have to reign in my growing uneasiness. “Where is she?”

“Jo? Upstairs working,” he says, measured. “Why?”

My temper rises a notch. “And where the fuck are you?”

“Downstairs in the gym. I asked sis to join me, but she wanted to finish up a blueprint—practically kicked me out of the room.”

Worried, I run a hand along my forehead. “Go and make sure.”

Gauge mouths for me to put the call on speaker. I jab the button, allowing us both to hear the conversation.

I can practically feel Punk’s eye roll through the phone. “Bro, chill. I’m sure she’s either in the middle of drafting, or she’s conked out. This week hasn’t been exactly nice to her. Plus, she was sick this afternoon.”

“Go fucking check on her,” I grit through my teeth.

“Remember that time Jo was in the middle of getting her lady bits waxed and you freaked out when she didn’t answer her phone? Remember the backlash she gave you when you sent Eagle to find her? He walked into that tiny ass room to find her spread-eagle with a technician ripping away between her legs. I’m only saying maybe you’re overreacting. I don’t want to walk in on my sis in a compromising position,” Punk says with humor.

Gauge chuckles at the memory, but I’m dead serious right now. “For fuck’s sake, Punk, go fucking check on my woman and make sure she’s in our fucking suite!”

“Shit, bro. Calm down. I was already walking to the room,” he says. I hear him knock on the door. “Jo? It’s me. I’m coming in. I pray to God you’re dressed. Atlas is making me do it—you can blame him,” Punk says with a laugh. I hear his footsteps enter the room. “Jo?”

My heart stops. “Where is she, Punk?”

“Jo?” I hear doors opening. “Jo?”

“Punk, where is my woman?”

“Fuck! Stage? Have you seen Jo? No. Shit! No, she’s not in her room. Go get Chase.”

“Where the fuck is she?” I holler into the phone. I look over at my best friend. “Gauge, bring up the tracking app.”

“Getting Chase and his team on it now,” Punk says heatedly. “I’m checking for clues in the room.”

Gauge looks at me with concern. “Atlas, the app says she’s in the suite.”

Punk’s gulp is audible. “She’s not, but her phone is, and it’s not fucking good.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Driving recklessly along the beat-up trucking road on the far side of the Fort Collins industrial park, I pray Lorenzo keeps his promise.

This place is a giant maze of steel buildings used as temporary storage for the rail system. Thousands of acres devoid of human contact seems like an ideal hiding spot for Lorenzo.

The directions Lorenzo sent me has me going to the rail corridors. If he's planning an escape out of Fort Collins, using the railroad makes sense since the FBI is watching the highways and airports. It feels a little like an old western set in modern times.

I slow as I near the railway and peer into several of the steel structures surrounding me. Lorenzo and his goons are holding my mom and Simone hostage in one of them. When I catch a flash of something shiny and bright yellow, I stomp on the breaks.

There, hiding in the shadows of a pole shed in the center of the rail system, is Lorenzo's Lamborghini. I throw the truck in park, leaving the keys in the ignition, and jump out. Pretty Paolo appears out of nowhere and firmly takes me by the elbow.

"Get your filthy hands off me," I shriek, trying to yank my arm from the ugly bastard's grip.

We both struggle with each other a few moments when Lorenzo comes out from the building. "Paolo, let her go. She must come to me freely," he orders in a smooth voice.

Released from Paolo's hands, I step purposely toward Lorenzo. My heart pounds harder against my ribs with each footfall. Lorenzo's dark eyes sparkle brighter the closer I come to him.

When I'm within grabbing distance, Lorenzo closes the gap between us. His arms encircle me in a death grip and thrust me against his hard chest. It takes everything in me not to respond to my fight or flight instincts. Any resistance and he may back out of his promise to leave my family alone.

He palms my face with one hand, his hard eyes reading mine for any sign of falsehood. I must be one fan-fucking-tastic actress because Lorenzo's eyes soften. His hold relaxes, becoming tender.

"Pina," he whispers seductively. "You've chosen me."

Wrong! I was coerced, you loafer-dick.

Lorenzo runs his smooth thumb along my bottom lip. Unable to tolerate his Palmolive touch, I snap my teeth. He yanks his hand away.

Sheer willpower be damned.

Lorenzo's polished face pulls into a nasty grin. "I see the fight is still in you." He grabs me by the collar of my shirt, bringing my face less than an inch from his. "Good. I want to be the one to break and mold you."

I open my mouth to give some smart-aleck retort when he crushes his lips to mine, shoving his tongue down my throat.

Gah! And I thought I didn't have a gag reflex except for Simone's loogies.

Struggling in his arms, Lorenzo breaks the kiss with a snarl. "Don't test my patience, Pina! I've waited long enough. My tolerance is nearly gone. You came to me!"

"I still haven't seen my mom and sister," I fire back.

Lorenzo's jaw ticks, but he nods with a smile. "Mmm, you've pleased me. Never assume a deal is done until you see the goods. That quality in you will make you a damn fine

Donna to stand next to me.” He takes me by the hand and pulls me into the metal building.

In the center of the room, I spot my mom and sister still restrained in chairs. Lucky Luca is squatting next to Simone, whispering in her ear. She yanks her head away, making Luca laugh. Seeing the creep near Simone brings on my feral side. I rip my hand away from Lorenzo and sprint toward her.

“Pina!” Lorenzo yells in alarm.

Luca looks up with only enough time to see me barreling down on him. The one good thing about being short is I don’t need to lower my center of gravity to drive my weight into someone. *Thank God for small wonders.* I drive my shoulder into Luca’s gut, making him tumble backward on his ass.

Scrambling quickly, I straddle his chest and start throwing right and left hooks at the sick fuck’s face. Thanks to Maceo teaching me how to throw a proper punch, I actually manage to land a couple decent shots on the asshole.

My mom and sister shout through their gags, their words inaudible. Luca’s little weasel squeals twist my face into a cruel smile. “How you like being beat? Not fun is it, you fucking sadist!”

Lean arms wrap around my waist and haul me off of Luca, but the fight hasn’t left me. I kick Luca hard in the shin as I’m dragged away, making him yelp.

Lorenzo snickers in my ear. “Oh my! My vixen has some claws.”

Luca sits up slowly with a busted lip and a welt on his cheek. He wipes the back of his hand across his mouth, eyes widening when he notices the blood. He staggers to a stand with gritted teeth. “Little bitch.”

Lorenzo pulls a pistol from inside his suit and points it at Luca. My eyes freeze on the gun, a Glock like Maceo’s—hope springs eternal. “Nu-uh-uh. Apologize to my queen before your luck runs out, Luca.”

Luca freezes and swallows, seeming to remember his position. His face immediately transforms from possessed to

impassive, like a good little soldier. “Of course. My apologies, *Signora Bianchi*.”

My eyes narrow at the bestial prick. The fucker added that last bit to get under my skin, and damn him because it sure did. “Go suck a bag of dicks.”

Lorenzo gives a bolstering laugh and re-holsters his pistol in his shoulder harness, his arm tightens around me. “Isn’t this delightful. My second in command and future wife playing nice. Which reminds me...” Lorenzo reaches back into his suit and pulls out a robin egg blue jewelry box—the kind of box that holds a Tiffany engagement ring.

My mom and Simone start protesting through the fabric gags, shaking their heads, and bucking in their seats.

Lorenzo sneers at my family and juts his chin at Paolo and Luca. “If either of them acts up, shoot them. I won’t have my proposal ruined by their whining.”

“You promised you wouldn’t hurt them,” I protest.

Lorenzo cups my face with one hand. “And as long as their quiet, I will keep my promise.”

Wanting to be strong, but failing as my tears spill from my eyes, I plead with him. “Let them go. Please, Lorenzo.”

His eyes flash with intensity. I can’t be certain, but he must be getting off with me begging. He pulls me closer and runs his nose along my neck.

Not getting the result I want, I nearly cry. I look to my family, my face looking similar to theirs. My mom’s famous saying, ‘Kill them with kindness,’ springs to mind.

“Lorenzo,” I say, my fingers gripping on to his suit jacket. “Sugar dumpling, please let them go. How am I able to enjoy your proposal with my mom and sister bound like criminals? They’re my family.”

Lorenzo blinks, cocking his head. “Sugar dumpling?”

Shit. Did I overdo it? “Umm, would you prefer baby-cakes?”

Lorenzo gives an amused half-smirk. “Call me whatever you want but make it sincere. I won’t be mocked.”

Pushing my nerves aside, I walk my fingers up the lapel of his suit and look up at him shyly. “Will you untie them?”

Lorenzo’s face darkens with desire, making me shiver. He slides his hand down to palm my ass, pressing his erection against me. “Pina,” he coos. “I would love nothing more than to grant your request, but they don’t understand what’s going on. They don’t know that you’re here willingly. We can’t trust them.”

Hating myself for what I’m about to do, I swallow my pride and inch my hand between us, grasping his length through his tailored pants. He groans and closes his eyes a moment, relishing in my touch.

“Please. Do it as an engagement gift for me? You need to understand I’m a simple girl and treasure simple things. Acts of kindness go a long way with me.”

“You’re far from simple.” Lorenzo leans forward and kisses me roughly. “Fuck, Pina! You make it impossible to say no. Fine, you win.” He nods over my head to his goons. “Untie them, but be ready. One wrong move and put them down.”

Over my dead body.

Ignoring my mom’s and sister’s horrified expressions, I manage a seductive purr. “Thank you.”

Lorenzo grabs my chin roughly and forces me to look at him. “Don’t think for a second you can fool me. If you’re planning anything funny—”

“I’m not,” I say firmly, interrupting him. All I have is a prayer. “I just want them free.”

Lorenzo looks back and forth between my eyes, determining if I’m honest, before pressing his lips to mine. He grabs my hand and slides a ridiculous flashbulb-size diamond ring on my finger.

I frown. “That’s it?”

He scoffs. “*That’s it?* Are you joking, Pina? That ring cost a hundred-thousand!”

“Not the ring. I’m talking about the proposal.”

Lorenzo gives an apologetic smile. “We don’t have time, *bellissima*. We need to hurry.”

Well, fuck. This isn’t going in my favor at all.

“Oh, okay. I guess this will have to do,” I say, pouting. “It’s not any different from how Maceo proposed.”

Lorenzo’s nostrils flare. “What do you mean?”

“Maceo put a ring on me, and that was it. No getting down on one knee or professing his love.” I lie with a shrug, faking a sad face. “This isn’t any different. I assumed you’d be more... *romantic*.”

With a snarl, Lorenzo presses his lips to mine in a domineering claim. “I’ll give you romance in spades.” He nods at Paolo. “Lay your coat down.”

“But Boss, this is the only suit I have on me,” Paolo protests.

