

*A Dark
Mafia
Romance*

LOVELY

Beast

BB HAMMEL

Lovely Beast

A Dark Mafia Romance

BB Hamel

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Trigger Warning

This book contains graphic descriptions of sexual content, explicit violence, drug use, and past trauma. These scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth experience, but may be triggering for some readers.

Read at your own risk.

Chapter 1

Sara

In a room full of handsome criminals, lawyers stand out like nuclear bombs, but it's not like I could avoid Brice's wedding considering I'm a bridesmaid.

"Angelo keeps looking at you like you're the only person in here," Robyn says as we stand outside the venue and sip champagne. She's another one of Brice's closest friends and she's also wearing a lavender-colored dress that's the wrong shade for her skin. Music pulses inside, and Brice and Carmine are on the dance floor, a happy bride and groom on one of the best days of their lives. "Are you going to sleep with him or what?"

"I'm definitely *not* going to sleep with him," I say and glance over my shoulder. I can feel Angelo's eyes on my body even from a distance and he doesn't bother looking away. He's one of Carmine's *business associates*, which is barely concealed code for *straight-up gangster*. He's standing with a couple other men in dark suits, all of them drinking whiskey. A slight smile quirks his lips as he tilts his head and doesn't look away when our eyes meet, and I have to remind myself that law-abiding citizens and mobsters don't mix.

And this wedding is *filled* with guys just begging to get thrown in prison.

It's not every day the Don gets hitched, and the Scavo Famiglia went all out when their young leader decided to marry my best friend, Brice. Normally, I'd run far, far away from Angelo, but there's something about him tonight—maybe it's the music, the alcohol, the atmosphere, but every

time he's around me, I can't help but want to get a little bit closer than I should.

It doesn't hurt that he's tall, built like an athlete, and walks with the swagger of a man that knows how to get things done.

"Bullshit," Robyn says and prods me in the side with two fingers. I've known her since college and she's basically like my second brain, but I don't love the drunken poking. "You've been dancing with him for hours. I swear, if you keep it up, he's going to get you pregnant through your freaking dress."

"That's gross," I say and scowl at her. "It's not like that. He's just—"

"Tall? Handsome?"

"He's just nice."

She rolls her eyes. "*Nice*. That's what I call all the gorgeous criminals in my life."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to admit that you're going to sleep with him."

I take a deep breath, finish off my champagne, and level my best ice-queen glare at Robyn. "Under no circumstances will I have sex with that man," I say, and her eyes go wide. "Do you hear me? Are you even listening? God, you're looking over my shoulder right now. Robyn, I'm not fucking Angelo, okay? I don't care if he's good looking, he's not my type, not remotely, and I swear—"

Robyn tries to cut me off by gesturing at her neck but it's too late. A man clears his throat behind me and I feel a dark flush run into my core.

Slowly, I turn around, and Angelo's standing right there.

Oh, shit.

That explains what Robyn was looking at.

"I'm most definitely your type," he says, staring down at me with an amused smirk. "But I never said you were *mine*."

Heat builds in my chest, and I'm so embarrassed I could melt into the ground. "You weren't supposed to hear that."

"Probably not, but I did." He leans a touch closer. "Are you sure you don't want to fuck me?"

"I thought I wasn't your type."

"I'm flexible and my tastes are always changing."

"Okay!" Robyn says and slips away. "That's my cue!"

"Wait," I say but she's already gone, hustling back inside, and Angelo's standing between me and the doorway. I take a deep breath and let it out, trying to calm myself down, but I feel like such an idiot. I don't normally drink this much, and I definitely don't let my guard down and dance with strange guys, and I absolutely, positively never, *ever* flirt with mobsters.

Not even handsome mobsters.

That's basically my one rule in life: don't make eyes at criminals.

"You know, it's adorable you think *you're* the one in control here," Angelo says as he holds his drink up to his full lips. He's got dark eyes, dark hair, smooth skin, and a touch of stubble on his cheeks and chin. His tie's loose, his top button is open, and it's showing just enough of his muscular chest to know that he's covered in tattoos.

"I've never met someone as arrogant as you are," I say and tilt my chin up. "You do realize that, right? If you had a shot, that's gone now."

He barks a single laugh. "Please, princess. If I wanted to fuck you, I'd fuck you."

A tingle of excitement shoots down my legs, but I clench my jaw. "I'd rather fall off a roof."

"I'd rather stick my dick in an oven."

"I'd love to watch that."

"I bet you would. You'd sit there touching yourself, pretending you were half as hot."

“God, you’re repulsive.”

“And you’re a chilly and stuck-up.”

“Don’t you have a liquor store to rob?”

“I only steal from bigger targets these days, but thanks for the suggestion.”

“Asshole.”

“Frigid princess.”

I glare at him and he glares at me, and we’re standing inches apart, extremely alone in the outside courtyard. His eyes are burning into mine like coals and my lips part slightly open as my heart races in my chest. I’ve been dancing with this man all night and I hate him so much, but I also distinctly remember the feeling of his hands on my hips and his body swaying close, skin touching skin, the heat and the rhythm building and driving us forward—

“You want to kiss me right now,” he whispers.

“I’d rather kiss dirt.”

“How about *I* want to kiss *you*.” My jaw drops and suddenly all my witty comebacks disappear. “No more bullshit, frigid princess,” he says softly.

And when he pulls me against him, his hand on the small of my back, I tilt my head and part my lips and let him kiss me nice and deep.

Yep, this is a mistake.

An absolutely *massive* mistake.

And yet Angelo is beautiful, I’m a little drunk, and I want to do something stupid for once in my life.

The kiss is heaven, a delicious and painful heaven. His tongue invades my mouth as he pins me against him, and he treats me like he wants to break me, kissing hard and rough with a soft growl in the back of his throat. I’m not the kind of woman to let a big bastard like this intimidate me, but a soft whimper escapes my lips—a noise I’ve never made before in my life. But Angelo brings this strange, warm softness out of me, and

it's like I want to yield to him and let him use me however he wants.

Just maybe, I'll like it.

My whimper spurs him on. He moves me back until I stumble against the iron railing ringing around the patio courtyard, and the kiss deepens. His drink falls from his fingers and tumbles behind me into the grass, and I toss my champagne glass into the bushes and we wrap our bodies tighter, making sure there are no gaps between us as the kiss heats up and my desire blows a hole straight through my head.

"Don't get any ideas," I say as I pull back from him, trying to catch my breath, but his eyes tell me he's already making his plans.

"There's a room," he says and grabs my hand. "Coming?"

"We shouldn't."

"I didn't ask if we *should*. I asked if you're coming."

I stare into his eyes. This is my chance, my last chance.

I barely know this guy and everything's telling me to turn around and run away.

But I've spent my life doing the right things, over and over again, ever since I was a little girl. I thought the rules were there for a reason, and if I followed them, I'd get everything I wanted.

Now I'm beginning to think the rules were made by those in charge to keep the suckers in line.

"I'm coming," I whisper and he leads me around the side of the building.

This is stupid. This is so, so stupid, and yet I like the way he smells and the way he smiles and the way he laughs, and most of all I love the way he looks at me.

Like I'm the only thing worth looking at in this entire building.

I don't do things like kiss handsome gangsters, especially not ones with filthy mouths. All my life I've been careful: no

boyfriends, no mistakes. I worked hard to graduate top of my class, to get good grades in law school, and to land a highly coveted associate position at a prestigious law firm in Dallas. Everything's been by the book, never deviating, never once letting myself do something potentially disastrous.

And now it's like all those years of hard work and sacrifice, those late nights studying while my friends went out drinking, those missed dates and ignored messages on Tinder and a thousand different social opportunities I straight up pushed to the side, suddenly it's all pouring out of me.

All that missed opportunity. All that risk not taken.

I want to do something dumb, if at least for only tonight.

He finds a side entrance and we head inside. The sounds of the kitchen echo down the hall. He stops outside an unmarked door, pushes it open, and snaps a light on.

"Romantic," I say and stare around at a storage area. Bags of beans and rice, paper plates and utensils, things the kitchen would need stacked on big iron racks.

"Did you want romance, or did you want to feel something?" He steps close, pulls the door shut, and pins me there. I'm starting to think I should've run away when I had the chance. He's looking at me like he wants to crack me in half. The hunger in his eyes is intoxicating and terrifying as he reaches past me and turns the lock with a sharp click. "Because I'm not interested in romance tonight."

"What are you interested in, Angelo?"

"You."

His lips find mine, and I give in to the moment, no more resisting, no more playing. His hands explore my body and I'm losing control but that's what I wanted. No more too-inside-my-head, no more second-guessing-everything, I can drift into this man's mouth and tongue and hands and forget myself for a while.

He lifts my dress, the soft fabric sliding over my thighs until his fingers find the hem of my panties. I whimper onto his tongue as he slides them down to mid-thigh, enough to expose

but also enough to keep me caught there. He teases me with his fingers and kisses my neck, and I purr and moan as his touch drives me crazy, splitting me open, rolling along my clit, making me shiver and groan.

“So much for hating me,” he whispers and bites my lower lip as his fingers slide inside and I gasp. “You don’t taste like you hate me. You taste like you want to fuck me.”

“How do you know what I taste like?”

He drops to his knees and pins my hands to my sides and disappears between my legs. I moan in shock and excitement as his tongue laps me up and sucks me and, fuck, I guess that’s how he knows, and I grind against his mouth as pleasure rips into my mind. Oh my god, I’ve never felt something like this before, and I’m buzzing and riding along that edge of pure intense joy and all I want is for him to keep going, but this man won’t let me have anything that easy. He stands and kisses me and I taste myself on his lips before he turns me around, peels my panties down to my ankles, and grips my ass.

“Look at you,” he whispers as his belt comes off. “God, you’re fucking beautiful, Sara. I hope you have someone telling you that every day of your life.”

“Only on weekends,” I say, looking over my shoulder as he takes his hard cock from his pants and strokes himself. Fuck, he’s big, and my heart starts to race, but the look on his face as he stares at my body drives into my chest like a spear. I love that look, I want to live in that look forever. It’s the expression of a man that wants something so badly he’s willing to do anything to have it, and I’m all he desires in the entire world. It’s incredible, intoxicating, and terrifying all at once.

He smirks as he spits into his palm and rubs it into his tip. “I’d tell you every morning,” he says softly and presses himself against my soaking entrance. “I’d tell you the second you wake up in the morning, still sore from me fucking you the night before, and I’d tell you again as I came between your lovely legs.”

“I thought you said you weren’t interested in romance?”

He laughs softly and slides himself inside of me.

I moan and throw my head back. “I’m not,” he whispers in my ear, filling me to the brim, and my brain’s exploding with bliss and I see black spots in the edges of my vision as he starts to fuck me. “I’m only interested in taking you, frigid princess.”

Everything’s sensation after that. It’s him between my legs and him slapping my ass and him pulling my hair and whispering in my ear and having me, having me, over and over and over, deeper and harder and faster, a frenzy of desire spilling between us and rolling around like a wild thunderstorm. I’m not Sara anymore, at least I’m not the old-Sara anymore, I’m something totally different, a girl that gets fucked at a wedding in some random storage room and loves it, a girl that doesn’t care if the man inside of her is a mobster, a gangster, a criminal bastard, so long as he feels and tastes good. That’s the new me, the me that lasts for a little while at least, the me that breathes new life into my body and builds deeper and deeper until the climax tears through my flesh and transports me somewhere else, somewhere better. I come in a blinding flash and, god, it’s heaven, it’s too much.

I come and whisper his name, Angelo, Angelo, over and over. I come in a cascade, in a wave. I come and moan and kiss him over my shoulder and let him fuck me and fuck me harder and take me until it hurts so fucking good, and I let him fuck me more until he stiffens and I feel him fill me deep between my legs, deep inside my tight and dripping pussy, and we collapse together against the wall, panting and holding each other, half-dressed and out of our minds.

“Can I admit something?” I whisper.

“You can tell me anything right now,” he murmurs. “After that, I’ll worship the ground you walk on.”

I can’t help but smile. “I’ve never done this before.”

He laughs softly. “Were you a virgin?”

“No, asshole, I mean—you know. A one-night stand.”

“Would you call this a one-night stand?”

“Don’t be a prick.”

He chuckles and kisses my neck. “Don’t worry. I think you’re incredible.”

I shiver and smile. “I’m not worried. Asshole.”

We stay like that for a while longer, but it can’t last forever. The old-me comes back, the Sara with the straight As, the Sara that only cares about making partner and being responsible. I pull up my panties—ruined and worthless, but better than nothing—and adjust my hair.

“You look incredible,” he says as he adjusts himself and studies me. “Nobody will ever guess you just fucked a made man in a supply closet.”