“And my suit is three-Gs more. I’m not going to get mine dirty by kneeling on this shit floor. If my queen wants a proper proposal, she’ll have it. Now lay the damn coat down,” Lorenzo snaps.

Fearing his wrath, Paolo hops to it and drapes his suit jacket at our feet. Lorenzo lowers to his left knee and takes my hand. “Love of my life, you’re my everything. You bring meaning to my existence. I want to conquer the world with you at my side. Make me the happiest man by becoming my partner in crime?”

Gross. But at least he’s in the position I want him in. I need to make this as real as possible. I give him a sad smile. “This isn’t how I would have liked to start our relationship.”

Lorenzo’s eyes flint between mine, his hand constricts slightly around my hand.

I look at my mom and sister before looking back at him. “I promise to make us work if you promise not to hurt them.”

Lorenzo’s eyes shine with triumph. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes. I’ll marry you.” Shelving my disgust, I bend and plant a heavy kiss on his lips, leaning my weight into it. With his hands gripping my waist and his attention focused on my mouth working against his, he doesn’t feel my hand slip into his suit.

Three, two, one...

My hand whips out of Lorenzo’s suit with his pistol. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Luca and Paolo go for their guns. Reacting on instinct, I aim the gun at the closest threat, shooting Paolo in the shoulder. Paolo drops his guns and screams. Luca, the weasel that he is, runs and dives behind a tower of pallets.

“Pina, no!” Lorenzo grabs for the gun. I dodge and grab both sides of his head, ramming my knee up and connecting with his face. Lorenzo falls back with blood gushing from his nose. “Fuck!” he roars.

My face swivels to my mom and sister, frozen from the unexpected attack. “RUN!”

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Punk texts me a picture from Josephine's phone. The image is horrific, showing Stella and Simone roughed-up and restrained. But I know exactly what drove her to escape the house to go after her family.

Luca, with his hand shoved down Simone's shirt, squeezing her breast to the point where Simone looks like she's screaming in pain behind her gag, was certainly the bait needed to lure Josephine away from headquarters.

Bianchi has Stella and Simone. Josephine would do anything for the people she loves, including sacrificing herself.

"Jesus," Gauge mutters, looking at the same image on his own phone.

"I'll kill him. I'll kill the motherfucker!" Chase screams in the background.

"Punk, stop him from going all Hulk smash," I order. "Tell him Luca is his, but we need video confirmation Bianchi is at the rail corridor."

"Jo left the map with the address on her phone. She did it on purpose to give us a trail to follow," Punk says.

Chase barks orders to his tech team. My woman was smart enough to give us her location before she took off, giving Chase the information he needs to gain live video feed. Pulling up the live feed only sends Chase into a feral rage.

"Oh, fuck. Someone stop him," Punk shouts. A scuffle can be heard with Chase swearing at everyone to get the hell out of his way.

“What’s on the feed?” Gauge asks.

“Luca with Simone and Stella. He’s toying with Chase’s woman,” Punk answers heatedly.

“What’s going on?” a soft male voice asks.

“Get Jim out of there!” I shout.

“Oh, God! No! No, it can’t be,” Jim wails. A grown man weeping is one of the most horrific sounds imaginable—right up there with my woman crying.

“Atlas, we need a plan, stat!” Chase bellows.

“We ride. Arm yourselves to the max. We surround the building and flush them out. Shoot to kill. Butch and Ziggy stay and man the command center, update us with any changes on the feed as they happen. Have everyone wear their earpieces. We work this like any other hostage situation. Ziggy, call Detective Quire at the station. Butch, call our contacts at the FBI. Punk, send me the address. Gauge and I are heading there now. The rest of you will meet us ready for battle.”

“I’m coming,” Jim grits.

“Jim, I don’t want you in the way if a gunfight breaks out,” I say quickly.

“It’s my wife. My children,” Jim counters.

“I’ll take Jim,” Tony offers. “I’m taking the SUV since I don’t have a hog yet. I’ll make sure he stays out of the crossfires.”

“You keep him safe, Tank,” I order. I don’t need to spell it out for him—Josephine will never forgive me if anything happens to her dad.

“You have my word,” he replies.

“Good. Now let’s ride.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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JOSEPHINE

“**R**UN!” I scream again, finally breaking through their frozen minds. They grab each other’s hands and run for the front of the building to the exit. My feet race forward to catch up to them. A shot rings out and a metallic ting with sparks flares out on the metal siding of the building over our heads.

“Go to the right,” I instruct. My sister tugs my mom to the right and down a corridor of stocked shelving units stacked with cellophane-wrapped pallets, shielding them from view.

Another shot rings out over my head right before I follow the same path, I quickly run the opposite way—Lorenzo isn’t interested in them, but me. I need to lure them away from my family.

Shots are fired near my feet, sending shards of concrete dust and rock shrapnel into the air around me. Startled, I drop the gun in my wake and sprint faster to the shelving units on the other side.

“Don’t shoot her!” Lorenzo growls out. “That’s my fucking fiancée.”

Shit, shit, shit. This guy is completely mental if he still wants me. I need to figure out a way to get back to my truck or get my family to my truck to escape. I round a corner of stacked merchandise and freeze when I see Lorenzo less than ten feet away.

His blood-coated face spreads into a villainous grin. “There you are.”

Spinning on my heels, I back-track around the other corner with Lorenzo in pursuit. I manage to get far enough ahead to have a row of stacked shelves between us, but he sees me between the gaps of wrapped merchandise. We both slow to a stop and catch our breaths, gauging to see how the other will react.

“Pina,” he purrs in a sickly-saccharine voice. “How I love your spirit. Did you know you have given me a gift? Do you know what it is? You have given me the greatest challenge in winning your heart, and I fucking love it. And you know what I’ll love more? Breaking your spirit.”

“Stay away from me,” I warn, trying hard to hide my fear.

He laughs. “This is fun, no? This game we play. I admit you got me good back there.” He grabs at the bridge of his nose. “You may have reset my nose, *bellissima*.”

Movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention. I see my mom and sister on the far side of the building, waving for me to come to them. I shoo them, waving my hands frantically for them to get the hell out.

“And as much as I love playing cat and mouse, we need to be on our way,” Lorenzo says.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I hiss, my heart racing from the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

Lorenzo snarls. “You came to me. You wear my ring. You will have my name. Make no mistake, Giuseppina, you’re mine!”

He makes a wild grab for me through the gap between the shelves. I narrowly jump out of his reach and start sprinting again. I skid to a halt when I see Luca pointing his gun at me from the other end of the aisle.

My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it pulsing in my ears. I spin and practically collide with Lorenzo’s chest. His arms snag me in a vise-tight grip. “Gotcha.”

I hear my mom and sister scream, seeing me in the clutches of a mad man.

No, no, no! Images of Jacob flood my mind. The horror, the fear, the vulnerability. No, I won't go through it again. I refuse.

Remembering Maceo's defensive instructions, I drop my weight. Putting my arms out to push against Lorenzo's hips, gives me the space I need to knee him again and again in the gut. With each thrust of my knee, it loosens his hold 'till I have enough space to punch as well as knee him.

Cursing, his hands lose their hold on me. I race under his arms in the other direction, sprinting for my life. When I circle the corner, I see my mom and sister racing toward me.

"Get to the truck," I yell.

Mom and Simone slide to a stop before racing to the exit again, only to be stopped by Paolo, holding his wounded shoulder, and pointing his gun at them. They retreat and come racing back my way. There's nothing between us but open air and Lorenzo's Lamborghini.

Well, fuck. It may be our only hope. Mom and Simone must have the same idea as me because they hightail it to the sports car too. They reach it first—mom climbing in the driver's side and Simone in the passenger's.

Nearly out of air, I reach the driver's side door. "Move over."

"No, climb over me," my mom shouts back.

I don't argue. I jump over my mom and straddle the center console. These damn cars aren't meant to hold more than two people. My arms and legs are twisted with theirs, packed like sardines.

"Do you even know how to drive stick?" Simone cries.

"That's why I should be driving," I snap, panicked. Fuck, if mom can't drive stick, we're screwed.

"Shut up, the both of you," mom yells, fear lacing through her voice.

I look over my shoulder and see Lorenzo racing to the car. "He's coming!"

Simone starts hyperventilating. “Oh, my God. Start the car.”

“Where’s the key?” mom screams, frantically looking around the steering wheel for the ignition.

“There,” I point, flipping the cover on the fighter-jet style starter switch in the center console. I hit the start button and the car purrs to life. *No hot-wiring needed, thank fuck.*

Unfortunately, it could mean one of two things—the keys are in the car somewhere by some stroke of luck, or Lorenzo is very close.

As if called on cue, Lorenzo’s body slams against the driver’s side door. The three of us shriek in terror. Clearly anxious, Lorenzo tries to open the door, but mom engaged the locks. He pounds on the window, screaming my name, rage contorting his face. The fact he’s not opening the door means the keys are in the car. I would feel relieved if he wasn’t trying to smash through the windows.

“Fuck, mom, drive!” Simone hollers over the noise.

“I’m trying, Simone,” my mom yells back. Her eyes scan the dashboard while her hand messes with the clutch between my legs.

Smash! The driver’s door window explodes around us. “PINA!”

Holy shit! Lorenzo busted the window with his fists. He reaches in and tries to grab me. Screams fill the car in deafening volumes, chaos taking over. Another *smash* as the passenger window implodes on us. Paolo’s hand reaches in to open the door.

My mom somehow manages to throw the car in reverse and stomps on the gas. The car flies backward alarmingly fast with Lorenzo and his goons chasing after us.

“Stop!” I scream, afraid we’ll crash, not knowing where we’re going.

Simone, panic-stricken, grabs at the wheel, yanking it hard toward her. The car is spinning on its back tires. Round and

round we go, screaming at the top of our lungs and throwing up Hail Mary's to the heavens.

“We're gonna die!” Simone wails.

“Let go of the wheel,” I holler, yanking it back straight.

Mom slams on the break, bringing the car to a screeching halt—the three of us suck in air.

Alarmed, my eyes lift to the review mirror, despair filling me. “He's never going to stop,” I choke, watching him close the distance.

Without warning, mom steps on the accelerator. The car lurches backward again, going faster than before. Simone and I scream. What the fuck is mom doing?

Thunk! The car hit something. *Thump, thump, thump*—it rolls over the roof of the car. The windshield cracks, and something big tumbles off the hood. Mom doesn't stop until the car floods with sunlight.

Gasping, I stare at the windshield where a trail of blood trickles down the fractured glass. The door jerks open making us scream. I nearly piss myself when an arm reaches in and pulls me from the car.

Strong muscled arms encircle me, crushing me to his massive chest. “It's over. You're safe, Pixie.”