“I knew you were all about the romance.”

He laughs and comes closer. He leans in, but I put a hand against his chest. He pauses, lips inches from mine. “One last kiss,” I say. “And then we’re done.”

His eyes seem to sparkle in the low light. “One last kiss and then we pretend like we’re strangers again.”

“That’s right. One last kiss.”

He leans in and his lips touch mine so gently it kills me. He stays there, drinking me in, and the kiss lasts nearly forever before he finally breaks it off.

“A good kiss to end things on,” he whispers, unlocks the door, and steps out into the hall.

I stand there alone in the supply closet.

I never do things like this, and I’ll never do it again.

But he’s right.

That was one *hell* of a last kiss.

Chapter 2

Sara

Nine Weeks Later

THE TOP FLOOR OF KLEIN AND HOUNDSON SMELLS LIKE disinfectant and leather cleaner. The silence is heavy, almost oppressive—everyone keeps their door closed, and the thick carpet sucks up any personality and conversation like a vacuum.

I lean back in my chair and bump against the wall behind me. The light in my tiny junior office flickers every time I plug my laptop in and it's a constant game of using it on battery for as long as I can before I give up and accept the headache-inducing strobe. I'm pretty sure I have the smallest office in the entire firm, and the partner that shares a wall with me called it the *law closet* when I first moved in. That's guy's a prick. Actually, most of them are pricks.

A knock at the door makes me bump into the wall again. I curse as I adjust myself. "Come in," I call out.

Carmine Scavo stands there looking in with a frown. He glances at my filing cabinet, at the single chair in front of my desk, at the total lack of windows, and I'm pretty sure he could stretch out his arms and touch both walls. He's big, good looking, and sleek in a rich-and-dangerous sort of way, and a smile breaks out across his face. "I have to admit, I imagined something a little more—"

I glare at him. “If you’re about to insult my office, I’ll have you thrown out of here in a second.”

Carmine laughs and closes the door behind him. “I’d never dream of it.”

“Take a seat, Carmine.” I watch him settle in the only chair. My best friend’s husband is the sort of criminal client I’d never let walk through my door, mostly because I do intellectual property and copyright law, and if Brice didn’t love him, I’d never take this meeting.

But Brice does love him, and I love Brice, which means I’m willing to give legal advice to a gangster.

“I haven’t seen you since the wedding,” Carmine says and tries to stretch his legs out but realizes there’s not enough room. I grimace slightly but try not to let him see it. “How are things?”

“Things are fine. Busy with work.” I gesture at the pile of case files. I’m a first-year associate which means I get all the work the higher-ups don’t want. It helps fill out my billable hours but it’s also extremely tedious and distracts from building my own book of business.

“You haven’t been hanging around with Brice much lately.”

I shrug a little and glance away. I’ve been feeling guilty about that. “I’m not seeing much of anyone these days.” Which is true—I’m trying to keep my head above water and haven’t made time for an actual social life since diving into this job.

“You’re that busy, huh?”

“Trying to work my way up in this place.”

He bobs his head from side to side, studying me. “Well, give her a call. She misses you.”

“I will. Did you come here to make me feel shitty about not talking to Brice, or did you have some business you wanted to discuss?”

Carmine’s smile is sharp as he sits up straight. “As a matter of fact, I do have some legal issues I’d like to discuss. But I need to know who I’m speaking with first.”

My eyebrows raise. “I’m sorry?”

“Are you Sara the lawyer or Sara my wife’s friend?”

I sit very still and try to get a sense for where this is going. Carmine watches me in return. My stomach’s doing flips, tying itself into knots, but I keep that off my face. I don’t want to show weakness to a man like this if I can avoid it, and I take a few moments to consider what he’s saying.

“I’m not officially your lawyer yet,” I say very carefully. “If you’re about to admit to crimes—”

He holds up a hand. “I don’t commit crimes.”

“All right, then I’m a little bit of both.”

He clears his throat and I realize he might be as nervous as I am. “Here’s the situation. One of my guys got arrested and charged with murder two days ago, and I think he’s innocent.”

I let that sink in. The silence feels heavy and oppressive. I knew Carmine was into some dark stuff, but murder? And here, in Texas? His family is based in Philadelphia, and although he travels back and forth with Brice for work, they’ve been spending more and more of their time on the East Coast these days. I had no clue he had guys in Dallas, much less guys that might get thrown in jail for a serious offense like freaking murder.

“I’m not sure what I can do to help you,” I admit and start opening a drawer. “We have some good defense attorneys if you want me to make a recommendation—” I start pulling through paperwork, looking for a card I can offer him, but he shakes his head.

“No, I’m here because I don’t trust anyone else. I have my own suits back in Philly, but I need someone licensed here in Texas. I need someone that has my best interests at heart.”

“Carmine,” I say, spreading my hands. “Murder isn’t my thing. I do intellectual property disputes.”

“The law is the law. You *could* take this on, couldn’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

“He’s innocent, Sara. I don’t know by whom, and I don’t know why, but he was set up.”

I rub my face and shake my head. “Carmine, I’m sorry, this is nuts. I’m a first year IP lawyer, I couldn’t possibly help you with a murder case whether your guy is innocent or not.”

“I’ll triple your normal rate.”

That gets my attention. I sit still, eyebrows raised. Putting a triple rate case on my books would be absolutely massive, and I could really use a ton of help if I’m going to impress the guys here. Klein and Houndson is a top law firm in Texas and I’m bottom of the rung, which means there are half a dozen other smart and capable lawyers fighting tooth and nail to push me even lower on the pecking order.

And this place is a little—*traditional* would be the nice term. There are other female lawyers here, even a few female partners, but not many even though the law industry as a whole is rapidly changing and diversifying. Klein and Houndson remains one of the few places that hasn’t kept up with the times, and now I’m struggling through that mess.

Taking on a client like Carmine, a client willing and able to pay fat bills, would be *extremely* beneficial.

But it’s a murder case, and I don’t do murder cases.

“I’m sorry, Carmine, I just can’t.”

“If I could go hire any old lawyer, I would, but none of them are going to believe me. You barely believe me and you were at my wedding. I know who I am and I know what my people do, but I’m telling you the truth right now. My guy was set up and I can’t let him rot in jail for something he didn’t do. So please, help me out. Help *him* out.”

I rub my temples. There’s that headache again ready to bloom, and the laptop’s not even plugged in. What the hell is Carmine thinking, coming to me with a case like this? I love Brice, but that doesn’t mean I’m about to throw my life away working with a freaking mobster.

But then again, even gangsters deserve good representation, and if Carmine really thinks I’m the only person able to do the

job—

And the money's going to be good, which helps a whole lot.

"I could, *in theory*, take it on."

"Perfect," he says and hits his thighs with his palms. "That's great. Let's sign the documents and get to work."

"But wait, hold on, I said in theory—"

"I'll need a lot of your time, all right? Lots and lots of billable hours. Go fucking nuts, I don't care what it takes. I want to clear my boy's name."

I groan and shake my head. "Carmine—"

"His name is Nicolas Cavallo. Young guy, barely twenty-one. Smart, fluent in Spanish and Italian, an up-and-coming sort of guy. He's not the type to kill a room full of Mexican cartel members, but that's what they're saying he did."

I groan and feel like my stomach falls from my knees. "Cartel? You've got to be kidding me."

"I know, but hey, they're dead already so you don't have to worry."

"Carmine."

He grins at me and stands. "You'll be okay, don't stress about it. I'm sending help. You're not going through this on your own, but listen, Nicolas is innocent, and it'll be on you to prove it."

"I'm not a detective, I don't do investigations. I'm an IP lawyer—"

"You'll do great, and besides, Angelo will take care of everything."

My jaw falls open and I stare at Carmine as he walks to the door of my office. That name echoes through my head—Angelo, Angelo, Angelo. This has to be a sick joke. I've thought about Angelo a thousand times since the wedding, but I swore I'd never see him again, never reach out to him again, no matter what.

Our last kiss still tingles on my lips.

But it was our *last* kiss.

I'm not breaking that promise to myself.

"Wait, hold on," I say before Carmine can run off. "*Angelo* is helping me?"

"Nicolas is part of Angelo's crew, so Angelo's the one that feels responsible. He'll do most of the investigating, all you have to do is steer him along and provide him all your legal expertise. You got it?"

"Carmine, this is wildly insane. Not to mention inappropriate and maybe not even legal, and you can't just—"

"Yeah, yeah, shit's complicated, I'm aware, and that's why I'm paying you the big bucks." He smiles at me sadly and shrugs. "But the kid's innocent and I'm not about to let him go down for the rest of his life. Are you?"

I glare at him and cross my arms. "That's not fair."

"Nobody said any of this shit was fair." He pulls his phone from his pocket and checks the screen. "I gotta go make some calls. How about you go meet Angelo at the Hilton downtown tomorrow night? Sometime around seven? Dress real conservative though, we don't want a repeat of the wedding."

I turn beet red and put my palms flat on the desk. "Please, don't ever mention that again. If we're going to do this, we're keeping it professional."

He laughs and holds up his hands. "Understood, and hey, all I know is you two danced a lot, that's all." I want to punch Carmine in the throat so badly it hurts, but I'm too knocked off balance to do anything but sit here and stare death at him. "Hilton, tomorrow, seven. Angelo will give you everything we know and he'll run things from the ground. You tell him where to look and he'll look. Good luck. You can do this." Carmine disappears into the hall and is gone, leaving me alone.

I lean back in my chair, knock against the back wall, and slowly deflate, feeling like I was just run over by a truck.

How is my life taking a sudden turn for the worse?

Angelo's here, in Dallas, and he's going to work with me to solve a murder case, a crime I don't even specialize in, and a crime that involves a freaking Mexican drug cartel. This is so beyond me and I feel like I can't breathe. My head's pounding and my hands are sweating, and I'm trembling as I stare down at my lap and both my hands press to my stomach.

Because none of that is the real problem.

I can handle a murder case and some cartel guys. It's hard and dangerous but I have resources at the firm and a dozen decent lawyers that can help me out if I need it. No, the case is bad, but it's not what's killing me.

Angelo's the problem.

That night is the problem.

His *baby* is the problem.

The baby I'm carrying.

I found out three weeks ago when I missed my period after the wedding. I took a test, and another test, and another, until I had a pharmacy's worth of positive tests lined up on the rim of my bathtub like a chorus in a Greek tragedy all singing about how I'm doomed forever and ever and the gods are laughing at me.

I'm pregnant.

With a mobster's baby.

And now that mobster is back in my life when I swore I'd never tell him about this child and never wanted to speak with him again.

One last kiss, that was all.

Except he left me with a parting gift.

Now we're about to work together, and I don't know if I can handle keeping this secret.

Because there's no way in *hell* he's ever finding out about *my* baby.

Chapter 3

Sara

I stand in the lobby of the Hilton at seven on the dot, adjust my knee-length skirt, check my flowy blouse in a mirror, and think about getting the hell out of there.

I'm not sure why I showed up. If I'm going to take on this case for Carmine, I'm going to do it my way, which means the official way. I'll hire a couple defense attorneys for consultations, I'll brush up on the pertinent laws, I'll do deep, obsessive dives into the case itself and all the important witness testimonies and evidence, and I'll crush this thing before it even goes to trial.

Under no circumstances will I run around Dallas with a mobster looking for something that might not even exist.

There's no silver bullet. There's no easy fix. This case is going to crack the old-fashioned way, and a guy like Angelo's only going to make my life harder.

I have to be honest with myself: Carmine might be Brice's husband, but he's still the Don of a powerful mafia family. That's bad enough and I don't love turning a blind eye to a criminal like that, but actively getting involved in his activities is way too far.

At least it's too far for the Sara I've always been.

I'm not sure what's too far for the Sara that slept with Angelo that night at the wedding. For a few hours, I was someone else, someone that wanted to take risks, that wanted to live a little bit. Someone that wanted to feel *good* for once instead of constant pressure.

But I left that Sara behind with that last kiss and I'm only ever going to be me.

"You look perfect, you know."

I grimace and look over my shoulder in the mirror. It's him, standing a few feet behind me, casually wearing a dark suit with his hands in his pockets, looking like an actor straight out of a movie about gangsters. Hair pushed back, lips in a smirk, tattoos poking out of his sleeves and up his neck. Angelo sucks the light into him like a black hole, and I can't help but stare for a few beats as I try to calm my suddenly speeding heart.

This is him. This is the man that got me pregnant.

My heart starts racing. Nerves tingle down my arms and into my fingers. I shouldn't react like this but I can't help it.

This is Angelo, the guy I've thought about every day for nine weeks.

The father of my baby.

No, *no*, not the father of my baby, *nobody* is the father of my baby. This is my child and it doesn't matter who happened to donate the sperm.

I straighten my back and tilt up my chin and meet his gaze. I'm wearing a very conservative and business-friendly outfit, just about as nonsexual as I could possibly manage, and he's still looking at me like I'm sin incarnate.

"Hello, Angelo," I say and extend my hand. "Nice to see you again."

His eyebrows raise and my palm hovers there between us like a joke. I can still taste him on my lips and feel him between my legs. I've never been more vulnerable in my life, and I hate him so much for making me stand here and look like an idiot. But slowly, he steps forward, and we shake.

"It's nice to see you again too, Sara."

"Carmin told me to come meet you here." I clear my throat.

"I understand you know Nicolas?"

His grip on my palm tightens. “I’m the reason the kid’s in trouble.”

“Then I guess we should talk.”

He releases me and turns. I follow him into the hotel bar and we grab a table in the far corner. He gets us drinks: a glass of cheap champagne for me and a whiskey for him.

I can’t tell him I’m not drinking, so I place my glass in front of me and wait as he looks at me for a long moment. His eyes drift from my lips to my neck, to my chest, and back up again, and I know what he’s doing, looking at all the places he kissed and touched, and I wonder if he’s thought about me half as much as I’ve thought about him since that night. I highly doubt it—I know men like Angelo. Confident, selfish men, handsome and rich men, dangerous men. I’ve avoided men like him my whole life, and now here I am, sitting across from him with a secret.

The kind of secret that could ruin our lives.

This is such a mistake.

“Tell me about the case,” I prompt and try to keep my voice as steady as I can. I’m a lawyer and a professional. I can do this, I can keep it all business and get out alive. I have to keep going.

“Straight to business,” he says, eyes drifting down to the table. “Nicolas was sent down here to negotiate a business deal.”

“With a Mexican cartel?”

“Let’s assume someone like that. Do you really want to know the details?”

“Tell me as much as you can without incriminating anybody.”

“Right, so a business deal.” He takes a long drink and sits up straight. “It was supposed to be a simple meeting. I sent Nicolas because the kid knows Spanish and I figured that’d help with the talks. We’d already hammered out the deal on our end, and Nicolas just needed to get some details sorted, shake some hands, and get the whole thing moving. Except when he arrived at the motel where he was supposed to talk to

the representative from our southern friends, he found something else entirely.”

My breath hitches in my throat. “What did he find?”

“Bodies. A lot of bodies. Blood everywhere. I only know what he told me, but I believe him. I brought that kid into the crew and I’ve been working with him ever since, and I can swear to you, the kid doesn’t have it in him. Not that sort of killing. No way in hell. Not many people can slaughter a room full of living, breathing humans and walk away from it without losing their minds.”

I shift in my seat and raise my glass to my lips. A terrified shiver runs down my spine. I’m about to drink—but I stop myself. God, I’m not used to being pregnant. I fake a swallow and put the glass back down. “How many dead?”

“Five men. All of them with connections to our southern friends. There weren’t supposed to be that many to begin with, much less all of them with bullet holes and cut throats.”

“Spare me the gore, please.”

“You’re about to get knee deep in some filth, Sara. You better start strengthening your stomach.”

I narrow my eyes. He’s right, but he doesn’t need to be a prick about it. “What did Nicolas do after he found the bodies?”

“He did what anyone would do: he got the fuck out of there. Cops caught him an hour later as he was driving to the airport freaking the fuck out. He called me losing his goddamn mind the second he saw all that shit, and I could barely make sense of it, but I told him to get on a plane and get the fuck home, and we’d sort it all out from there. Instead, the cops caught him before he could reach the airport, hauled him in, and accused him of doing it. The lead detective said they got fingerprints or DNA or some shit, and now here we are.” Angelo leans forward, staring into my eyes, and I get a flash of him pulling my hair as he slides deeper and deeper between my legs. A shiver of lust and fear rolls down my back. “I’m telling you right now, he’s innocent. If you heard him when he called me, there’s no way in hell you’d think he did it.”

“I believe you,” I say because I don’t have any other choice, but it does seem implausible that one guy managed to murder five Mexican cartel members. “The question is, why don’t the police?”

“That’s where you come in.” He sits back and finishes his drink in one long gulp. “I have no clue what they’re thinking.”

“I’ll start the process of getting the evidence from the prosecutor’s office and I’ll build a defense from there, but I need to make sure Nicolas is going to be entirely forthcoming with me. Which means a visit.”

“Whatever you want.”

“And as for you—” I raise an eyebrow. “You can go back home.”

That surprises him. He tilts his head in confusion. “Carmine said you’d need help.”

“Carmine’s wrong. I need help from experienced defense lawyers, not from street thugs. You’re not needed, Angelo. Go back to Philadelphia.”

He stares at me for a beat before he bursts out laughing. I grind my jaw, frustrated and annoyed by his reaction, but I’m not backing down. Angelo is only going to get in the way and potentially make my life that much more difficult, and I’m not interested in having him hovering over my shoulder.

Besides, the longer he’s here, the more likely it is he’ll find out about my baby, and I can’t let that happen.

“There’s no way in hell I’m heading back to Philly without Nicolas.”

“Like I said, you aren’t needed. If I have to hire a private investigator to aid us with gathering evidence and following leads—”

“You’ll have me do it,” Angelo says, his smile disappearing. “You really are a frigid princess, aren’t you?”

I sit back for a second like he knocked the wind out of me. That’s what he called me the night of the wedding, his *frigid princess*. I have to steady my racing heart and gather myself—

I won't take this bait and let him mess with me until I say something stupid.

"I'm doing you a professional courtesy by taking this meeting," I say and keep my tone as neutral and serious as I can, "but I told Carmine and I'm telling you, I don't want you getting involved."

"Too bad, princess. I'm not going anywhere." He swirls his drink and keeps on staring at me like he's waiting for me to get up and come sit in his lap. My stomach's twisting, half with rage and disgust, and half with a strange and sickening desire. "You know, I keep thinking that you're playing some kind of game, but it really isn't. You're really not going to talk about it, are you?"

I grimace and lean forward. "There's nothing to talk about."

"There's *a lot* to talk about. That night at the wedding—"

"Angelo—"

"You whispered my name just like that if I recall correctly. I've been thinking about you for the last couple months, Sara. Every night before bed, I close my eyes and picture you in that fucking cheesy bridesmaid dress looking absolutely fucking perfect, dripping with sin and sex and damp with sweat, face flushed, excitement in your eyes, and you're sitting there now dressed up and looking like the most fuckable lawyer in existence—"

"I did *not* dress up for you, asshole," I snarl at him. "I wore the *least* sexy outfit I could find."

"You really think we can ignore what happened?" he asks and his voice softens. "You really think you're capable of that? Because I promise, my frigid princess. I'm not."

"Stop it," I say sharply and take a beat to gather myself. This is *not* how I wanted this to go, but I can't let him get the upper hand. This is what Angelo does: he pushes my buttons, teases me, drives me crazy, tries to beak me. It won't work this time. "I told you then and I'll say it again: whatever happened, we left it behind. It's dead and buried. Understood?"

His smile is sharp. “I understand that’s what you want, but you’re not so easy to forget.”

“Try harder.”

“Frigid princess.”

“Massive asshole.” I shove the full glass of champagne away. “Thanks for the drink. This meeting is over. You’re not needed and you’re not welcome. Go back to Philadelphia.”

“You still need my help,” he says as I get up.

“No, Angelo, I really don’t.” I adjust my bag and straighten my skirt and ignore the way he’s looking at me like he wants to drag me back into some empty storeroom and fuck me all over again. *That’s not happening, not ever again.*

“Who do you think is going to keep you alive through all this?”

His words stop me in my tracks.

He’s not smiling. That’s not some tacky joke. His head is tilted and he’s looking at me intently like he really wants to know who’s going to protect me, and for a second, I start to panic. The weight of this whole thing starts to push down on my chest and I have to lean against the table. I start thinking about my life, and about the life that’s growing in my belly, and I don’t know what the hell I’m thinking getting involved with gangsters and drug cartels. There are *five murdered bodies* and whoever did it might still be out there, and they won’t be happy if we start looking for them.

What’s a dead lawyer compared to a bunch of cartel men?

Angelo’s right—who the hell is going to keep me safe?

“Easy,” he says, getting up and coming toward me. He puts a hand on my back and steadies me as I take gulping breaths. “All right Sara, you’re fine, you’re okay. Shit, I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

He doesn’t know. He doesn’t get it. I’m not losing it because I’m afraid for myself—I *am* afraid, but I wouldn’t react like this if it were only me.

I'm terrified for my baby.

"I'm fine," I say but he doesn't let me go. He stays there, standing close.

"You're not fine. Fuck, I meant to scare you a little, not make you spiral into a full-on panic attack."

"I'm not having a panic attack," I hiss at him, although I kind of am. "It's just a lot to process." I don't fight him as he helps me sit back down and he stays hovering at my side.

"Look, I know you don't want to see me. We have a complicated history that was meant to stay history, but—" He leans closer and his voice lowers. "Nicolas is innocent and we need a lawyer we can trust. That's you, ice queen. And you need a man like me to take care of you."

"Don't call me that." I fan myself as sweat breaks out on my back. "Can you just back off? I'm fine."

"I don't want you to fall over on your face."

"Angelo."

"All right, understood." He sits back down on the other side of the table. "I mean it though. Carmine sent me here to do your bidding, but also to make sure you don't get hurt. I'm not going anywhere."

I do my best not to groan. I feel dizzy and lightheaded, and all I want to do is curl up in a ball on my couch and cry. This was such a bad idea but now that I'm here, now that I'm meeting with him and moving forward with this insanity, it feels like I'm trapped.

I'm already involved, and I can't go back.

I have to remind myself why I'm doing this. I'm helping a friend. I'm helping myself move up at the firm. I'm saving an innocent guy from going to prison for the rest of his life.

I'm not doing this to get close to Angelo again.

"Boundaries," I finally manage to say.

He looks amused. "What are those?"

“Don’t be an asshole right now,” I say and grip the edge of the table. “We’re setting boundaries. We’ll have a professional relationship and that’s all. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” he says with a soft smile. “But do you?”

I push myself up again. “I’m going home.”

“But when will I see you again?” He’s trying not to smile, and I can tell he’s making fun of me.

“Never, hopefully.”

“Then I guess I have to follow you home.”

“Please don’t.”

“Goodnight, Sara.”

“Angelo, I need to know you’re not going to follow me home.”

He shrugs, takes my glass, and downs it. “No promises.”

I stand there and consider kicking him hard in the shin and screaming until the veins burst in my eyes, but I’m tired and scared and I want to go home, and there’s a baby growing inside of me now, which means I have to take care of myself before anything else.

Angelo isn’t going anywhere. I can accept that, even if I hate it.

But if he’s staying, there *will* be limits.

Chapter 4

Angelo

The jail where they're keeping Nicolas isn't so bad. It's new and modern and there's air conditioning, which isn't always a given even down here in the South where it's hotter than hell.

I walk in behind Sara and try not to stare at her ass, but it's fucking hard. Even in one of those conservative pantsuit things, she looks absolutely stunning: long, dark hair up in a tight bun, shiny and sleek; full figure with hips to die for and a mouth like heaven; and those lovely blue eyes that always seem to sparkle even when she's glaring, which is most of the time.

Since I met her, I've seen Sara smile twice. And both times were when I was fucking her.

"Keep your mouth shut during this," she whispers sharply as we head into the visitation waiting room. "You're my legal assistant. Understand?"

"Princess, I doubt anyone's going to think I'm a legal assistant."

"*Don't* call me that." She glances back, face hard. Her face is always hard. This girl truly is the epitome of an ice queen, and I don't know why I'm so drawn to it. Maybe I want to break that chilly exterior. Maybe I like the anger and abuse. Or maybe I just got addicted to her slick pussy and her incredible whimpers and I want more.

Mostly, I think I like the challenge. It's been a long time since a woman stood up to me and I like the fact that she seems to

both want me and despise me at the same time.

And I feel the same way—this girl's the opposite of what I've always gone for. I like warm and inviting and happy. I like when women laugh at my jokes and touch my arm and flirt a little. Sara would rather call me a douchebag than admit she found me charming, which is weirdly alluring. But most of all, she's from a world I'll never know.

She's a lawyer. Maybe she didn't grow up rich, but she's privileged. Good schools, good grades, that sort of thing. Hell, she met Carmine at Blackwoods, that fancy fucking college for snooty rich assholes and violent mobster kids, which means she's either a genius or she's got connections. I'm betting on both.