“Maceo,” I cry, collapsing against him. He sweeps me into a threshold carry, walking me to the ambulance speeding down the road toward us, along with an entire fleet of officers and Mercy Ravens.

CHAPTER TWENTY

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“I don’t know what happened. The car was too cramped with the three of us. I struggled with the gearshift, and everything happened so fast. Those vile men were breaking the windows. I stepped on the gas, going backward instead of forward. The girls were screaming and grabbed the wheel. We were spinning, and somehow, I managed to stop. But I panicked when I heard Jo say he was coming, and I stepped on the gas.”

Stella shakes her head as Detective Luke Quire scribbles her statement in his notepad. “I didn’t even know I hit him ‘till I stopped the car outside and saw the blood on the windshield.”

Hit him, she did. Lorenzo looked like he got bulldozed from how hard she nailed him with the Lamborghini. Flay, our crew’s medic, said he probably was killed on impact—the fucker never even got the chance to register the pain before he was gone. Pisses me off that I didn’t get a fucking round in him.

Stella sniffles in Jim’s arms as she recounts what happened an hour ago. “I never meant to kill anyone,” she sobs.

Luke closes his notepad and smiles kindly. “Of course, you didn’t. Your story matches your daughters’ statements. The evidence is pretty cut and dry. The situation was dire, and it’s obvious you didn’t know how to drive a stick.”

Something Luke says makes Jim frown and look at his wife. He shakes his head, brushing off whatever errant thought he had, but I smirk, understanding at once.

“I’m going to go talk things over with the FBI and see if we can’t wrap things up and let you guys head home,” Luke says. I shake his hand before he heads over to the FBI working the case.

“Jim?” Stella looks at her husband. “Can you see if the paramedics have any bottled water? I’m parched.”

Jim kisses his wife’s head. “Of course.”

When he’s out of earshot, I turn to my future mother-in-law with a raised eyebrow. “Stella Holland, you sneaky woman. You know how to drive stick, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, dear,” Stella says dismissively, avoiding looking me in the eye.

I bark a laugh. “Shit, Stella. If I had given you a pistol the night we caught the hacker, you would have gone out and gunned the prick down, wouldn’t you have? Come on. You can tell me the truth.”

Stella gives me a leveled look. “I married a tradesman who drove a stick shift. You honestly think he didn’t teach me?”

Wow! Stella is a piece of work. Note to self—never piss off my mother-in-law. “Why backward?”

Stella sighs. “I actually was having trouble with the stick at first, with it being between Jo’s legs, I couldn’t see. But when I heard the defeat in her voice when she said he wasn’t going to stop...there was only one thing to do. I don’t regret it.”

My arm snags Stella into a giant hug. “Thank you, mama bear,” I murmur against her head.

“You’ll learn soon enough when you become a parent the lengths which you’ll go for your children. And by the look of it, I’d say that’s sooner rather than later,” Stella says.

I pull back and look at her skeptically. “I’ve assumed, but how do you know?”

“One, a mother always knows. And two, her nausea isn’t stress-related.” Stella smiles and pats me on the arm. “Congratulations, but if you hurt my daughter, I’ll find myself another flashy car and run you over.”

I can't help but laugh out loud. Fuck, I'm marrying into the perfect family—I'll fit right in with their crazy.

Shaking my head and chuckling, I go search for Josephine. I find her monkey-hugging her sister in the ambulance. Neither one will let go of the other. A paramedic works to clean the lacerations the girls received when the windows in the car were busted.

Chase paces back and forth like a caged lion, talking to his tech team on his cell. The guy has every reason to be on edge.

After Stella so wonderfully took out Bianchi, Luca and Paolo took off. Paolo was picked up by highway patrol a mile down the road, but Luca is still MIA. Chase didn't get his pound of flesh, and he isn't going to rest 'till he chokes the life out of Luca for touching his woman. And I'll be there with the shovel and garbage bag to help assist him when the time comes.

The paramedic talks candidly with the girls, trying to distract them from the crime scene. Josephine must sense my eyes on her because she looks up and gives me the most radiant smile.

My heart does a backflip, making me rub my chest where my heart beats for her. I swagger forward 'till I'm standing behind the paramedic.

Chattering away, he turns and jumps when he sees how close I am. I'm naturally intimidating looking to outsiders, but when I'm hovering over someone, I'm sure I scare the crap out of people. Josephine has always said if I was an Avenger, I'd be Hulk—minus the green skin.

The paramedic gulps. “Hey, man. Your fiancée is all cleared.”

“And what about my girl?” Chase says on the other side of the paramedic.

The guy jumps and takes a giant step back from Chase. My hand covers my mouth, trying to stifle my chuckle. If I'm Hulk, then Chase is Thor, only with tawny hair and brown eyes.

“She’s all cleared too,” he says quickly before excusing himself.

Chase looks at Simone with an intense expression and moves in. Simone’s eyes widen when he pulls her gently from her sister’s grasp and cradles her in his arms. “Let’s go home, Numbers.”

Simone protests when he walks them to his bike. Of course, he ignores her as he seats himself on the hog with her straddling his waist, facing him. The roar of his motorcycle coming to life drowns out Simone’s complaints.

Chase’s face finally breaks into a smile. He leans forward surprising Simone with a domineering kiss on her lips. Whatever he says next makes her blush bright red.

I laugh to myself as I watch them speed away. “He’s going to have his hands full.”

Josephine snorts. “Poor bastard doesn’t know what he’s in for.”

“And do I know what I’m in for?” I challenge, giving her my panty-dropping smile.

My Pixie looks at me with hooded gem-blue eyes and wraps her arms around my neck. “You know exactly what you signed up for.”

Relishing her touch, my forehead rubs against hers. “You nearly gave me a heart attack,” I whisper. “Don’t do anything this reckless again.”

“Maceo,” she coos, wrapping her legs around my waist to pull me in closer. “If there’s anything that you can count on, it’s me doing anything, reckless or not, for those I love. You think I wanted to break your heart and go to Lorenzo? I did what I did because there wasn’t time to waste.”

“You could have been hurt,” I say with a shudder. “He could have taken you away from me. You think I want to live in a world where you don’t exist? Where I can’t hold you against my chest and feel your lips on my soul? It’s not fair, Pixie.”

Josephine squeezes me. “I’m sorry, future hubby. Forgive me.”

I squeeze her back and don’t let up. “Always, Pixie.” An idea comes to me and makes me giddy with anticipation, my hand moving lower over her backside.

Josephine’s eyes narrow. “You’re imagining paddling my ass because I took off, aren’t you?”

“You bet your sweet peach I am.”

The early morning rays creep along the floor of our suite, inching closer to the bed. I’ve been awake for nearly an hour, staring at the woman I adore asleep beside me.

It’s our wedding day—fucking finally. I know we’ve only been together mere months, but it feels like I’ve waited a lifetime for this day to arrive. In such a short period of time, I’ve nearly lost her twice, the most recent occurrence only a week ago.

My heavy palm rests on her lower abdomen, cradling our unborn children, and I smile.

Today, I will finally make an honest woman of their mother. I’ll stand before all of our family and friends, confessing my undying love and faithfulness to the woman of my dreams. Today will be another step toward the future I want to create with Josephine.

My Pixie stirs and her eyelids flutter open, revealing the most beautiful aqua-blue eyes known to mankind. I swear if I stare into those blue depths for too long, I may never resurface.

“Good morning, Missus Tabares,” I sing.

Josephine beams a radiant smile. “I’m not Missus Tabares, yet.”

“Oh, you will be...” I look at my watch. “In nine hours.”

Josephine looks confused. “Nine hours? You mean ten.”

I shake my head. “Nope, nine. You slept in an hour.”

She’s been doing that a lot lately, sleeping longer. When I asked Stella about it, she told me exhaustion was a sign of pregnancy, even this early in the game. I neglect to mention it to my bride.

Josephine’s eyes bug out. “An hour?! Again? Why didn’t you wake me?”

My fingers tuck a lock of her sandy hair behind her ear. “Baby, you’ve been through a lot lately. With the threat gone, your body finally is letting you rest.”

Plus, the babies need you to rest now, because when they come, it will be all hands on deck.

“I also have selfish reasons for letting you oversleep, because you’ll not be sleeping tonight,” I say with a mischievous grin, attacking her with kisses.

Josephine squeals like she always does when I tickle her with my morning scruff. My favorite place to over sensitize her is between her thighs. Needing to taste her sweet ambrosia, I start tracking kisses down her body to the honey pot between her legs.

“Oh, stop. I need to pee. I feel like I had the weight of the world resting on my bladder.”

I bite my tongue. My catcher’s mitt size hand was definitely the culprit for the extra weight she refers to. Not going to tell her I was palming our babies inside of her—don’t need to give her a reason to be pissed at me and back out of the wedding before we tie the knot.

Instead, I roll off of her and watch her delectable ass bouncing in her skimpy panties as she races to the bathroom. She’s been peeing more lately—hard to believe the little tykes are already weighing on her bladder, but Stella said she was the same way with both the girls in the first month—something about the uterus shifting to allow the babies to grow and pressing along the bladder.

When my Pixie returns from the bathroom, I can't help my grin from growing wolfish. "Get your sexy ass back in bed."

She ignores my command and shakes her head, throwing her hair in a ponytail. "We need to hit the trails. I have to meet Jared and the girls in two hours for breakfast and spa treatments."

I groan and flop against the pillows, my cock fully saluting my boxer-briefs. "Baby, let's take today off. I want to worship your body." I slap the bed. "Here! Now, woman."

"We've already agreed to take tomorrow off after our wedding. Get your butt up." Josephine yanks her tank top off and digs through her dresser for a running outfit.

I eye her tits, noticing the increased fullness and darkening of her areolas. *Mamá boobs*. Salivating, I bite my bottom lip to stop my drooling, eager to suck them into my mouth.

When Josephine pulls her sports bra out, I burst from the bed. I know for a fact if she gets the cock-blocking fabric over her luscious breasts, I'm shit out of luck. Snatching the bra from her dainty hand, I sling-shot it clear across the room.

Josephine balks. "Maceo, what are you doing?!"

Taking her by the hips, I walk her backwards to the bed. "Doing the Spaniard thing and conquering my Viking woman's body," I tease, pushing her on the bed and climbing on top of her, removing her panties as I go.

Before she can protest, my lips silence hers, loving how her mouth responds to mine. Her mind might be screaming today's agenda at her, but her body is all for what I'm offering, arching off the bed to be reacquainted with mine.

My fingers pluck and tweak her ripe nipples, making Josephine scrunch her eyes tight and hiss.

Hmm, overly sensitive? Going forward in this pregnancy, I'll have to remember her breasts are tender and I can't be rough.