Then there's me. Poor kid from a shit part of the city. Dead parents, no future, nothing to my name except a willingness to bleed.

Sara doesn't know suffering while I was born into it.

She gets to choose whether she helps a guy like Nicolas, but I don't have that same freedom. He's my responsibility—he's a guy just like me—and I don't turn my back on my friends.

Either way, when Carmine said I might be working with Sara and asked if what happened at the wedding would complicate things, I told him absolutely not. I practically leapt at the chance to be close to her again.

Because even though we promised that night was all there'd ever be, I still want more, despite these tangled feelings.

That's my problem though. That's always been my issue. No matter what, I'm never satisfied.

But for a little while back in that storage room, I felt like I didn't need anything else in the world.

Only my frigid princess.

Which is why I'm willing to follow her now and play pretend.

We go through the whole process of checking in. I've visited guys in jail before, but never as a lawyer. The whole thing is different: instead of looking at us like we belong behind bars

with the other scum, the prison staff is actually being nice for once. Probably because we're in suits and we have briefcases and we've got power.

That's what it means to be on this side of the law. Protection, a little bit of power.

And I hope Sara's going to bring it all to bear on these fucks because my boy Nicolas really is innocent.

We're led down a back hallway and into an interview room. The guard leaves us alone and we're sitting on the same side of a table with rings built into the other end for the inmate's wrist chains. I lean back and watch as Sara opens her briefcase and starts getting her shit together. I catch glimpses of files and notebooks and photographs.

"Is that all the evidence the state has?" I ask.

"Not all of it," she says and her lips push together. That's the look she gets when she's annoyed, which is the expression she has most of the time. "They're being cagey. They keep promising the rest of it, but somehow there's a new excuse every day."

"That's always the way."

"Makes me curious." She taps a pen against her lips. "Who would want to set Nicolas up?"

I tilt my head side to side. "I don't think it's about Nicolas at all. Better question is, who would want to hurt the Scavo Famiglia?"

She studies me for a moment. "Well? Who?"

I spread my hands. "Your guess is as good as mine. We're a bunch of saints."

She sighs and I grin at her. I love the way she acts like I'm the most frustrating man in the world, and maybe I play it up a little bit when I'm with her, just to get a rise. And she never fails to deliver.

"This is my first jailhouse visit," she says quietly, suddenly, still staring at her notes, but I notice her hand is trembling

slightly and the nib of her pen makes little skittering marks across the yellow lined pad.

“You’ll be fine, don’t worry. Nicolas is a good kid and I’m here with you.”

Her smile is bitter. “Your presence isn’t as reassuring as you might think.”

“I’m a delight and you’re glad I’m back in your life.”

“We both know that isn’t true.” The door cracks open and the guards come in first. I swallow my reply as Nicolas is led to the table and locked into place as he gets settled on the lone metal chair.

He looks harried and tired. Big, black bags hang under his dark eyes. His black hair is greasy and messed up like he hasn’t showered since he got picked up, and there’s a fresh bruise under his right eye. We don’t speak until the guards leave.

“Nice outfit,” I say and nod at his orange jumpsuit.

He grins at me. “Same to you. God, fucking hell, Angelo, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“How you doing, kid?”

“I’m all right. Surviving.”

I gesture at his face. “Looks like you got into a scrap.”

He glances down at the handcuffs on his wrists. “There are guys in here.”

We go silent and let that sink in. I know what he means and I’m sure Sara does too. She looks queasy and nervous but she’s hiding it pretty well behind her rigid back and her hard expression.

“If you’re in danger, I can speak to the staff,” she says. “My name is Sara Bray and I’ll be your lawyer.”

“You’re the one Carmine promised? You’re good, right? Listen, I know it’s fucking crazy and I bet you don’t believe me, but I’m innocent.”

She glances at me. “I believe you,” she says quietly. “And so does Angelo.”

“We know you didn’t do it. Shit, you can barely tie your shoes, much less kill five cartel guys.”

He looks relieved. It’s almost pathetic. “They were dead when I got there, but the cops, they kept saying they found evidence. I haven’t said a fucking word to them since they brought me in, but they can’t have anything, can they? I was in the room for like a minute at most.”

“It appears they do,” Sara says. “Nicolas, I need to know everything, the whole story, start to finish. Everything you saw, everything you heard, everything you touched, and everything you smelled. Tell me whatever you remember.”

I nod to the kid and he clears his throat before he dives into the story.

It’s more or less what I told her. As he talks, Sara takes notes. She watches him, and he’s staring at the table, and I keep looking at her. The girl’s in over her head, that much is obvious, but she’s smart and capable or else Carmine wouldn’t have brought her into this. He’s a good judge of character, and in this situation, I completely agree with his decision, even if she doesn’t specialize in murder defense.

She’s still smart and at least she’s willing to listen. Most lawyers, they see a guy like Nicolas, they see a little evidence from the cops, they immediately assume we’re full of shit.

For once, we’re not.

“I might’ve touched the table. When I got into the room, I freaked out, you know? There was blood *everywhere*, it was absolutely crazy, and I panicked. But once I got myself together, I ran the hell out of there and called Angelo.”

“I told her about that,” I say.

“Did you notice anything strange? Anything off about the room? Anything in the parking lot?”

“Nothing aside from the bodies,” Nicolas says looking despondent. “I had no clue what was in that room until I went

inside.”

“Wait a second,” I say and glance at Sara. “Who let you in?”

Nicolas blinks at me. “The door was open already. Someone left the bolt out so the door didn’t shut all the way. I figured that was on purpose so I could go right in.”

“Really?” Sara asks, looking interested. “That means someone left it like that on purpose. But I don’t see anything about the bolt being open in the police report.”

“Does that mean anything?” Nicolas asks, craning his neck to look at Sara’s notes.

“We don’t know,” she says, “but we’ll look into every angle.”

The meeting winds down from there. She makes Nicolas go over his story another couple times and keeps taking notes until time is up and we have to go. I shake the kid’s hand and squeeze his elbow before they lead him out. “You’ll be all right,” I say quietly. “We’re here.”

He nods and looks beaten and dejected as they take him back to his cell.

We leave together. Sara doesn’t talk on the way back to the parking lot. She clutches her briefcase against her chest, and I’m not in the mood to try drawing her out. I keep thinking about Nicolas and that black eye, and the fucking cops dragging him into here. It all stinks to me, it all reeks like lies and shit.

This is our life. It’s always like this for guys like me and Nicolas. We’re born with nothing and we’re given nothing, and even if we fight to get some slice of goodness in this world, it’s always ripped away from our broken fingers by someone that doesn’t want us to have it. That’s how the world’s always been and how it’ll always be, and I can’t pretend like I think Nicolas has a shot in hell at beating these charges.

And it messes me up. It breaks my heart. It makes me so mad I could go back into that jail and kill every single one of those guards and drag Nicolas out myself.

Instead, I'll see this to the end, no matter what.

"I think you're right," Sara says back in the car as I start the engine. I turn to her, surprised to hear those words come out of her mouth. "Don't give me that look. I think he really was set up."

"Based on what?"

"The open door. Nobody would leave the door open like that, not even by mistake. Someone wanted Nicolas to stumble in there."

I lean back in my seat and run my hands over the wheel. "Cartel guys would know better than that. The kid's new to all this shit, otherwise, he would've been paranoid about that open door from the start."

"Why'd you send a kid like him, anyway?"

"He speaks Spanish and we thought it was a simple job." He shakes his head. "We didn't know."

"Right." She takes a long breath and lets it out. "Assuming it was one person, how the hell do you kill five people without anyone hearing a thing?"

I glance at her. "You think someone's lying."

"I think a lot of people are lying. We just have to figure out who and why." She leans her head back and closes her eyes. "I only hope the real killers aren't paying any attention to all this and are long gone by now."

"You don't have to worry about that," I say and turn toward her. She glances at me, face still serious, but I can see the glimmer of fear in her eyes. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"I appreciate that, but I don't need a knight in shining armor. I need a gun and a good night's sleep."

"It's Texas, I thought everyone carried out here."

"Not everyone." She sighs and rubs her face. "It'll be fine, let's just get back so I can do some work, okay?"

I put the car into gear and start driving.

The world might be shit, but I'm not going to let it hurt this girl. I've done bad things, let people down, gotten fucked up in my day, but I won't let that get in the way of keeping Sara safe.

Chapter 5

Sara

I sit in my apartment surrounded by files and law books and feel like I'm starting to get dizzy.

It's early in the morning, barely past eight, and I'm already overwhelmed.

After visiting Nicolas, I got together everything the prosecution sent over and borrowed as many books on homicide as I could and got to studying. As it turns out, living like a saint for my whole life prepared me for lots of cramming, and I stayed up half the night reading case law and trying to get myself up to speed. But all that did was give me a headache and make me exhausted because there's no way I'm going to learn everything I need to know in time.

There won't be any fancy legal tricks. I don't know how to mount a proper defense, and if this goes to trial, I'm totally screwed.

I'm going to have to prove that Nicolas didn't kill those guys beyond a shadow of a doubt, and I'd better do it soon.

There's a knock at my door. I sit up straight, and a spike of fear runs into my chest. I keep imagining those killers, picturing at least three or four of them, professional guys in those suits crime scene people wear that don't leave any prints or fibers or DNA evidence, like killer spacemen. I look through my peephole, heart racing, phone in hand ready to call emergency services—

But Angelo's face looks back at me. "I hear you breathing," he says and raises up two coffees. "You're working. Let me in."

I step away from the door.

I could ignore this. Pretend like he's not there. I could tell him to go away and let me do what I need to do.

But he's got coffee and I'm barely functioning.

"Fine," I say and unlock the door. When I open it, he breezes past and heads inside. "But you're not distracting me."

"Nice place," he says, looking around. I live in a decent two-bedroom apartment in a nice part of Dallas. There are certain perks to being a lawyer, even a first-year associate, and it helps that my parents paid for my undergrad degree and helped with law school.

I shut the door and lock it. "Be respectful of my personal space, please."

"I'm nothing but respectful." He hands me a cup. "Coffee, one cream, one sugar. I didn't know how you took it."

"That's fine." I take a sip and sigh. "You're right, okay? I am working. Been working all night."

"I see that." He lingers at the edge of my living room and stares at all the books, files, folders, and pictures. "You come up with anything?"

"Nothing." I sit down in the middle of it all and slump back against the couch. I feel him watching me and I'm suddenly very aware of my thin pajama shorts and the simple black Metallica t-shirt I'm wearing with the big rip near my boobs. I wish I had a bathrobe or something, and I settle for putting up my hair into my customary tight bun and hoping he doesn't look too closely at my chest. Which is definitely wishful thinking. "Just a few odds and ends but nothing solid."

"Like what?" He drifts closer and squints down at what I'm studying.

"Like they found fingerprints on the table and that lines up with Nicolas's story. They have footage of him going into the motel room and coming back out, but the CCTV doesn't have sound, and allegedly doesn't show anyone else coming or

going. But he was only in there for a brief window, like he claimed.”

“That’s all they have? They’re basing the murder of five guys on that?” Angelo looks appalled. “Fucking prosecutors. Fucking cops.”

“There’s one more thing.” I hesitate to even tell him about this, but he’ll find out eventually. “A witness claims to have heard something. He’s a maintenance guy that was doing work on a room nearby, and he swears he heard violent and angry shouting around the time that Nicolas went into that room. He claims the fighting ended after Nicolas left. He was the one who contacted the cops.”

“A fucking witness,” Angelo says quietly, face hard. “That’s where we start then.”

I hold up a hand. “Actually—”

“It’ll be easy. We find him, break one of his fingers, and he’ll tell us the truth. We get him to recant his story, and boom, it’s all over.”

“Absolutely not,” I say sharply. “That’s called witness tampering and that’ll get us both thrown in jail.”

“So we let the prick do whatever the fuck he wants?”

I shake my head. “No, we don’t, but here’s the thing. If he is lying, that means he’s part of whatever really went down. If we go to him, our enemies will know we’re starting to peel apart their story. We need to look somewhere else, ideally somewhere they’re not looking too.”

He studies me as a small smile breaks across his mouth. “You’re one smart ice queen, you know that?”

“God, you’re the worst.”

“Beautiful, intelligent, and isn’t afraid to crack the whip. I’d say you’re the perfect woman.”

“Get out. Just go.”

“No thanks.” He stretches and sighs. “What now?”

“Now I sit here and drink this coffee and then I read through all these files again. And you leave.”

He stands and crosses the room, which is the opposite of what I wanted. He sinks down onto the couch beside me, sitting way too close, and I’m very aware of his dress shirt rolled up to the elbows and his slim suit pants that hug his muscular thighs to perfection. His eyes skim across the papers before landing on my mouth, and I swear I can hear him thinking right now, or maybe it’s just me, but either way, the image of him kissing me and fucking me slips back into my mind.

I have to get up. I shuffle off the couch and move away, heart racing, sweat beading down my back. What is it about this guy? Why does my body react like I want him to kiss me again, when all I really need is for him to get the hell out of here?

“Come here, look at this.” He’s squinting down at a police report and slowly picks it up between two fingers like it’s filthy and he’s going to contaminate himself by touching it.

“How about you read it to me.”

He smirks but doesn’t comment. “This says there were a few other people working that day. There’s a couple maids, a front desk kid, and the manager. Did the cops interview any of them?”

I pause before walking over. I take the paper from him and skim it, then skim another page, and another, before finally grunting in surprise. “If they did, it’s not anywhere in here. How the hell did I miss that?”

“That’s where we start then.” His smug grin is so infuriating I want to rip it off his face.

“I think this is the most painful thing I’ve ever had to say in my life, but you’re right. We should talk to them.”

“My favorite words. Say them again, my frigid princess.”

“Get out of my apartment.”

“Oh, come on. Say my name and tell me that I’m right.”

“You’re sick. Do you remember the boundaries?”

“I remember them. I simply don’t care.”

I sigh and rub my face. As infuriating as he may be, the fact that the other employees apparently weren’t questioned is a massive breach of protocol. It’s possible the prosecution hasn’t sent it over yet but—

It could be something else. Something bigger.

I sit on the floor cross-legged and start taking some notes. “All right, I have work. You can go now.” I try to read and pretend like he doesn’t exist, but he’s watching me the whole time, and I quickly give up. “Seriously, why are you still here?”

“Let me ask you something,” he says. “Why are you like—this?” He gestures at me.

“That’s insanely insulting, you know.”

“This whole ice queen thing. Where’s it come from?”

“I’m not—” I clench my jaw and take a calming breath. “Angelo, I’m not interested in talking about my personal life with you. *Boundaries.*”

“It’s gotta be your parents, right?” He tilts his head. “Yeah, it’s always the parents.”

“Angelo.” I stand up and stare at him, seething, hands curled into fists at my sides.

“Come on, frigid princess. I bet your mommy and daddy are rich but didn’t give you enough love. Am I right?”

“You’re not right. I’m ten seconds away from hauling you out of here myself.”

“I’d love to see you try.” He leans back and crosses his legs. “Come on, I’ll tell you about my tragic backstory if you tell me about yours.”

“No, thank you.” I turn away from him and sink back to the floor. Whatever game he’s playing, I’m not interested in talking about my past, because the worst part of it all is that he’s right.

Or at least he’s partially right.

“You know what gets me, princess? You and me are like complete opposites. You’ve been given everything, haven’t you?”

“No, not even remotely.”

“You went to Blackwoods College. You work for a big, fancy law firm. How can you tell me you weren’t handed a perfect future on a silver platter?”

I take a deep breath and try to think calming thoughts—waterfalls, wind through prairie grass, the sound of a computer fan buzzing on an otherwise silent night—but nothing seems to work.

This bastard knows how to crawl under my skin.

“I wasn’t *handed* anything. I got straight As in high school and got a massive academic scholarship to college.”

He looks surprised. “Straight As, huh? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. I dropped out in ninth grade.”

“Guess I shouldn’t be surprised, either.”

“When it’s either work and help your grandmom pay her rent or go to school and watch her get kicked out, the decision’s pretty easy.”

I hesitate, not in the mood to get pulled into this conversation, but curiosity gets the best of me. “Did you live with her?”

“I did. My parents passed when I was nine. I barely remember them anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not. They were both drunks. Mom was driving and absolutely shitfaced the night she swerved into oncoming traffic on the Blue Route and got four people killed.”

I look away and try to imagine what it must’ve been like growing up with that. “I can empathize more than you realize.”

“Yeah? You got something you want to share.”

I level my gaze at him and shake my head. “Not even remotely.”

His lips curl. “Yeah, I figured. Girl like you, what’s the point? You already made your mind up about me, didn’t you?”

“All I know is I have work and you’re a distraction.”

“Understood.” He stands and stretches. “As much as I love driving you crazy, I do want you to get my boy out of prison. Let me know when it’s time to do some interviews.”

“Sure,” I say, already turning back to my work. “Whatever.”

But instead of leaving, he leans closer to me. “I’m not going away, my frigid little princess, so stop thinking you can treat me like another simpering loser until I disappear. It won’t happen.”

He stands up straight and walks out. I watch him go, seething. That’s not what I’m doing—if anything, I’m giving him more grace than he deserves.

It seems the honeymoon is over. Now we’re down to the real work, and he’s not enjoying himself anymore.

Not that it matters. So long as he lets me do my job, I’ll keep working for the best of us.

Chapter 6

Sara

“Well, what’s it like working for my husband?” Brice grins at me and leans closer across the table. Robyn’s sitting on my left and Cassidy is sitting on my right, and everyone’s looking at me like they want me to dish about the case.

But if they saw the pictures of those mangled corpses, they wouldn’t be so interested.

“It’s fine,” I say and take a drink of water. We’re all out to dinner at a decent Mexican place in downtown Dallas, which means it’s crowded and the buzz of conversation has me on edge, or maybe it’s the fact that I spent the last few days obsessively reading about murder.

“Fine? That’s all you have for us?” Cassidy laughs and looks at Brice. “She doesn’t look like it’s *fine*.”

“Carminé said it was a complicated case.” Brice frowns a little, looking worried. “He’s not asking too much of you, is he?”

“It’s fine, really.” I try to give them a smile but it feels wrong and I let it drop.

“I heard Angelo’s been helping out,” Robyn says and her smirk makes me grimace.

“I wonder where you heard that,” Cassidy mutters.

“Sorry,” Brice says quickly, “but ever since the wedding, I figured—”

“I’m fine, okay!” I can hear the anxiety in my tone and I try to pull it back, but the girls are already staring at me. “It’s just a hard case, that’s all.”

“I’ll talk to Carmine,” Brice says and nods to herself. “I’ll have him find someone else. I love you, Sar, and I’m not about to let you kill yourself just because you want to do a favor for my husband.”

“No,” I say quickly, “seriously, it’s not like that. He’s doing *me* a favor, if anything. Work hasn’t been exactly—” I stop talking suddenly, face turning bright red. I’m utterly mortified and I don’t know why I’d spill that out now all of a sudden, but the girls are giving me pitying stares.

“You want to talk about it?” Robyn asks, and I shake my head.

“You don’t have to,” Cassidy says. “But we’re here for you.”

I hold up my hands. “Look, I’m really fine.”

“You keep using that word but I don’t think you know what it means,” Robyn says with a grin.

“I’m just tired and cramming a lot to get myself up to speed.” The waitress returns with our meals, and I stare down at the line of lovely looking tacos, and my appetite is completely gone.

I wasn’t kidding about work, but I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I’m at the bottom of the totem pole and even though taking on this Carmine case is big business, I still have at least half a dozen other attorneys sniffing around acting like I can’t handle anything. Even the big shot at the end of the hall, this massive trial lawyer named Aldrick Genette, has been stopping by to give me pointers that are basically thinly veiled insults.

Nobody thinks I can pull this off.

Not even me.

But the girls take pity and the subject changes. I sit back and mostly listen while Cassidy discusses her training business, and Robyn tells a particularly raunchy story about a Tinder date gone wrong, and I keep catching these looks from Brice. I know what she’s thinking, but I wish she’d leave it alone.

When dinner's done, we say goodnight, and I'm left out on the street trying to decide if I should go back to the office for a few more hours or if I should head home. Brice sidles up next to me while her driver waits nearby.

"Must be nice," I say, nodding at the limo.

She smiles and shrugs. "I can't complain."

"I know what you're about to ask."

"You do?"

"You're worried about me, aren't you?"

"There are some red flags." She smiles at me and tilts her head. "But you never let that stuff get to you, do you?"

"It's not in my nature."

"Which is why I'm so worried." She takes my arm and leans against my shoulder. "We all know what my husband does for a living. I love that man but his business is a little bit..."

"Illegal? Messy? Violent?"

"I was thinking *complicated*, but sure we can go with all of the above."

"You know what's strange? Even despite all that, I still want to move ahead with this case."

"If it's about the money—"

"It's not."

She pulls back and studies me. "Then why?"

"It's about *winning*."

She looks surprised. "Winning? Really?"

I pull away from her and start walking. She falls into step and the car drifts after us like a massive, sleek black puppy dog, except there are guys with guns inside of it and thankfully, they're on our side.

"You met my parents, right?"

"Once," she says. "Sophomore year they came to visit. Remember that?"

“I remember,” I say and glance at the buildings. Mom was already drunk and Dad made it clear that he wanted to be anywhere else. When his beeper went off, he practically jumped at the chance to fly back early for a surgery the following day. “They’ve been like that my whole life.”

“Like what?”

“Mom’s been overbearing, almost obsessive, but only insofar as it reflects back on her. Dad’s the total opposite, he’s been too busy being Mr. Super Surgeon to ever give a shit about his daughter. They raised me to hit hard and finish things, and Mom would always tell me that winning is the only thing worth doing.”

“Oh, honey,” Brice says with a sigh. “I can only imagine how that might’ve fucked you up.”

I smile tightly. “I try not to think about it, but here we are anyway. I need this case exactly *because* it’s too much for me. I need it to prove that I’m not just the spoiled brat daughter of a brilliant and rich surgeon and a socialite alcoholic.”

We walk in silence for a bit. I feel vulnerable and strange, and maybe it’s the baby making me say all this, but it actually feels good to tell someone about my family dynamic instead of bottling it up.

“You probably know this already, but you don’t have anything to prove to anyone,” Brice says and when I give her a look, she only shrugs. “I really mean it. You’re smart and successful and gorgeous, and I wish I had your hair—”

“That’s not true. The hair part, the rest is dead on.”

She laughs. “I’m only saying, don’t put yourself in a tough spot just because you think your parents want you to.”

“It’s not really for them. It’s more for... the person I see myself as. The person I *want* to be, but I’m not sure I actually am. If I can’t take on a case like this and knock it out of the park, then am I really as good as I think? It’s as much about proving to myself that I can do it too.”

Brice nods and slowly stops walking. She faces me, her expression serious, and she takes my left hand between both of

her own. It's strange and I don't love the contact but I don't pull away either—I'm being vulnerable for once in my life so why not go all the way? She takes a deep breath and looks me in the eye.

"Sara, I think you should walk away."

My eyebrows raise. "Okay. That's direct. But why?"

"Because I think it's more dangerous than Carmine's letting on."

I let that slowly sink in. I know something big is going on here, or at least something *extremely* shady, but this feels like the start of something.

"What do you know?"

"Nothing concrete, only I heard him on the phone with Angelo last night. They were talking about... well, Carmine was talking about his enemies." She clears her throat and tightens her grip on me. "The list is very long."

"Angelo's just trying to find out who we need to look into, that's all."

"They're not the kind of people you want to get involved with. No, don't give me that look, I know I'm not one to talk considering I married Carmine. But I didn't have a choice in that, I just—"

"You love him."

"Exactly," she says quietly and sounds exhausted. "I don't want you to get sucked into something bigger than you can handle, that's all."

"Don't worry about me. Angelo claims he's basically my bodyguard. And despite his many personality flaws, he can be... useful."

She nods miserably but slowly her smile returns. "Are you sure there's nothing going on with him? I know you two, at the wedding—"

"Nothing," I say quickly and pull my hand from her grip. "I promise. Strictly business. We have *boundaries*."

“Yeah, right. I know all about boundaries and how quickly they evaporate.” She steers me toward the car. “Come on, let me drive you home.”

“No, really, I’m fine—”

“Sara, stop it. I have a rich and powerful husband, at least let me spoil my friends a tiny bit.”

I sigh as she opens the door to the limo. “Who am I to turn down a ride?”

“Exactly. Let’s go.”

We get into the back seat and the conversation turns to more mundane things like movies and TV, but I keep hearing her warning in the back of my head.

This is bigger than me. This is deep, and I might drown.

But I’m barreling forward anyway.

Chapter 7

Angelo

“**T**his might be a bad idea,” Sara says as she stares out the window of the car at the rundown rancher across the street. “Where’d you get this address, anyway?”

“Unlike you, I talk to people,” I say and kill the engine.

“I talk to people too.”

“No, you glare at them like you’re waiting for them to shut up.”

“I’m charming.” She turns and jabs a finger at me. “People like me.”