To make up for my harshness, I bend and lave her nipples with my tongue to soothe the burn I caused.

My woman moans her approval. It's music to my ears, hearing her enjoying my touch. I continue the path I started earlier, walking my lips down her abdomen—kissing above her mound twice for each of our babies—and parting her hairless pussy lips already glistening with her arousal.

Damn. I've struck gold when I found her.

Without warning, Josephine grabs my head and shoves my mouth down on her. Fuck, how I love it when my Pixie gets all aggressive and needy in the bedroom. It turns my already rock-hard dick to solid steel, stretching it to the max.

Groaning with approval, I suck on her tender clit, coaxing the pretty pearl out from under its hood. Wanting to send her into overdrive, I use the broad side of my tongue to flick her with my barbell. Josephine whimpers and the sound catapults my desire to a new level. Needing to taste more of her, I dive my tongue into her pussy and lap at her sugary cream.

Josephine pants and digs her nails into my scalp. "Oh, fuck!"

"That's it, Pixie. Come. Come on my tongue."

One moment I'm sandwiched between her slender thighs. Next, I'm on my back, staring at the ceiling.

What fucking ninja move was that? Not one I've taught her. She must have gotten lessons on the side from one or all of my brothers.

Shocked, I look down the length of my body and watch my sexy kitten push down my boxer briefs before straddling my lap. My fingers eagerly grab hold of her hips and help her slide down my leaking shaft.

"I'd rather come on your cock," she moans, as I enter her to the hilt.

"Shiiit!" I grit when she starts working her hips in a delicious rotation. "Baby, you're killing me."

Josephine doesn't ease into it. She rides me like a bucking bronco, bouncing on my greedy dick. Her hands plant themselves on my heaving chest, giving her more leverage to

slide along my length. I watch in awe as she throws her head back, her ashen-brown hair brushing against my hands on her waist like silk ribbons.

My heart beats like a battle drum for her, faster and faster to match her humping pace. I lick my lips to get another taste of her sweet spunk on my tongue. I swear to Christ, it makes me harder.

Josephine mewls. “I love how hard you get for me when I ride your fat dick. You make me dripping wet and my pussy ache.”

My ears perk up. *Is my little Pixie talking dirty to me?* This is new—and fucking *amazing*. Pregnancy hormones are bringing out her nasty, and I love it.

Oh, I am going to roll with this. “Yeah, Pixie? How much do you love my cock?”

Josephine’s head rolls around, her eyes heated and sensual. “Love the way it fits snugly in me and stretches me wide. Love how it drags against my tight walls. Love how it hits the back of my womb.”

Ah, hell. If she keeps talking like this, I’m going to nut myself before she’s ready. Holding her stare, I lick my thumb and work it between us, pressing against her precious clit. Josephine bucks hard against my hips, making me see stars for a second.

Josephine’s mouth falls open with a moan. One of her hands leaves my chest and grabs at her left perky breast. “That’s it,” she purrs. “Fuck me with your cock and thumb. Pump me full of your hot come and make me scream.”

Fucking fuck! The visual I have is porn-star heaven and every guy’s pin-up fantasy. I sit up and wrap my free arm around her waist, holding her in place while I pound her from the bottom. “You want it rough, Pixie?”

“Yes,” she whimpers. “I love it when you dominate me.”

Sweet angles above. She’s never confessed it out loud before. Deep down I’ve always known it, but hearing her admit it...*hot damn!*

The beast in me can't handle anymore. Making my own ninja move, I flip us on her back, never breaking connection. I push her legs up 'till her knees are touching her shoulders and fuck her for all I'm worth.

The bed bounces across the floor from the impact of my thrusts, making the headboard connect with the wall again, and again, matching the pace of my beating heart—a beat that pounds for her—*bang, bang, bang*.

The moans coming from my woman have turned to full squeals of pleasure. Her nails dig into my back, spurring me on. The rougher she is, the more she feeds my inner beast.

“Harder. HARDER!”

“Any. Harder. And. You. Won't. Be. Able. To. Walk. Down. The. Aisle,” I say between pumps, sweat dripping from my brow and mixing with hers on her chest.

Josephine's inner walls start to contract as she writhes beneath me. She's close, so fucking close, I can taste her musk perfuming the air. It's my aphrodisiac, my Achilles heel. My balls tighten to solid rocks, ready to burst and flood her honey-pot with my seed, with my heart, with my love.

Josephine's body shakes and her eyes roll back into her head. “Maceooo!” Her pussy squeezes around me 'till my vision goes black and I explode like a bomb, pumping every last drop of me inside of her.

I collapse, drained and panting hard, with my dick still kicking inside of her. I didn't know I had been holding my breath and nearly passed out from lack of oxygen. My vision returns and I roll on my back, taking Josephine with me. “I think I died and went to heaven.”

Pounding on our suite's door startles us. “Atlas! Stop fucking my sister!”

Josephine and I both start sniggering. We should have remembered our bed is against the same wall Punk's is on. The banging of our headboard probably was heard through the soundproof walls. “Sorry, bro!”

He pounds some more. “Not everyone gets up at six in the fucking morning. This ain’t basic training.” The knob rattles and Punk stomps in.

We need a deadbolt.

Josephine squeaks with embarrassment. I quickly cover her with the comforter, hiding her nakedness from view. “The fuck, dude?! A little privacy.”

Punk rolls his eyes. He stalks over to the closet and retrieves Josephine’s robe. He throws it on the bed and I snag it. She slips it on underneath the covers, and we both release a sigh of relief.

Punk stands beside our bed and folds his arms over his chest. “Save it for the honeymoon, you two.” He scowls at the wall where a good size dent is in the drywall. “We’re bolting the damn bed to the floor. I need my fucking beauty sleep.”

Unable to hold my shit together, I fall back on the pillows clutching my stomach. “You’ve been having way too many girl nights with Josephine if you believe you can make your ugly mug pretty with more sleep.”

Josephine slaps my chest. “Apologize. There’s no ugly in our family.”

“Yeah, apologize, bro—your bride orders it,” Punk says with a wry smile. “We all know I’m the best-looking asshole around this joint.”

“This shit again,” Gauge groans as he enters our suite. “Do I need to give you another ass whooping, boy?”

Flustered, I run a hand down my face. “Dude, why are you in here too?”

“What? Don’t want to see your bestie first thing in the morning?” He smirks at me before he nods at Punk. “This fucker woke me with his pounding.”

“I was only pounding because this fucker woke me with his pounding,” he explains, humping the air to get his point across.

Gauge lets out a belly laugh. “How loud were you too? Aren’t the rooms soundproof? Oh, shit! If they’re not, nobody better mention a word of it to my girl. She would be humiliated.”

“Walls are soundproof. Doors...not so much. Doesn’t matter because we already know Opal’s a screamer,” Chase says from behind him. “We all lived in the same rental with paper-thin walls.”

Gauge points at him. “Talk about my woman like that again and I’ll feed you your balls.”

Chase laughs and mimics locking his lips. “Well, this was earlier than planned, but I guess the early bird gets the worm.”

I frown, not understanding. “The fuck you talkin’ about?”

My brothers roll their eyes. “It’s bro time. Come on. Adriell Hills is calling. Followed by lunch at *Bianchi’s Italiano Restaurante* for shits, kicks, and giggles—consider it like pissing on the fucker’s grave. Lloyd is expecting the whole crew to come to his new joint for haircuts and straight razors at 1300. We need to get you back here before 1500 for the big show,” Gauge says.

I squeeze my woman, not wanting to part ways. “I’m running and eating breakfast with my woman this morning.”

Punk throws his head back and makes a snoring noise. “Booring! Come on, Prez. Last moment of freedom before you’re stuck with the ball-n-chain.”

Josephine shoots Punk an irritated look. “Excuse me!”

“I’m kidding,” Punk teases with a smile.

Glowering, I refuse to budge from Josephine’s side. “We had enough bro time earlier this week when you threw me a bachelor party.”

It was an epic burn Atlas fest. While the women threw Josephine a charming bridal shower/bachelorette party, I was pelted with paintballs by my brothers, roasted by all the guys over dinner, and whipped with my own belt by a dominatrix

the guys hired. I still have bruises from those assholes paying that woman to beat me.

My brothers laugh at my expense. “Today is totally for you. Jo made us promise to be on our best behavior after you cried to her about the bachelor party,” Chase teases.

“Careful, Chase. I’m not above paying a dwarf wrestler to pound on you when you decide to get hitched,” I warn.

Punk shakes with laughter. “We’ll have to remember your suggestion if Chase can ever convince Simone to take a chance on him.”

“Asshole,” Chase mutters. Simone hasn’t exactly warmed to the idea quite yet. After her abduction last week, she has been stuck to Josephine’s side like superglue. The two have been going through counseling together, being each other’s support system. The closest Chase has gotten anywhere with her was the stolen moment on his bike—well, and sleeping on the couch in her room at night, to be there in case she needs anything.

The suite door opens, and Ziggy and Jared walk in, hand in hand. Ziggy is dressed in ridiculous checkered golf shorts in loud colors, a polo, and matching visor. “I call dibs on driving the golf cart,” Ziggy hollers.

Irritated with another intrusion, I growl. “We’re buying a do not disturb sign for our door,” I tell Josephine.

“Nah. Too much money. Use a sock,” Punk says, flopping on our bed. “Get your ass up or I’m coming in to snuggle with both of you.”

“The fuck you are,” I snarl. My hands reflexively covering my woman’s already covered body.

“You better go,” Josephine says. “I can run on the treadmill and put Hades on the one next to me.”

Hades grumps from his bed in the corner, not liking the idea of running on a machine. He rolls over and gives us his back, letting it be known he won’t budge if he isn’t going to the trails.

“Dammit. Guess I’ll be running by myself on the treadmill.”

“All the more reason for me to stay and do my normal routine with you,” I argue.

This is our last day with Hades before we fly off to Spain for our honeymoon on Ibiza Island. The hellhound isn’t going to run with anyone once we’re gone—he’ll probably sulk around the house or live in Chase’s tech room ‘till we return.

Punk’s having none of it. “You two aren’t allowed to see each other before the wedding. Technically, we’re saving you guys from doom.”

Gritting my teeth, I look at my brothers. “Who’s manning headquarters and guarding the women?”

“It’s covered. I got Luke to send over two cops for the day,” Gauge answers. “Let’s roll.”

Josephine nudges me to get moving. I sigh with resignation, sliding out of bed, butt-ass naked.

Jared mutters, “Sweet Lord!”

Ziggy throws his hand over Jared’s eyes. “Bro!”

Josephine sniggers. “Impressive, right?”