“People are terrified of you, but don’t worry, my frigid princess. I can do the talking.”

“Absolutely not.” She sits up straight. “This isn’t some street interrogation. We’re here on official business, which means we follow the law, got it?”

“Street interrogation?” I shake my head. “You really don’t get out much.”

“Don’t start that.” She pushes the door open and steps onto the street. “You coming?”

I follow her to the end of the driveway. We pause for a second and look around. The neighborhood is a rundown working-class place on the edge of the city with more weeds than grass and lots of chain-link fences. It’s a place I recognize, even if there aren’t many like it in Philadelphia. I know the kind of people that live in these houses, people existing paycheck to paycheck, always one mistake or bad turn away from total

disaster. I know them because I've been them, because I grew up with them. It's something Sara will never understand.

"Seriously, let me talk our way inside. Once we're sitting down, you can go in on the lawyer bullshit, but let me get it started."

"I don't know why you're so convinced that you can do this better than me."

"Because—look at you."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Excuse me?"

I run a hand through my hair and turn away, looking at the rundown rancher and the beat-up sedan in the driveway. "You look like your clothes are worth more than that car. No, don't get me wrong, you look gorgeous. I can't keep my eyes off you when you're wearing those tight skirts."

"Stop it," she says through her teeth.

"You scream money. You look like a fucking lawyer, and yeah, I know, that's the point, but that's not a good thing out here."

"Why are you so convinced that I'm rich?"

I glance back at her. "Tell me you're not."

"I'm not rich."

"You ever miss an electricity payment? You ever have to choose between paying your phone bill or canceling cable for a month? You ever put back a loaf of bread because you couldn't afford it?"

"No."

"Then you don't know." I walk slowly up the drive toward the front door. "I'm not playing some fucking pity party. I have plenty of money now. But when I was growing up, I had to make those decisions. I had to struggle, and life kicked my fucking ass day and night. You don't know what that's like."

She says nothing as I step up to the door. I try the bell, but nothing happens. I give it a second before I knock on the door, pounding a few times before stepping back.

“I do know what it’s like to struggle,” she says softly as a dog starts barking inside. “You think my life’s been easy because I had money growing up, but you’re wrong about that.”

I look back at her and stare into her hard eyes, and she glares back at me daring me to question her. Instead, I only shake my head. “Tell me about it sometime.”

“Shut the fuck up!” someone inside shouts. It’s an older woman’s voice, rough from smoking. “Stop barking, you stupid fucking—” The door yanks open and she looks out at me with a cigarette dangling between her lips. Dark hair going gray and frizzy, dark red dress, pale skin lined with age. “Whatever you’re selling, I don’t want it.”

She starts to slam the door but I talk fast. “We’re not selling anything. I fucking hate door-to-door salespeople. Scum of the fucking earth.”

That makes her pause. Her eyes narrow. “You political? I don’t vote.”

“No politics. My name’s Angelo and this is my associate, Sara. We’re here to talk to you about your job. You’re Sheila Vasquez?”

She gives me a long look and takes a drag. “What’s a nice-looking boy like you want to talk to me about that stupid motel for?”

“I’ve just got a few questions, that’s all. If it’s a total waste of your time, I’ll mow your lawn for a week, how’s that sound?”

She barks a rough laugh. “You’ve got a deal, but only if you do it without a shirt on. Gets hot out there, you know.”

“Deal.”

“Come in then, watch the dog, he’s a real piece of shit. Back off, Burger! Back off!” She pulls open the door, and Sara looks at me like I’m absolutely insane, but I don’t feel bad about lying to this toughened piece of shoe leather. She’s probably done worse.

Her place is cluttered but surprisingly neat. The dog’s a little white thing, yappy and obnoxious, and it jumps at my legs

until I let it sniff my hand and scratch its ear. Sara shies away from it like she's afraid it's going to bite her, which is hilarious because the thing's got a jaw about the size of a mouse. Sheila leads us into the living room and gestures at the couch.

"Sit down, you want anything? Water, iced tea?"

"We're fine, thanks." I perch on the edge of the cushion with Sara by my side. Pictures of Sheila's family line the walls alongside basic art prints from Kohl's or Home Goods or someplace like that. It smells like old tobacco, and the walls are stained a faint yellow from years and years of cigarettes. The dog runs in little circles and ends up leaping onto Sheila's lap as she settles into an armchair and puffs out smoke.

"All right, you got me sitting. What do you want to ask me about the Two Lane for?"

Sara speaks up before I can. "How long have you been working there, Ms. Vasquez?"

"Call me Sheila." She squints at Sara. "Been working at the Two Lane for about five years now, maybe a little more. Hard to keep track." She clears her throat. "Are you two with someone or something like that?"

"I work for Klein and Houndson, and Angelo here is my assistant," Sara says.

"Lawyer, huh." Sheila takes a drag. "And you've got an assistant that looks like this? You must be expensive."

"Very." Sara leans forward. "Sheila, do you know why we're here?"

"I can take a few guesses. You finally looking into all the shady shit happening at the Two Lane? The fucking hookers and the drugs?"

"No, not the hookers and the drugs," Sara says. "The dead bodies."

Sheila wilts slightly. She leans further back into her chair and takes two quick puffs. "I don't know anything about that."

"You were working that day, weren't you?"

“Yes, but I don’t know anything.”

“The maintenance man said he heard fighting and shouting.”

“Roger’s got better ears than me.”

“Where were you when the incident happened?”

“Don’t remember. Like I said, I don’t know anything.” She sucks down her cigarette and shifts forward. The little dog burrows into her lap as she strokes his back with rough fingers. “If that’s all you wanted then sorry I wasted your time, but it’s better if you both left.”

“Sheila,” I say before Sara can dig us deeper into a hole. “We’re not cops. You know that, right?”

“I know she’s a lawyer. I don’t know what *you* are. Never seen a law assistant or whatever with so many tattoos.”

I laugh, unable to help it. Sheila’s clever. “You’re not wrong about that.”

“So what are you then, huh?”

Angelo wipes invisible dirt from his sleeve. “Let’s say I have a vested interest in this case. What can you tell us?”

She sighs and shakes her head slowly, cigarette dangling between her lips again as she tosses the dog gently onto the floor. Burger whines and walks in circles but settles at the chair’s side.

“I remember the guys showed up in a van. They checked in, got a key, and headed upstairs. That was early in the morning right around when my shift started at five. They went in that room and never came out for the rest of the day, and I didn’t see anyone come or go. Then they were dead and everyone was freaking out. And you know who’s got to clean that room? Go ahead, take a fucking guess.”

“You’re sure you didn’t see or hear anything?” Sara asks.

“I’m positive.” Sheila finishes her cigarette and stubs it out in a half-full ashtray on the coffee table. “And that’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Thanks for your time.” I stand up and slip a card from my pocket. “This has my personal cell on it. You want to talk, you remember something, or if you really want to watch me mow your lawn without a shirt, you call me.”

“Just might do that,” she says, taking it and slipping it into her pocket.

“Have a nice day, Sheila.” I head out. Sara hesitates like she wants to say more, but she gathers her things and follows. Once we’re outside and the door’s firmly shut behind us, the lock thumping shut with a loud slam, I wait over to the driveway and pause there in the sunshine.

“What the hell was all that?” Sara whispers, glaring at me. “You just ran out of there before she said anything. We barely asked her any questions.”

“She wasn’t going to talk.”

“But you don’t know that.”

“She already said too much.” I take her arm and pull her against me. She yelps in surprise. “They showed up *early*. You heard that. Around five in the morning. Which means they’d been in that room for hours before Nicolas showed up and anything could’ve happened in that time.”

“Great,” she says with a sigh. “Doesn’t seem all that helpful, you know.”

“It’s a step in the right direction.” I tug her along and we head down to the end of the driveway. “Sheila will get in touch again. I have faith.”

“Unfortunately, your faith doesn’t reassure me. If we could just—” Before she can finish, a big black truck parked nearby pulls out from the curb and starts driving. It peels out, going fast, and burns down the street and away from us. I watch it go, a strange sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Strange,” I say.

Sara gently extracts her arm from my grip. “Very,” she agrees.

“What are the chances that truck just happened to take off the second we leave that house?”

“Slimmer than I like.”

I grunt in reply and stare down after the truck.

I can't say who was driving that thing for sure, but an ugly feeling is lodged in my chest. I keep thinking someone's watching us, someone that knows the truth of what happened to those cartel guys, and I keep waiting for them to make their move. I can't say that was it—but I also can't say it wasn't.

“Let's go before they decide to come back,” I say and head to the car.

“Take me to the office, please,” Sara says. “I have more work to do.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Alone.” She sinks into the passenger side seat.

I smile at her through the window then glance back at the house.

Sheila knows something. I can feel it in my bones. That woman saw or heard something but she's too afraid to say anything about it, and hell, I can't blame her. Whoever killed five well-armed cartel members isn't the kind of person you want to mess around with.

But that means she's in danger, and I don't know how to keep her safe.

Sara's my priority. As much as I want to help everyone, I have to accept my limitations and hope that whoever did those cartel guys in won't go around murdering witnesses just to keep them silent.

Which might be wishful thinking.

Chapter 8

Sara

I spend the day in the otherwise empty office going over my notes again and again. For all his arrogance and bragging, Angelo wasn't able to get anything useful out of Sheila, except for a small piece of the timeline. It helps, but it doesn't change anything.

What pisses me off more is the way Angelo acts like he has a monopoly on pain, like just because my father was a surgeon I somehow didn't have any problems. He walks around acting like he knows me better than I know myself and it drives me absolutely crazy.

He's the kind of person that loves to talk about how nobody can judge him while spending all his time judging others.

But he doesn't know me, not even a little bit. We slept together one time and that's it. He can say whatever he wants, tell himself that he knows something about me just because I want to Blackwoods College and got a law degree, but I know the truth. I know what my life was like before he ever showed up.

I'm stewing as I call a car and head back to my apartment. It's after seven at night and I'm looking forward to curling up on the couch, eating leftovers, and going to bed early so I can be up before the sunrise to start this whole process over again. Every day, day in and day out, working and working until I either find something or kill myself trying.

Something is off the moment I reach my hall. It's a smell, faint at first, but stronger as I get closer to my door. Like smoke, but

more acidic, sharper, like melted metal. I'm on edge as I reach out for the knob—

But the doorknob is missing, and the door's standing slightly ajar.

It looks like someone cut it clear off. That must be what I'm smelling. Metal dust and wood shavings. I want to turn and run but morbid curiosity makes me push it open and step into my own small living room. "Hello?" I say but it comes out strangled and soft. "Hello?" I say again louder but there's no answer.

The apartment's empty.

And it's a total wreck.

It's hard to process something so bizarre. The couch cushions are slashed. The kitchen cabinets are all opened and my plates and glasses are in a pile of shards on the floor. The refrigerator door is open, the food tossed out on the counter and in the sink. The paintings and prints I hung on the walls are ripped down, the glass broken.

My bedroom's the same. The more I stand in there and look around, the sicker I become. My clothes are torn out from the closet and thrown on the floor. My bed is ripped to pieces like someone took a knife to the comforter and the mattress. My clock is broken, my makeup is scattered, the water glass I keep beside my bed is shattered.

It's chaos. Pure chaos.

Who would do this? Who would break into my apartment and make such an insane mess? I try to see if anything is missing, but my laptop is still here, my TV is still on its stand, anything worth money is still basically where I left it—

But I know who was in here. I know who cut the knob and kicked the door in.

The black truck. The one that drove off from Sheila's house earlier.

I yank a suitcase from the back of my closet and start throwing clothes into it. I grab as much as I can, whatever looks like it's

in one piece and relatively clean. I take what I need from the bathroom, get everything in order, and I hurry into the hall as my heart races wildly and I raise my phone to my ear.

“Angelo,” I say, breathless, and only realize I’m panicking when I hear how shrill I sound. “My apartment. It’s been ransacked. Someone broke in and threw stuff around and broke my plates and my glasses and now—”

“Slow down,” Angelo says, sounding strained. “Where are you?”

“My apartment. They came to my apartment.”

“I’ll be there in a second. Don’t get off the phone.” I hear a door open and slam, and he’s breathing hard, probably running down stairs. I hurry away from my ruined apartment breathing hard and listening to the sounds of Angelo getting into his car and starting the engine. “Don’t move. Don’t hang up.” He’s driving fast, tires squealing, and I get outside. I can’t bring myself to stay near that apartment, not for a second longer than necessary.

His breathing is a strange comfort. The anxiety in his tone pushes my own panic down a notch. I can breathe at least. I stand out front of my building with my bag, and I look around for a black truck, but there’s nothing, only normal-looking cars and normal-looking people walking past, but nothing’s normal anymore.