It dawns on me they’re referring to my junk, and it takes all my self-control not to strut like a cock or make a helicopter move. They’re in my room. What did they expect?

“Mines totally bigger,” Punk brags. Always trying to be the golden goose in the room.

Shaking my head, I zip my shorts. “Unless you had a growth spurt, we all know I’m the most hung in the house.”

Chase thumbs his chest. “No, I am.”

“Jesus, I live with children,” Gauge mutters, but he has a devilish glint in his eyes. “On the count of three, we whip them out and compare.”

Punk jumps up, always eager for a competition. “Game on.”

“Ugh! That’s it. Everyone out,” Josephine orders, pointing to the door. “Jared, you stay.”

“Why does Jared get to stay?” I huff.

“Because we have spa treatments and massages,” Jared announces like a chorus line. “Eduardo and his crew will be here in less than two hours to pamper the hell out of us.”

Punk does a double-take. “And I wasn’t invited? What the hell, sis?”

“You’re with the groom’s party. The spa is for the bride’s party,” Josephine explains.

I want to laugh at the disappointed look on Punk’s face. “Thought you didn’t like spa shit?”

“Who doesn’t like a massage?” Punk protests. “I get tense. I like to have my knots worked out.”

“Nope. You get to golf,” I say sarcastically. What can I say—misery enjoys company, and if I’m stuck golfing instead of hanging out with my woman, then Punk can suffer along with me.

Gauge lassos the air with his finger. “Let’s round up the boys and meet in fifteen. Atlas, grab your suit, shower shit, and whatever else you need, and throw it in my room. You two are officially restricted from seeing each other ‘till showtime.”

Sulking, I brush my teeth and collect my crap for the day. Before I leave, I bend over the bed and plant a juicy kiss on Josephine’s rosy lips. “I’ll see you soon, Missus Tabares.”

Josephine blesses me with one of her mega-watt smiles. “You bet your sweet ass, Mister Tabares.” She spans my butt for good measure as I turn to leave.

“I’ll miss you,” she calls.

“I’ll miss you more,” I reply.

“I’ll miss you the most,” she counters.

“I’ll miss you the most times a hundred.”

She giggles. “I’ll miss you the most times a thousand.”

“I’ll miss you the most times a—”

Gauge grabs me by the collar of my shirt and hauls me away to the beautiful sound of my woman laughing her head off.

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CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

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From our suite, I stare out the bay of windows overlooking the patio below, decorated for the ceremony. Both sides of the party have had pictures done as we wait for the clock to strike three.

Our guests are already seated and excitedly talking with each other. The sun is out and it's a beautiful autumn day—perfect for an outdoor wedding under heaven's sky. Everything looks lovely and sophisticated...it's magical.

A blessing from above came in the form of my florist getting some of her flowers in. She ran around and mixed in the real flowers with the fake arrangements I was forced to make. The extra flora adds to the overall elegant theme, making everything look lush and smell lovely.

Rich emerald, pale pink, hints of gold, and dovetail gray create the perfect pallet for the event.

The strings we hired from the CSU music department play a Mumford & Sons' song—mixing my love for British punk and Maceo's love for folk. Kind of like us in a funny way.

Jared comes to stand beside me and takes my hand. "You okay, Jo?"

I couldn't hide my smile if I tried. "More than okay. I'm awesome."

Jared runs his thumb under his eye and sniffs. "I'm happy for you, babe. You deserve all of this, including that man hung like a horse."

I burst out laughing, wiping away a rogue tear on his cheek. “You’re still stuck on that, huh?”

“It will forever be burned into my mind,” he leans in and whispers. “Seriously, though, how does it fit?”

“Like a fucking glove,” I gloat.

“Lucky bitch,” he teases. “And speaking of bitch, here comes the Queen-B.”

“I heard that.” Simone saunters up to us in the mother-approved bridal gown. It hugs her hourglass curves, the emerald color making her gray eyes shine like silver coins.

“It’s not fair to look better than the bride on her wedding day,” I chide playfully.

“Whatever,” Simone says dismissively. “No one is going to even notice anyone but you today.”

“Yeah, and it fucking sucks,” Ebony gripes as she adjusts her boobs in her dress. No matter how much she tugs the neckline down, there’s simply not enough cleavage showing for her liking. Tony is going to be one happy guy, having her wrapped in yards of material to hide her assets.

Opal skips to my other side. “Oh, my goodness, Jo! You’re the most beautiful bride. Atlas is going to sprint up the aisle to fetch you himself.”

“Don’t joke,” I warn. “It’s a legit fear of mine. I can totally see him motioning for Tony to speed things along to the ‘I dos.’ The man has no patience.”

Opal giggles. “It’s only because he’s a man who knows what he wants, and it’s you.”

“Oh, Jo!” I turn and see my mom smiling with moisture in her eyes. “You look radiant.”

I raise my hand. “Nope. Stop. If you start crying, I’m going to start crying.”

“And if you and Jo start crying, I’m going to start crying too,” Opal says, even though she’s already shedding tears.

Simone starts sniffing and she steals Jared's pocket square.

"Brat, that was mine," he hisses. He runs to the nearest tissue box and starts handing them out to everyone. "Enough, ladies. Makeup is done, for crying out loud."

I start laughing, unable to control my flooding emotions—feeling way too much to handle it appropriately.

Simone turns toward Maceo's dresser. She takes a velvet box from the top and brings it over to me. "A little something old and new from your groom. He said you didn't need anything blue, since there's nothing as blue as your eyes. And he says he lent you his heart 'till he sees you at the altar, meaning you don't need anything borrowed."

Everyone awes in unison.

A smile stretches across my face when I open the large velvet jewelry box. Nestled in the black velvet is a gold necklace with a single teardrop black diamond and two clear round diamonds bookending the bigger stone. A pair of gold earring showcasing black teardrop diamonds complements the set.

"The diamonds were his *abuela's*. The black represents him. And the clear..." Simone trails off.

"What? Me?"

Simone shakes her head and looks at my mom for help. Mom clears her throat. "For the twins you're going to have."

My jaw ticks. "That presumptuous asshole! I cannot believe him sometimes. He's totally convinced we're going to have twins. I should have kept my damn mouth shut and never mentioned the every-other-generation twin crap."

"Now, now. Let's try to relax. Angry bride stomping down the aisle to beat her groom isn't a good look on you," Jared says with a wry smile, taking the necklace and clasping it around my neck. He hands me the earrings, and I thrust the hooks through my ears, muttering curses under my breath.

Huffing, I turn to look in the mirror and pause. My face is *glowing* against the gems.

Oh...my God! “MOM!”

“Okay, time to hustle our butts downstairs and get in place,” mom orders, waving the confused wedding party out of the room. After she closes the door, she hurries back over to me and takes my hands. “Breathe, dear.”

“Fuck, mom. Fuck. Fuck.” I can’t stop hyperventilating.

Mom shoves my ass down on the bed and kneels in front of me. “For goodness’ sake, Jo. It’s pregnancy, not the end of the world.”

“I’m not pregnant!”

“Mm-hm, okay, sure. Tell that to your uterus,” mom says in a snarky tone.

I purse my lips, unable to grasp what the hell is happening. “The doctor said it could take months.”

“Do you really need me to explain the birds and the bees, dear? You had unprotected sex with an alpha hell-bent on knocking you up.”

I rack my brain, trying to figure out which time was the conception date. For crying out loud, I’ve only had the IUD out a month. “It’s not possible.”

Mom sighs and stands, pointing at my suitcase. “I packed you prenatal vitamins and three pregnancy tests in case you didn’t want to wait to find out. Do you want to try one now?”

“Isn’t it too early to take a test?” I shake my head. “You know what, forget it. I’m going to keep going through denial—at least for today.”

Mom sits next to me on the bed and pats my knee. “It’s going to be okay, honey. You’ll see.”

A soft knock at the door sobers me. My dad enters the room with a sad smile and weepy eyes. “It’s time to walk my baby down the aisle.”

“Oh, dad.” I stand and run to wrap him in a hug. I know this is a bitter-sweet occasion for him. There’s nothing I want more than to give him love and let him know nothing changes between us—I’ll always be his little girl.

He smiles and kisses my forehead, lacing my arm through his. “You look beautiful. The second most beautiful bride.” He smiles over at my mom—she’ll always be number one in his eyes. I squeeze his arm, letting him know I’m ready.

When we make it to the first level, Hades clomps over to me with his happy tongue hanging out and a pillow strapped to his back with our wedding bands—rings I had said were unnecessary since I had my flower engagement ring and Maceo had his tattooed ring, but he was insistent on keeping tradition.

He also said I could have Hades be the ring bearer when he proposed—there was no way I would renege on the deal.

Candy and Red hand out the bouquets and pin Jared and dad with their boutonnières.

I notice Candy is wearing the mint green dress I had snuck in her pile from our shopping excursion. She sees me admiring her and does a little pirouette to show it off. We both laugh, finally having put our differences aside.

I bounce with excitement. This is it—this is the start of our happily-ever-after, with two kids on the way.

Gah! Stop thinking about it. Deny, for the next twenty-four hours, that little Maceos and/or Maceoetts have taken up lodging in my womb.

Candy and Red give me a nod and open the patio doors. The strings start playing Bob Dylan’s *Make You Feel My Love*. Brass comes and escorts mom to her seat, and Reaper escorts both Candy and Red to their spots.

Punk swaggers over, looking dapper in his suit. He gives Ebony his arm, but before they walk ahead, he gives me a charming wink.

I keep trying to catch a glimpse of Maceo, but I can’t see him from my vantage point.

Damn my short genes. Our babies better inherit some height from Maceo.

Chase comes and escorts Opal, who is blushing from all the people admiring how pretty she is. My heart accelerates, noticing the line is getting shorter.

Holy-moly, is it hot in here, or is it my nerves?

Ziggy approaches Jared with a look of tenderness in his eyes. Jared's handsome face breaks into a big smile when Ziggy takes his hand in his and walks them down the aisle.

Simone turns and pins me with a grin. "Showtime, squirt. See you at the finish line." Gauge holds out his arm for her, leaving only my dad and I left.

My dad goes to move, and I halt him. I look at him with my heart in my throat. "I loved you first, dad."

Dad chokes up. "I loved you first, too, baby girl."

We start forward, my arm laced through my dad's arm on one side, and Hades on my other side. My head rises to where my future husband waits for me, and my eyes lock with his.

Maceo stands at the end of a short aisle looking tall and strong like the Titan he's named after. He's beyond gorgeous in his gray fitted tailored suit. It hugs his body in all the right ways, making him a living, breathing Adonis.

His black hair has been trimmed and shaved tight to the sides in an undercut, longer on top and flipped back the way he likes to wear it. His chiseled face is smooth as silk thanks to a straight-razor shave from Lloyd. He stands proudly with his chest puffed out. And his eyes—those dark pools of onyx—are smoldering with desire, drinking me in.