My life’s been ripped to shreds and my illusion of safety is gone.

A car pulls up and slams on its brakes. Angelo rolls down the window. “Get in.”

I toss my bag in the back seat and he drives fast away from the building. As soon as we’re clear, the sudden horror hits me full on, and the careful facade and the iron-laced fence I keep around my heart suddenly cracks, and I lean forward and sob into my hands.

Angelo doesn’t speak. I bet he’s bewildered. I never cry in front of people—hell, I never cry at all. But I can’t help as the tears rip themselves from my throat and my chest heaves.

Someone broke into my apartment and threw my life around like it's nothing, and if I was home when that happened then I might be dead like those cartel guys.

The car slows and stops. I don't know where we are. I stare out from tear-blurred eyes and shake my head when Angelo offers me a tissue. I wipe my face with my hands and sleeve, feeling like an idiot, and he looks back at me with a grim frown.

"I don't cry," I whisper. "I never, ever cry."

He looks surprised. "Your apartment just got violated. It'd be weird if you *didn't* cry."

I stare down at my hands, streaked with tears. "My dad would yell at me if I got upset. My mom would call me a baby and mock me viciously. I still don't know which of them was worse, but I learned fast that crying didn't get me anywhere in my household. If I wanted something, I needed to swallow my feelings and act like nothing mattered. At least they respected that."

Angelo's silent. He's studying me, and I feel so vulnerable, which is strange. I never wanted to be vulnerable around this man, not again, but I can't help myself. Crying like this brings back too many ugly memories—my mother, drunk, yelling as I sobbed over the death of my hamster when I was seven years old, or my father sneering as I teared up when I failed to make the varsity softball team in middle school, or a dozen other pathetic moments when I was told that my feelings were irrelevant, that I needed to shove them away and suck it up and move on. It didn't matter if I was crying for good reason—

Tears were for babies and the weak, and weakness was not allowed in my family.

"You'll stay with me tonight."

I shake my head. "No. I can't do that."

"I have a suite. I'll sleep on the couch."

"Angelo—" I clear my throat and take a breath, trying to get myself together. "It's not appropriate."

“What, because I fucked you a couple months ago? Or because you’ve been touching yourself in the shower thinking about my cock between your legs?”

“God damn it, what is wrong with you?” Anger flares as I turn on him. “Why are you always like this?”

“Because it’s easier to be pissed than it is to be scared,” he says softly returning my gaze with a grin. “You’re staying with me tonight, Sara. You can’t go back to your place.”

This man is a psycho. He’s infuriating and insane, but he’s right. The anger does manage to clear my head a little bit and gets the gears in my skull running, even if that means all I’m doing is plotting his demise.

“Just for tonight,” I say. “And only because they cut off my doorknob.”

“They did what?”

I tell him everything, starting with the moment I reached my door. “I think they were looking for something, but I don’t think they found it.”

He runs his hands over the steering wheel. “They were looking for your notes.”

“My notes?”

“On the trial. They want to know how close we’re getting to figuring out the truth, which means we’re on the right track. But more than that, they were trying to scare you.”

“It worked,” I say and laugh bitterly. “They scared the *shit* out of me.”

“Good.” He looks at me with a hard expression. “But don’t let them win.”

I let those words sink in. I can hear my father saying something similar: *don’t let someone steal your win, Sara*. It was always like that with him, that obsession with winning, with getting ahead, with shoving those around you down beneath your boots and climbing up over their bodies. He did it, one surgery at a time, one promotion at a time, and now my

father is a famous neurosurgeon with a popular podcast and dozens of eager patients and millions in the bank.

And he's the most miserable person I've ever met.

I don't think Angelo realizes what that means to me, what I've done in the name of winning, and what I'm willing to do. But he's right—whoever broke into my apartment and ripped my life to pieces wants to make me turn and run away.

But I'm not about to lose this game of death chicken.

They'll blink first and I'll catch them—

Or I'll slip up.

Either way, I'm not letting this go.

Chapter 9

Angelo

S ara unpacks her stuff in the bedroom. I call down to room service for a bottle of whiskey and some dinner. She takes a long shower and I'm so fucking tempted to kick down that door and burst into the bathroom with her and kiss her soaking wet skin and feel her shiver under my hands again.

But something's between us now. Something big and tall. Fences, doors, walls.

The night of the wedding was pure. It was simple, it was animal. I wanted her and she wanted me. We flirted, we laughed, we danced. We ended up fucking, and that sex still lingers with me, floats through my mind, the taste of her still on my tongue.

But the more I get to know her, the deeper her mystery goes.

I want to peel her apart. I want to see what makes her work.

I wasn't fair to her earlier today at Sheila's place. I acted like she could never understand the struggle someone like Sheila goes through, but maybe that isn't true, maybe she understands in her own way. Not quite the same thing, but pain in its own way. I keep catching glimpses of that pain, little hints of whatever she went through with her parents. The crying, the sorrow. It was like she's mortified of what happened at her apartment, but sobbing about it is somehow even worse.

That's not a normal fucking reaction.

Most people would feel okay crying over something like their apartment getting violated.

And yet Sara's pissed at herself. She's pissed at me. She's angry at the world, and I'm not totally sure why.

But I want to find out.

I'm sipping a whiskey when she comes out of the bedroom. Her hair's wet and she's in sweats. "You're a prince," she says and sighs as she grabs a plate of chicken fingers and fries. "The perfect comfort food."

"I've got drinks too if you want one."

"No, thanks." She curls up on the couch with her plate and picks at it. "Can I ask you something?"

"Might as well since we'll be roommates for the foreseeable future."

She winces and holds up a hand. "For one night, you mean."

"Right. Sure. One night." I grin at the look on her face. "Go ahead and ask me whatever you want."

"How'd you meet Carmine?"

"That's a boring story." I take a drink, ice clinking against the glass. "And telling it might implicate me in a few crimes."

"Pretend I'm not a lawyer for a little while." She laughs, and the anxiety is practically sparkling across her skin. "I just need a distraction."

I look at her, at her still-damp skin, and I have some ideas on how I can distract her. "I got in to trouble when I was a kid," I say and stare at my drink, at the liquid sloshing around from side to side. "That's all I had really. I dropped out of school in ninth grade and got a job to help my grandmom with rent, but working minimum wage didn't go very far. So I started getting involved in other shit."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"You can imagine. Selling weed, panhandling, even learned how to pickpocket and that was fun until a cop saw me do it on the blue line and the fuckers chased me halfway across the city. Barely got away that time."

Her smile seems genuine. “You picked pockets? Like an old-timey criminal?”

“I was good at it too. Except, you know, that one time I got caught.”

“Sounds like you were amazing.”

“Guys like Carmine and his family, they’re always watching the city. They’ve got their ears to the ground listening for all the shit, you know what I mean? After a year or two of petty crime, I started making a little bit of money and started working with a pretty solid crew of guys I met. We built a reputation for ourselves. We were honest, didn’t fuck people over, didn’t steal from clients, but we were ruthless. Broke knees, got into fights over territory, that sort of shit.” I smile to myself, remembering the good old days. Things were simple back then. Dangerous and there wasn’t all that much cash to go around, but simple.

“You were a petty thug,” Sara says, prompting me to go on.

“I was a very talented petty thug,” I say and she laughs gently. “Carmine approached me one day a few weeks after we made a big score. We knocked over his liquor store that had a protection deal with the Scavo Famiglia. The store owner was holding extra cash for the Scavos and laundering it through his register, and in exchange, they were supposed to make sure nothing bad happened to him, except I found out about the arrangement.”

“You stole from Carmine?”

I grin and nod. “I should be dead, but he made me an offer. Return the money, get down on my knees and apologize to the capo I embarrassed, and come to work for him personally. Guess what I did?”

“You apologized.”

“Fuck no. Told Carmine I’d rather die than kneel. He liked that and let me keep some of the money. We’ve been together ever since.”

She jabs a fry into ketchup and plops it in her mouth. “Nice story. Sounds fake though.”

“It’s true,” I say and look across the room toward the window.
“More or less.”

“What about the rest of your crew?” she asks. “Did Carmine bring them on too?”

My smile fades away. “No. He didn’t.”

“What happened to them?”

I give her a long look. The silence grows between us. “I learned a long time ago that sometimes the choice is stand and die or run and live. I learned how to fucking run. I learned how to survive. Not everyone in my crew did back then.”

“I see,” she whispers and looks down at her plate. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“But you’re loyal to Carmine now? You two seem close.”

“Turns out he’s not so bad.”

“And you think he’s telling the truth? About Nicolas and the dead guys. There’s no way he’s playing some game?”

“The only game is whatever you’re doing right now, my frigid little princess.”

She glares at me. “Don’t do that.”

“You got a question. Now I want to ask one.”

“I’m tired. I think I’ll go to bed.” She puts her plate aside and stands up. “Thanks for talking to me.”

“No, you don’t.” I step close and grab her wrist before she can escape into the bedroom. She glares at me, expression hard, and her nearness fills me with a sudden and intense longing. It’s a feeling I haven’t experienced before but I want her like I’ve never wanted someone, like if I can’t taste her right now, I might break apart, like I might crumble on the spot.

“You shouldn’t do that,” she says. “I might get the wrong idea. I might start thinking you want to hurt me.”

“No, princess. I wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Then let me go.”

“Why aren’t you drinking around me?”

Her mouth drops open. I study her lips, her tongue, her teeth. I want that mouth on mine, I want to taste her tongue and her lips. I want to hear her moan and whimper, and I want to make her curse and scream and pant and drool and, fuck, I want her, every inch of her.

“I’m not *not* drinking.”

“You’re nervous, aren’t you? Afraid you’ll lose control. Afraid you’ll do something stupid.”

Her mouth closes and she looks away. “Yeah. That’s it.”

“Good.” I release her wrist. “I like that you’re thinking about it.”

“Goodnight, Angelo.”

“Sleep tight. We’ll clean up your apartment tomorrow and see if we can’t learn something from the mess.”

She disappears back into the bedroom.

The temptation to follow is strong, but I have a long and gory history of controlling my worst impulses, right up until I can’t anymore.

Chapter 10

Sara

Every time I close my eyes, I see my apartment ripped to pieces.

It's like a compulsion. I try to will myself to sleep, but by trying hard to pass out, I keep spiraling back to that moment when I realized someone had violated my world and gone through my things. The pain and terror of that moment sends a spike of anxiety deep into my body, and I wake up all over again and have to start the process from the beginning.

It's not fun.

Minutes turn to hours.

I'm safe. I know I'm safe. Angelo's in the other room, probably dreaming about robbing banks or doing drugs or stealing from old ladies or whatever mobsters like to dream about, and here I am wrapped in luxurious sheets listening to the soft drone of the hotel air conditioning and can't manage to close my eyes for longer than a minute because I'm terrified.

The sickest part of this whole thing is I keep thinking about what my parents would say. My mother, drunk, would grin at me over the edge of a martini glass and cluck her tongue and say something like, *I told you, sweetie, you should've married rich like I did and stayed far away from this mess*, or my father, he would stand there scowling and eventually shove a broom and a dustpan into my hands and say, *well, are you going to fix it or are you going to cry all night*, and no matter how hard I work to get away from them I still have my parents in my head. Chastising, telling me I'm not good enough.

I can't take it anymore.

Around two in the morning, I get up and pace back and forth. Maybe I just won't sleep, but if I don't sleep, I'll be a mess tomorrow and I can't afford to be a mess right now. I need to be able to think if I'm going to solve this case. The longer it takes, the longer Nicolas sits in jail, and the thought of leaving him in there with whoever gave him that black eye is really bothering me.

I want to rip my hair out until I hear something in the other room.

It's a soft sound. I barely catch it. But it's the sound of someone moving around.

Angelo's still awake.

My stomach does a flip. The memory of his kiss comes back like lightning in my core. No matter how hard I try, I keep coming back to that night—probably because it left me with more than a bruise on my ass where he spanked me. I put a hand to my belly and tighten my jaw.

I'm doing this for my baby. Not *his* baby, but *my* baby. All this danger, all this stress, if it means I can move ahead at the firm and give my baby a better life then it'll all have been worth it. But if I'm going to get there at all, I need to survive.

I yank the door open and step out into the living room.

Angelo looks surprised. He's sitting on the couch shirtless wearing only a pair of long, black joggers. Tattoos are etched into his chest, a tiger over his heart, flowers along his collarbone, and more spiraling down and disappearing into his waistband. I stare at him and he stares back, and the TV light flickers, making him both ghostly and beautiful. I glance over—he's watching a black and white Western.