Maceo's fingers twitch as he leans forward, looking like he's going to run up the aisle to meet me. I notice Gauge holding on to the back on Maceo's belt, struggling to prevent it from happening. I nearly snort with laughter, but quickly collect myself.

This wedding march is taking too damn long. I swear dad is dragging his feet, not wanting to give me up yet, or maybe

it's me being overly excited for this moment to finally be happening.

When we do get near the end, Gauge can't hold Maceo any longer and curses, chasing after him. Maceo storms upon us and practically yanks me from my dad's arm, cupping my face and planting a heated kiss on my lips.

"It's not time for the kiss, yet," I say, blushing.

"I don't care. I can't wait any longer." Maceo kisses me again as if to prove his point.

Tony clears his throat. "We going to get this ball rollin' or we calling it good, boss?"

Maceo breaks the kiss and smiles at his brother. "Proceed."

"Then stop kissing Jo until I say so. Face each other and try to keep the PDA to a minimum," Tony orders before clearing his throat and addressing the guests.

"Welcome, family, friends, and loved ones. We gather here today to celebrate the union of Maceo and Josephine, or more appropriately, Atlas and Jo. They thank you for your presence and now ask you for your blessing, encouragement, and lifelong support for their decision to be married. Before I go further, I ask who gives this woman in marriage?"

Dad steps forward. "Her mother and I do." Hades howls next to him, saying, 'I do too.' Everyone laughs, and my dad sits next to my mom. Hades sits back on his haunches next to Maceo, taking his position with the wedding party.

I know I should be listening to the beautiful words Tony prepared regarding our love story, but my attention is focused on Maceo. I look up at him, utterly beguiled, and study every hard angle on his handsome face. The sharpness of his nose, the cut edges of his jaw, the fullness of his lips, the heavy arch of his dark brows, the intensity of his eyes—I memorize all of it even though I plan on staring at him for the rest of my life. But at this moment, I want to remember him exactly like this.

By the way Maceo's eyes trail all over my face and body, I'd say he's doing the same thing. The notion makes me smile

broadly. He, in turn, flashes me a smile which makes my toes curl and sex ache.

“Maceo and Josephine have prepared their own vows which they will read to each other now. Maceo, if you would start?”

Without taking his eyes off mine, Maceo nods and squeezes my hands. “Pixie, I know I’m an overbearing pain in the ass. I know I’m demanding and needy at times. I know I have a quick temper and sometimes act hastily. I can honestly say it’s all your fault, too,” he says with a wink, making everyone laugh.

“Before I met you, I was running on autopilot—calm, controlled, ruthless, and vacant—everything colorless and lacking life. The day I ran into you on the trail, I could feel my heart expand and beat to life. I never knew how alone I was. I never knew I was living only half a life or that there was more to this world than simply existing.

“You didn’t bring me shades of gray, but a kaleidoscope of colors. You made me feel and want more from life, from you, from me. I went from being a robotic man to one who was finally experiencing what emotions are supposed to be—love, fear, anger, happiness, and all the above. You brought meaning and purpose, giving me a reason to be a better man, a better brother, a better leader, and a better partner.

“You have given me the other half of my soul that I never knew I was searching for, and I love you more with each passing day. I’ve screwed up a lot, and you’ve given me hell for it—which I totally deserve—but I’m fucking grateful for your big heart and your willingness to forgive me every single time. Thank you for taking a chance on me, on us.

“In return, I promise to only love you, honor, and respect you always, protect you in times of need, and hold your hand through everything else which comes our way. You’re it, Josephine. My ride or die. My everything.”

Every single woman here is either swooning or balling their eyes out—myself included. Maceo reaches out with one

hand and tenderly wipes my tears away. “Baby, don’t cry.” He looks at Tony expectantly. “Can I kiss her?”

Tony throws out his arm, stopping Maceo from advancing. “We aren’t done. Jo, please give your vows.”

Trying to get a grip on my hormonal self, I fill my lungs and let it out slowly. Maceo smiles at me, nodding for me to hurry and spit it out—eager as always to get to the good stuff. “Maceo, I was a stubborn, independent, bitch in heels when you met me—and nothing has changed.” Maceo lets out a belly laugh, along with everyone else.

“Nothing has changed because you accept me for who I am, bad attitude and all. You see my ambitions and dreams as something to admire and nurture. You see my stubbornness and unwillingness to yield as charming and desirable. You encourage and push me when I’m reluctant to leap because you see how much it would mean to me.”

I take a deep breath, letting my emotions pump through my heart and out of my mouth. “You are the balance I have been searching for—the yin to my yang, the dark to my light, the push to my shove. You’ve held me when I was at my lowest and scared of my own shadow. You saw strength in me when I believed I’d run out. You’ve lent me your strength when being forced to deal with my own issues head-on instead of letting me run away. You’ve loved me at my highest and my lowest, and through it all, it has been consistent and growing.

“My love for you has no expiration date. There will never be a day I will love you less—only more. I promise to keep you on your toes and hold yourself accountable when merited, to stand beside you no matter what battle we’re facing or whatever issues arise. I promise to give you stolen moments on the trails—or anywhere, for that matter. I promise cuddles every night, kisses anytime you want, and the home you’ve always wanted. I will love you, honor you, cherish you, and keep you at the center of my universe, always. My heart, mind, and soul are yours—they’ve been yours since the moment I met you. Your mine, and I’m yours.”

“You’re damn right your mine, and I’m yours,” Maceo says with a hitch in his voice. He doesn’t bother hiding his tears of joy when he takes my waist in his hands. A big man like him getting all emotional is kind of turning me on—mean and hard as steel with everyone else, but with me, he’s a soft teddy bear.

Maceo looks at Tony, sniffing. “Can I kiss her now?”

Tony shakes his head. “No, Atlas.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“You wanted *traditional*,” Tony emphasizes with finger quotations. “Now, suck it up and retrieve the rings from your hellhound.”

Maceo’s jaw ticks, but he gets on his knee to address Hades. “Hey, big boy, can you be my wingman and let me have the rings?”

Hades woofs in approval, turning around to give Maceo his back and access to the ring bearer pillow.

Maceo stands and smiles, taking my hand and repeating after Tony. “As a sign of my love that I have chosen you above all else, with this ring, I thee wed.” Maceo slips the diamond wedding band on my finger to line up with my flower engagement band.

Maceo looks at Tony again, his eyes flashing with hope. “Now?”

Tony glowers at him with a look that screams, ‘no.’

Smiling, I take Maceo’s hand and repeat the words. “As a sign of my love that I have chosen you above all else, with this ring, I thee wed.” Maceo practically jabs his finger through the band to get it on faster, and I have to bite my bottom lip to stop my giggling.

“And now by the power vested in me by the state of Colorado and getordainedin24hours.com, it is my honor and delight to declare you married. Go forth and live each day to the fullest with each other. You may now seal this declaration with a kiss.”

Maceo doesn't move. He stares at Tony with a deadpan expression. "Are you sure? Not going to say some more fancy words or scream out, 'just kidding,' when I go at it with my wife?"

Tony rolls his eyes. "Will you fucking kiss Little Jo already?"

"Bout fucking time," Maceo growls. He swoops in to cup my face with one hand and wraps an arm around my waist, lifting me off my feet and claiming my lips with his. I melt against him as everyone cheers in celebration.

We haven't stopped kissing, but Tony wraps it up. "I'm pleased to present the newlyweds, Captain and Missus Maceo Cruz Tabares. Now let's get our fucking drink on."

My face aches from how much I've been smiling throughout the evening.

The photos we took went smoothly, with the wedding party being in a constant state of giddy. Chef Jordan made an incredible sit-down meal of duck and steak with all the trimmings. Cutting of the beautiful three-tiered buttercream wedding cake Opal made went perfectly—probably because I threatened to body slam Maceo if he got any wild ideas of smashing cake in my face. The wedding toasts and speeches given by Gauge and Simone were tearjerkers. Everyone is having a blast.

When it comes time for the first dance as husband and wife, Maceo pulls me into his arms and spins me around the patio to *The Very Thought of You* by Billie Holiday as he sings along low in my ear.

After having a dance with my dad and the whole wedding party, the dance moves start breaking out.

Ebony reappears wearing the no-no dress, making half the crowd whistle with approval. Tony makes a beeline for her and refuses to let her dance or talk to anyone else but himself,

holding her close and whispering in her ear—surprisingly, Ebony is not complaining.

Gauge and Opal move as one unit the entire evening around the patio, never breaking contact. Chase has caught Simone and convinces her to dance with him. She leans into him like she knows he would hold her the whole night.

My parents laugh with Ziggy and Jared near the lit fire pit. Punk talks shit with Darnel, the tattoo artist. Hades keeps getting fed scraps from Lloyd's plate. A bunch of my crew members play a card game with their significant others. Luke and some of the other invited officers overrun the bar. And every other member and guest is dancing, drinking, or stealing a kiss.

As the evening wears on, my head lies against Maceo's chest. I listen to his steady heartbeat instead of the music playing as we sway in one another's arms. An unfamiliar voice breaks our spell. "May I cut in?"

I turn to see a gentleman I've never seen before. He looks to be in his fifties and is in very good shape. Four other gentlemen of similar age and stature stand close behind him.

Alarmed, I look to my husband, but Maceo only smiles at the man in question, giving him a bro hug. "Captain Warren, it's good of you to come. All of you, I'm happy you could make it. Sorry I haven't made the rounds yet. Been too busy loving on my wife."

The man Maceo has called Captain hugs him back hard. "Wouldn't have missed this for the world. I don't blame you for giving her your undivided attention—she's a real beauty. Can't believe you've found a woman willing to put up with you. Your parents would be damn proud of you if they were here today."

Maceo smiles, but I see the hint of sadness in his eyes. I clear my throat. "They're here, Captain. They're always with him."

Captain Warren looks at me with a toothy grin. "Very true, my dear. And please, call me Travis. None of this Captain shit

—never been one for titles. Your husband here is like a nephew to me, which makes you my new niece.”

The man seems nice enough and obviously knows Maceo, but he’s a stranger to me, and he’s calling me his *niece*. Maceo can feel my uneasiness like a ripple on my skin. “Travis was my dad’s best friend. He led their SEAL team 6. And these guys were part of the original six—Harold, Jax, Mike, and Kevin.”

“Ah,” is all I can manage. I recognize the significance of these men being present for this occasion—it represents his father being part of our special day. I tear up, knowing how touching this must be for Maceo.

“Baby,” Maceo purrs on the top of my head. “It’s okay. This is family. More people to love.” I nod and smile, feeling slightly foolish for being overly emotional in front of these men.

Travis chuckles. “I’d be crying too if it dawned on me that I was married to this asshole,” he says, thumbing Maceo. He pulls out a small leather journal from inside his suit coat and hands it to my husband. “Something your old man left in his locker on base. Your grandmother told me to hold on to it until the time was right to pass it on to you. I’d say the time has come.”

Maceo takes the journal with a shaky hand, running his thumb over the binding. “This was my *padre*’s journal?”

A man behind Travis snorts with amusement. “We use to call it his ‘diary,’ but yeah, journal works too.”

My husband doesn’t seem to know what to say. He swallows loudly when he looks at Travis. “What’s in it?”

“Your father wrote about you and your mom a lot, life as an active SEAL, his hopes and dreams for his life with his family. He started it the day he met your mom in Colombia. Anytime something significant happened, like your birth, he recorded it. Anytime there was a milestone in his relationship with your mother, he recorded it. Anything which struck him as important, he’d write it down,” Travis explains. “You’ll

learn you two have a lot in common. Maybe it will help you to feel closer to both your parents.”

Maceo’s knuckles turn white from squeezing the journal tightly. “Thank you,” he croaks, fighting the wave of emotions filling his eyes.

Travis nods, looking equally as emotional. He shakes his head and smiles. “How about we all grab a drink and you can tell us how you two met.”

A wicked smile spreads across Maceo’s face. I elbow him in the ribs, making him double over. “The PG-13 version, hubby.”

Maceo chuckles darkly as we make our way to the bar with his dad’s old team. We freeze when Punk grabs a karaoke microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s come to that special time—bouquet and garter toss. Whoop-whoop! Gauge, if you would kindly take a knee to give Jo a seat. Maceo, you may go in for your prize.”

Well, this should be interesting. My dress is form fitting to mid-thigh, and I forwent underwear to avoid panty lines. It seemed like a smart choice when I was getting ready, but knowing Maceo is about to go down under, I’m regretting my decision. Me being panty-less with a garter on my upper thigh close to my core is an invitation too strong for Maceo to ignore.

“No hands. Teeth only,” Punk adds with a dirty grin.

Fuck you, Punk!

My nostrils flare and I march my butt over to sit on Gauge’s knee. Punk is already giggling like a little kid. He knows exactly what he’s setting up.

“I may need you to rein in your best friend,” I mutter to Gauge.

“Hmm?” he asks with a saccharine smirk. He’s apparently in on this shit show too.

“I’m not going to let my husband go down on me in front of a crowd—with my parents watching,” I hiss under my

breath.

Gauge nearly tips us over with his belly laugh. “Please tell me you’re wearing underwear? The man spends a fucking fortune on them for you. And if you’re going commando, you’re screwed or will be—audience or not.”

Butch walks over to the computer with his arm around Candy and switches the music to Marvin Gaye’s *Let’s Get It On*. I’m definitely done for now. Maceo has a weakness for soulful music when setting the mood.

Blushing hard, I start to sweat. “How in the world did you guys know?”

Maceo is getting hackled by his brothers to start crawling from the other end of the patio to where Gauge and I are seated.

Gauge has to use his free hand to cover his mouth from chuckling. “Punk had his suspicions when he didn’t see the telltale signs poking through your dress.” He shakes his head. “You cost me fifty bucks. I was convinced you wouldn’t have tempted Atlas this much in public.”

I mentally slap myself for being stupid. “It wasn’t intentional. However, public sex is kind of our thing.”

Gauge howls with laughter. “You have no idea how happy my brother is going to be when he sees what’s not underneath.”

I groan when I see how close my husband has made it to us on his hands and knees, looking like a tiger ready to pounce on his pray. *I’m toast.*

With a mischievous smirk, Maceo reaches me and slowly starts to hike up my dress. Gauge grabs his wrist. “Best not do it, bro, unless you want to give the wedding guests a peek.”

Maceo’s dark brows pull together, assessing Gauge’s words. When the lightbulb clicks on in his head, it shines through his eyes like the diamonds I wear.

Full-on smile, Maceo throws the skirt of my dress over his head and buries himself between my thighs. I feel his body

quake with laughter when he spots his prize.

Oh, Lord. This is beyond embarrassing. I keep a pleasant smile on my face, praying no one else knows. But when Maceo drives his head to my core and lashes out with his tongue, I nearly launch off Gauge's knee like a rocket. He gets half-dozen swipes at my clit with his barbell before I squeeze his head with my thighs to stop him, which only makes him laugh more.

Thankfully my husband takes mercy on me and wraps his teeth around the silk garter, sliding it down my leg. He emerges from under my dress with ruffled hair, a champagne garter in his mouth, and a happy-as-fuck glint in his eyes.

He winks at me before pulling back on the garter like a sling-shot and nailing Gauge dead center in his forehead, making him yelp with surprise. "Your turn, motherfucker!"

Butch changes the music once again to Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* for the bouquet toss. I'm half tempted to turn and hand it off to Opal, but judging by the voracious women in attendance, I decide against it—I'd like to survive my own wedding.

Maceo spins me in a couple circles with his hands over my eyes. I launch the flowers when the music stops like some wedding version of musical chairs.

A few women nosedive for it, causing it to roll right to Opal's feet. She picks it up and gives Gauge a beaming smile—when fate calls, you better listen.

The rest of the evening is filled with laughter, singing, dancing, reminiscing—all in the arms of the man I'm fortunate to call my husband. Even though I hadn't had any alcohol, aside from the few sips of champagne during the toasts, I feel drunk—light and full of happiness.

I take one long moment to look around at everyone we love and smile at the simple perfection of it all. Maceo wraps his arms around me from behind and sighs, seeing what I'm seeing. Our day turned out as special as Maceo had promised.

Maceo believes he's sly, but I feel his hand dip to cup my lower abdomen, still completely flat.

Maybe there is a baby—or babies—in there, maybe not. Either way we're going to start the next chapter of our lives with drooling, big babies added in the mix, and I can't wait.

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CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

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Esteban watches the wedding celebration from the road between the two checkpoints, out of sight of the security feeds. He sees no point in letting them see him on this happy occasion and souring the mood. Maceo will learn he's there soon enough and start his manhunt as usual.

Watching Maceo cradle his new bride in his arms causes a pang of jealousy to run through Esteban—not because the boy holds the *mami*, but because he was robbed of his own happy ending with Maceo's mother, Gabriella.

He grits his teeth, recalling the moment he came back to his villa and found her missing from their bedchamber. He knew at once who had taken her—Cruz Tabares.

Shit luck would be his demise, finding Gabriella working with Doctors without Borders in the mountainous village on the same day she grabbed Cruz's attention. But he saw her first and what he saw he loved. What he loved, he would have. So, he took her.

When Esteban closes his eyes, he can still smell her sweet scent—ripe passion fruit, fragrant, and citrusy. He can still feel her thick, dark-chocolate hair sliding between his fingers like silk. He can recall the sound of her whimpers while he held her in his arms and the taste of her salty tears as he kissed them away. And he recalls how good it felt to get lost inside of her again, and again.

A shuttering sigh escapes Esteban. *Gabriella—oh, how I miss you, sweet flower.*

The most beautiful woman was his, and that fucker striped her away. Cruz stole her right out from under him when he was away handling business, too coward to come at him head on.

Esteban's fist connects with the dashboard with a sickening crack. He shakes his hand to ease the sting, but it's no use—the real pain is not in his hand, but in his heart and the hollow space that once held his love for a woman who was taken from him.

Calming down, Esteban looks back out the window and sees the walking, talking embodiment of the man he hates most. Everything Maceo has done has been to emulate himself after that man. From joining the United States Navy and becoming a SEAL, to his choice in mercenary work. How he surrounds himself with his makeshift family and his overprotective nature for his woman. It's all Cruz.

The woman beside Maceo—mulish and more petite than he would have guessed Maceo's type—holds all his love. It's something Esteban can relate to, loving one woman so fiercely it drives you to insanity. As Esteban looks at the bride, he can see her appeal. Slender and elegant—a classic beauty. Her eyes are definitely her most unique quality. He doesn't believe he's ever seen an eye color as gemlike as hers.

The way the boy surrounds her, lets Esteban know Maceo will go to the ends of the earth for her, fight whatever battles necessary to keep her at his side...

Josefina is definitely Esteban's ticket to reaching Maceo. He only needs a way to access her.

The compound Maceo asked his wife to design and build is a modern-day fortress. Gaining entry is unlikely. If there's anything Esteban has learned from observing Josefina's past abductions, the key is luring her out.

However, Maceo's wife has proven routinely she'll not be taken easily, and Maceo certainly has put security measures in place to significantly limit the possibility.

Esteban drums his fingers on the steering wheel, churning over ideas of how to extract the boy's wife. If he can trick her out of her stronghold...

A loud bang nearly has Esteban throwing the car in drive. Excited shouts from the wedding celebration make his hand stall above the gearshift. He follows the crowds' line of sight and sees a vibrant array of fireworks being shot off from deep within the property.

Maceo points to the sky, cradling his wife from behind. Her smile nearly takes over her face as she listens to him, ignoring the skyline and focusing all her attention on him.

She loves him—truly loves him. Whatever plan Esteban devises will need to capitalize on their weakness for each other.

Maceo smiles at his tiny bride, making Esteban's heart lurch. The boy has his mother's smile—a smile so vibrant it has the power to render a charmed one speechless. His smile is the only resemblance, though. The rest is too sharp and lethal to be anything akin to the woman he loved.

Esteban looks back over the last thirty years and thinks about the life stolen from him. The woman who should have been his wife and the family they would have created. It's isn't fair, but then nothing in life is.

Two times he went to Gabriella after she was taken, two times he asked her to return to him willingly, and two times he was denied. Cruz had gotten into her head and filled it with lies. Each time she saw Esteban, her face would pale and fear would dance in her dark-brown eyes. Esteban wanted to kill Cruz for poisoning her against him. He had grown impatient and sent a crew to their home.

It wasn't supposed to turn out the way it had. The operation went horribly wrong, and Esteban's sweet flower is buried six feet under cold ground because of a fuckup.

The boy's boisterous laughter floats all the way to Esteban's car on the road. He's found happiness.

Guilt for having Maceo's mother sent to heaven too soon made Esteban keep coming back to check on him. He stayed away for many years because turf wars had broken out in Colombia with other drug cartels, and his attention was needed there. But every time Esteban had a free moment, he would come to the states and check on the boy.

Even now, as a man, Esteban still feels the urge to check on him. Maceo's mother would have loved to have seen this moment, seen her son take a holy vow to a woman who would give her grandchildren.

Esteban doesn't blame Maceo for hating his guts over losing his family, but Maceo needs to understand his anger is misplaced. He needs to understand Esteban would do anything for a do-over.

There's no doubt Maceo is what Esteban wants in his organization. His military and leadership skills are exactly what Esteban needs back home in Colombia, manning his empire. Had things gone the way Esteban had wanted when he sent his crew to retrieve Maceo's mother, it would have been his home anyways. Maceo would be working beside him and learning the business, carrying out Esteban's legacy.

Now that Esteban has found Maceo's weakness, his legacy may have a chance to continue.

With one last longing look, Esteban takes in the young couple who are oblivious to his nearness.

"Gabriella, I wish you were here to see this. I know you had your reservations, but they were lies planted in your head. I promise I will do right by your son and bring him back home where he belongs."

Without drawing attention to himself, Esteban starts the car and slowly drives into the night.

EPILOGUE

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“Come back here, temptress!”

Josephine squeals with laughter, racing away from the villa we’re renting for our honeymoon. I’m hot on her heels, pumping my legs and arms for all I’m worth.

The naughty woman stepped out of the bathroom wearing the slinkiest white string bikini known to mankind, making me horny as all get out. When I made a move to throw her on our bed and have my wicked way with her, she dodged me and made a beeline toward our private beach.

The security team I hired has been informed to steer clear of the villa and guard the perimeter, but to check in on the top of every hour—they’ve already made their rounds, leaving the area free for sexcapades.

My fingers reach out and tug on the back string of her top. The fabric snaps free of her chest, making her giggle even more. I growl, frustrated. Running with a hard-on is definitely uncomfortable, but I keep my eyes on the prize.

Pushing myself harder, I’m able to grab a string at her hip, pulling the knot loose. Her bottoms slide down her leg and she kicks it off as she runs.

With one last surge, I manage to wrap my arms around her when she reaches the water, twisting my body to take the brunt of the impact when we hit the Mediterranean Sea.

Josephine tries to wiggle away into the waves, but I snake my arms around her, claiming her mouth with a passionate kiss. She molds herself to me, enticing me in. I struggle

slightly with the drawstring of my board shorts before getting my thick, hard cock free, pushing inside of my wife's tight, molten center.

"Fuck," I groan into her mouth, nipping her bottom lip. With her legs wrapped around my back, I walk us back to the villa, seated to the hilt. We're no more than three feet in the door when my cell blares out a ringtone. "Fuck!"

Josephine pouts. "Maceo, you promised you'd turn it off."

"Ignore it, baby," I say against her neck, licking her collarbone.

The phone goes silent and immediately rings again, the magic coming to a stop. I damn near whimper when I slip out of my woman, setting her on her dainty feet.

"Go on out to the beach. Spread out a towel and lay across it spread eagle. Play with yourself 'till I get there—don't come without me," I order.

"So bossy," she teases, sashaying her ass.

My hand slaps across one of her firm ass cheeks. "You love it."

"I do, but not as much as I love you," she admits with a megawatt smile. She grabs a towel and heads out to the sandy shore, naked as the day she was born.

"I love you more," I holler out the door.

Cursing as I watch her leave, I grab my cell and answer. "This better be fucking important, Chase. You interrupted me balls deep in the tightest clutch."

"If it's as snug as her sister's, then I do apologize," Chase zings back.

I flinch. "Dude! I don't need a reminder of you doing the horizontal Mamba with my wife's sister."

The morning after our wedding, Josephine and I were in a rush to get to the airport. She had forgotten her purse, and I raced back upstairs to fetch it, nearly plowing over a half-dressed Simone trying to sneak out of Chase's suite while he

was still asleep. The look on Simone's face when she was caught red-handed was priceless. She begged me not to say anything to anyone, especially Josephine, as she raced across the hall to her own room.

Gauge texted me the aftermath; it wasn't pretty. Chase was less than happy to wake up to an empty bed.

I scowl at the wall. "I don't like keeping secrets from my woman. You need to get this shit straightened out with Simone, pronto."

"It's not like I'm not fucking trying, asshole," Chase snaps. "The woman has been ghosting me, which is damn near impossible when we live under the same roof, but fuck if she ain't making it work."

My lips pucker together and I shake my head. "I told you not to rush things with her. She was still going through the grieving process over her dickwad-ex."

"It seemed like shit was turning a corner. She was receptive during the wedding and even initiated the whole thing," he hisses.

"Ah," I say, understanding. Josephine had been the initiator in our own relationship and fought to blow me off too. Yeah, that shit didn't fly with me either. "You need to make a grand gesture, convince her to take the plunge. As soon as she agrees, you claim her."

"Grand gesture," Chase repeats, seeming to mull it over.

I peek out the patio doors and see my woman has taken my instructions to heart. She lays on top of the towel, legs splayed open, and her fingers circling her precious pink clit. Every few seconds, I hear a whimper bubble up from her lungs and float on the wind back to me. It's fucking beautiful. My already hard cock starts to weep with excitement.

"Fuck, Chase, spit out the reason for the call," I plead.

"I was doing surveillance checks from the night of the wedding and came across a vehicle passing through the security checkpoints on the road. The time stamps don't add up for a car passing by, meaning the car had stopped between

checkpoints right by the clubhouse. The time gap is ten minutes,” he informs.

My eyes narrow. “How sure are you it wasn’t a passerby seeing the festivities and stopping to see what the celebration was about?”

“As sure as I am that it was a black Lambo.”

I find it difficult to swallow. “Esteban?”

“Roger that.”

My heart stops as I acknowledge my worst fear is coming to life. It wasn’t enough he took one family from me, he’s hell-bent on taking another.

Time seems to slow down for a moment. I glance out the open door at my beautiful wife, still in the early stages of pregnancy, and my heart picks back up. Its rhythm increases ‘till it’s pounding against my chest like a drum. My breathing accelerates and fire courses through my veins, making my vision go red. The angry beast I keep leashed inside of me is breaking through its chains, ready to fight and defend the love of my life and my unborn children.

I do the only thing I’m capable of at the moment. My anger roars, and I swear a silent oath to finish Esteban once and for all.

PLEASE LEAVE A
REVIEW

Hello again lovely readers!

I hope you enjoyed Lips on my Soul, book 2 of the Mercy Ravens MC Series.

If you would like to share your thoughtful opinion of the novel, please feel free to leave a review with Amazon to help support your new *favorite* author.

Other sites where reviews are welcomed include Goodreads and BookBub.

Thank you again for reading my latest novel.

— M.J. Marino

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PLAYLIST

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Maceo

1. Manny Walters—My Own Fault
2. Lumineers—Stubborn Love
3. Machine Gun Kelly—Ocean Eyes (Billie Eilish Cover)
4. Mr. Probz—Space For Two
5. Vance Joy—Lay It On Me
6. Mumford & Sons—Believe
7. Bill Withers—Ain't No Sunshine
8. Angus and Julia Stone—The Devils Tears
9. Maroon 5—Lips On You
10. Of Monsters and Men—Circles (Post Malone Cover)
11. Maluma—ADMV
12. Mads Langer—21.4
13. Mumford & Sons—Guiding Light
14. Bob Dylan—Make You Feel My Love
15. Marvin Gaye—Lets Get It On
16. Martin Garrix ft. Khalid—Ocean
17. Kane Brown—Heaven

Josephine

1. Absufacto—Dissolve
2. X Ambassadors—Unsteady

3. Billie Eilish—Everything I Wanted
4. The Killers—Caution
5. The Weeknd—Blinding Lights
6. Vance Joy—Alone With Me
7. Halsey & Marshmello—Be Kind
8. Angus and Julia Stone—Chateau
9. Tom Rosenthal—Hugging You
10. Message to Bears—They Ran
11. Meg Myers—Running Up That Hill (Kate Bush Cover)
12. Bon Iver—Blood Bank
13. The 1975—Robbers
13. Billie Holiday—The Very Thought Of You
14. Cyndi Lauper—Girls Just Want To Have Fun
15. Coldplay—Magic
16. Shallou—You and Me
17. Jónsi—Around Us

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COMING SOON

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He thinks he can take her from me, but he's wrong. He already stole one family from me, and I refuse to let him take another. She's mine and I protect what's mine.

Maceo 'Atlas' Tabares, president of the Mercy Ravens MC, and alpha extraordinaire, has finally married the woman who shares the other half of his soul. His love for Josephine grows with each breath he takes, as does his need to protect her from the horrors of the world.

Josephine wears the titles First Lady and Missus Tabares proudly. Tied to each other in every way possible, their future looks bright as they begin the next chapter in their lives. With a new home to start building their future, thriving businesses, and surrounded by everyone they love, Maceo begins to set his roots, all because of the pixie-like woman who holds his heart.

Josephine is his life-force, his reason for being, but the retired Navy SEAL biker has made several enemies working as a mercenary, and one man he just can't shake.

Esteban Moreno, the vicious Colombian drug lord, has been secretly stalking Maceo for years, taunting the biker with what he did to Maceo's parents years before. Every major event that has happened in Maceo's life, Esteban was always in the background like a dark shadow, waiting for the opportune moment to approach him.

What Maceo assumes about Esteban is not entirely accurate. Esteban has every intention on taking Josephine, but only to use as bait. He wants the bigger fish. Coveting Maceo's leadership and military experience, Esteban needs

him, not dead, but alive, thriving, and running his drug trafficking empire. Stealing Josephine is the incentive he needs to bring Maceo over to his side.

But heads will roll before Maceo bends a knee to his greatest enemy. Through the words written in his *padre's* journal, the devotion of his crew, and help from the new head of the Bianchi mob, Maceo pieces together the clues to hunt down the man who threatens to take everything he holds near and dear in this world.

Will Maceo track down Esteban before the drug lord can put his plan into action? With Josephine in such a fragile state, will she be able to protect herself and the most precious gift Maceo has given her from Esteban's thirst for power? Will this ride-or-die, alpha couple survive their greatest challenge, and finally have the happily-ever-after they so rightly deserve?

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ALSO BY M.J. MARINO

Mercy Ravens MC Series

[Lips on my Heart—A Mercy Ravens MC Novel 1](#)

Lips on my Soul—A Mercy Ravens MC Novel 2

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Sixth, my girl pack: Laura, Sarah, and Serena. Thank you for always giving words of encouragement. You keep me rolling.

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M.J Marino—lover of great stories and putting pen to paper. This is her second self-published novel. She lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin with her husband, Matthew, and their three boys. Walking away from her career as a chemist, she has plunged herself into writing, pursuing a lifelong dream, and has no regrets. She writes what she wants and makes no excuses for it. Aside from writing, M.J. loves to read, garden, listen to music while singing along, organize her home, coffee, and bourbon—lots of bourbon.

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