"I didn't know you were into old movies," I say stupidly like that somehow explains why I'm standing here looking at him.

"They're easy to follow without sound." He sits forward. "Something I can help you with? You should be sleeping right now, princess."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before leveling my gaze at him. “I’m going to ask you to do something and I don’t want to hear any bullshit from you, okay?”

He tilts his head. “Go ahead.”

“Come sleep in bed with me.”

I expect him to make a joke. I expect something lewd—*can’t keep your hands to yourself, can you, frigid princess*, or something along those lines—but instead he only nods slowly.

“I can do that.”

“Good.” I turn away, already mortified, and storm back into the bedroom. I get under the sheets and I’m regretting this by the time the door shuts and he climbs into the other side.

I hate letting myself be vulnerable, and it’s even worse that I’m doing it around him. My walls are high and made of six-inch-thick steel, and the idea of letting someone like Angelo through makes my skin crawl.

And yet here we are.

In bed together.

We lie there in silence.

I’m intensely aware of his big body only a few inches away. Angelo’s hot, like a furnace, and I feel like I need to kick a layer away. But I can’t risk letting him get any ideas. Instead, I stare at the ceiling, trying to relax.

Having him in here helps.

I’m surprised that it’s actually working, but I’m too busy obsessing about *him* to be afraid.

It’s stupid and embarrassing but I’m too anxious to be alone. Angelo lying in bed with me takes some of that edge off, and I hate myself for being so weak and pathetic, and I hate myself for letting Angelo see this side of me, but I don’t see any other options.

“It’s okay, you know,” he says softly.

I turn slightly. He’s staring at the ceiling too. “What’s okay?”

“Needing some help.”

I narrow my eyes. It’s like he can read my mind. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not.” He doesn’t sound like he’s accusing me of anything though. “You went through something tonight. That’s why I was still awake out there. I thought you might want to talk. It’s okay to be a little fucked up from what happened.”

“I’m not—” I clear my throat. “I’m fine, okay? You don’t need to stay awake for me. Let’s just go to sleep.”

“Right.” He keeps looking at the ceiling like he’s pretending I’m not watching him. “I know what you’re feeling though. We all go through it.”

“What’s that mean?”

“When I was young, I saw something.” He glances at me. “You don’t need the details.”

“You’re right, I don’t.” My voice is quiet and my body feels pinned to the bed, but I can’t look away from him right now.

“It was ugly. Violent, bloody, not the sort of thing a seventeen-year-old kid should witness, and I was fucked up over it for days. When you do what I do, you get used to that sort of thing after a while, but back then I was still new to this life. I felt unsafe, and you know what’s funny about that? I *was* unsafe, every single day of my life, but I didn’t feel it until that moment.”

“What happened? I mean, what did you do?”

“I didn’t have any choice. I kept going. I woke up and I went out to the streets and I met my boys and I sold my drugs. I had no other options, but you know what? You do, Sara.”

I shake my head and put an arm across my face. “I wish I did.”

“No, you really do. You can turn around and walk away from this job any time you want. If it gets too hard, you can move on. Let me and Carmine figure this shit out with some other overpriced lawyer with a stupid degree that doesn’t give a fuck about Nicolas.”

“You make lawyers sound so lovely.”

“It’s the truth. You don’t *need* this. Walk away.”

I don’t say anything. He lapses into silence. Could I really do it? Could I leave him, forget about this case and this opportunity, give up on Nicolas and this whole mystery? Angelo’s right, I *could* do it—Brice would understand and she’d make Carmine forgive me.

I want to help them and I want to make my money and I need to get ahead at the firm—especially with a baby on the way—but do I need to kill myself over it?

“I just can’t,” I say, and he adjusts himself, leaning over toward me. I look at him and stare into his eyes. “You want to hear the worst part of all this?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“I believe Nicolas. I believe he’s innocent. Can I really walk away from him, knowing that?”

“It’s not on you.”

“It’s on me now.”

He nods slowly. His hand comes across the bed and I don’t flinch away when he brushes his knuckles gently across my cheek. An electric arc slices down into my core and he doesn’t let my eyes go, he keeps on looking as his palm moves back into my hair. I let out a soft breath, and a gentle whimper, and he comes closer with those lips and those eyes and that tongue, all of it coalescing into something I want to taste again, something I *need* to feel one more time.

I don’t stop him when he presses himself against me. I don’t say no when his grip tightens in my hair. And I don’t push him away when his mouth grazes mine and that tingle tears up from my middle and out into my limbs and my heart does a double beat and my eyelids flutter.

But I do moan when he kisses me.

His tongue slips past my lips and his taste floods me. Whiskey, dark chocolate, coffee. Something bitter and harsh and lovely.

He holds me back against the bed, half pinning me down, and he kisses me like he wants to devour me, like he’s been

thinking about this kiss for weeks.

It's the kind of kiss I'll think about for the rest of my life, an all-consuming kiss, a kiss where I'm left different at the end of it.

I want more, so much more. I dive into that kiss. I fall into his taste, his lips, his hands in my hair, the smell of him.

I'm afraid, so fucking afraid, of whoever ripped apart my apartment, but I'm also terrified of Angelo and what it means having him back in my life, and terrified of this baby and what the baby's going to mean for my life once they're here. Most of all, I'm afraid that I won't be the same person at the end of all this, that I'll somehow lose myself in the twist of Angelo's smirk, in his tongue brushing mine, in the frantic early months of raising an infant.

It's all there, all this worry and horror, and I could ignore it and push it away, I could refuse to let it conquer me and stop myself from taking this further. Or I could give myself to Angelo and let him take away all my pain and all my worry, at least for a few hours, but one thing jolts me out of this sudden insanity.

He's the father of my child.

I'm kissing my baby's daddy.

I pull back suddenly. He blinks at me in surprise but he doesn't move. He's hovering above me, hand in my hair, eyes staring into mine, his expression hard like he's half angry and half out of control.

"We can't," I whisper. "Please."

Slowly, he releases me. It's like a tide pulling back or a hurricane moving past. He recedes to his half of the bed, and I'm left there biting my lower lip to keep from screaming and dragging him back on top of me. I feel cold, empty, broken.

I feel afraid—but the sick part is, I'm less afraid than I was without him.

"Get some sleep," he says and rolls onto his side. "We have a lot of work ahead of us."

I want to touch him. I want to tell him that it's not about him, it's about this baby—but I can't. When this case is over, he's going back to Philly and I'm staying here and we'll never cross paths again.

I'll have my child. He'll have his life.

“Goodnight.” I roll away from him and let exhaustion take me.

Chapter II

Sara

I wake from a deep, dreamless sleep, and Angelo's gone.

He's not in bed. He's not in the bathroom. His side of the bed is cold and the sheets are pulled up to the bottom of the pillow like he wanted to hide his tracks. There's no sign that he was here at all.

Except there's coffee in the living room and a note. *Breakfast is in the minifridge. I'll be back later. A.*

I sit on the couch, eat some fruit, have a little yogurt with granola, and stare around the room.

I feel like I'm seeing it for the first time. It's not opulent, but it's extremely nice—the sort of hotel room meant to impress guests. Except Angelo couldn't have expected anyone would come here. That man acts like he's nothing more than a common street thug and talks about his past like he's on the edge of poverty, but he stays in places like this and dresses in thousand-dollar suits and expensive shoes and he looks like he's dripping with cash.

Maybe that's the old Angelo, the poor kid from a poor family, and this is the new one. A man that worked hard to get somewhere. A man that did things he never imagined he would.

I can be like that. I can do things, hard things. Whatever I need to do to get ahead.

And one of those things includes *not* kissing him anymore.

“Well, shit,” I whisper to myself. When I’m done eating, I decide to take advantage of this room while I can and head into the bathroom to take a bath.

I sink back into the water. I leave my phone in the other room and try to relax, but my mind keeps drifting back to that kiss last night. I keep seeing the look on his face, the pure desire in his eyes. And while that’s not great, it’s better than obsessing about my apartment. About what kind of life I’m going to have once this is all over, if it’ll ever be all over.

A door opens and closes in the other room. My heart starts racing and I jump out of the tub. I feel stupid, but I dry myself in a hurry, put on one of those big white terrycloth robes, and poke my head out of the bathroom. I’m safe in here, *I’m safe in here*, but what if I’m not? Whoever could kill five cartel members and get away with it could easily break into a hotel room and finish me off.

“Hello?” I sneak toward the living room, heart racing. “Angelo?”

I find him standing near the TV, looking surprised. His head tilts to the side and his gaze moves from my wet hair to my lips and down to my chest—

I realize the front of my robe’s hanging open. Not enough to let him see something he shouldn’t, but enough to give him a show. I suck in a breath and pull it closed, glaring hard.

“You scared me,” I snap and level my best ice-queen stare at him. “Next time, say something.”

“I wasn’t aware I needed to announce myself in my own room. Besides, I told you I was out and that I’d be back.”

“I didn’t know that meant back soon or—” I cross my arms. “Where were you, anyway?”

“Your apartment.” He gestures at a bag near the front door. “I figured you’d need some stuff.”

My anger fizzles. I stare at my big duffel bag, at the familiar green and silver with the rainbow threads wrapped around the handle and the tiny blue-haired troll doll dangling from the zipper.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“No, I didn’t, but I did it anyway. You’re welcome.”

I stride over, grab the suitcase, and drag it back into the room.
“Thanks.”

“The place looks clear, by the way,” he calls as I shut the bedroom door, lock it, and start going through what he grabbed. More toiletries, more clothes, lots of practical stuff. Even a few work outfits, which I’m insanely grateful for.
“Nobody was watching it.”

I lay out an outfit. Slacks and a conservative blouse. “How do you know?” I call back.

“I checked.” His voice is right outside of the door, but he doesn’t try the knob. “Believe it or not, I do this a lot.”

I pause for a second, wondering if he can barge in here, and decide to take the risk. I remove the robe and start getting dressed. “What about the rest of the apartment? Any clues left behind?”

“Nothing and I checked for that too. It looks like whoever broke in went to town and threw everything around, but that felt a little too...” He trails off.

“A little too what?”

“Obvious. Like that’s what they wanted us to think, or at least that’s what they want the cops to think if you got them involved. Like it’s clearly a robbery gone awry or something.”

“But they didn’t take anything worthwhile.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Once my clothes are on and I feel halfway decent, I walk over and open the door. He’s leaning against the wall to my right and looks me up and down. “You’re in your armor.”

“I *wish* I had real armor. Then at least I’d feel safe around you.”

He laughs as I brush past him and go get some more coffee. I managed to grab some sleep, but not *much* sleep, and now I’m dragging.

“Let’s not pretend like you feel nervous with me around, my frigid princess.”

“*Do not* bring up last night.”

“Why? You invited me into your bed. You feel *safe* with me.”

“I feel like it was a mistake to let my guard down.”

“You kissed me.”

I turn on him as my anger flares. “*You* kissed *me*, and I was too tired and stupid to stop you.”

“You moaned, princess.” He’s grinning at me. The bastard knows exactly what he’s doing right now and I’m falling into his trap but I can’t help it.

“Just because I have an involuntary intake of breath—”

“My god, you must be the best lawyer in the world if you just came up with that insanity. Involuntary intake of breath?”

“It was a physical reaction. Absolutely no moaning occurred last night.”

He barks a laugh, looking delighted and mystified. “You moaned, princess. You whimpered!”

“I absolutely did *not* whimper. Again, that was an involuntary ___”

“Yes, I get it, involuntary intake of breath. Shit, Nicolas is all but free already if you bring this energy to his case.”

I ball my hands into fists and glare at him down. I can’t let him think this is all some big joke. “Angelo, last night was a mistake. I was tired and not in a good place. I shouldn’t have invited you to sleep in bed with me and it won’t happen again.”

“I never thought it would.”

“Good. We can agree on that then.”

“But you are staying here for a while. No, I don’t want to hear it. You may think you need to protect yourself from involuntary intakes of breath whenever I’m around, but trust me, whoever flipped your apartment is much worse than me.”

I brush his stupid joke aside and let that sink in. “I’ll stay in the hotel, but I’m getting my own room.”

“No. You’re staying right here where I can see you.” The intensity of his stare makes my spine buzz. “I get you think I’m a lousy asshole, and that’s fine. But princess, I am absolutely *not* letting you out of my sight until whoever fucked with your apartment is behind bars for a long time.”

“Fine.” I put my hands on my hips. “Anything else?”

“One more thing.” He gets himself some coffee. “We’re meeting with the manager in an hour.”

“Excuse me?”

“The manager at Two Lane Inn. He was there during the murder and we’re going to talk to him.” He checks his watch. “I was told he starts work at noon.”

“I’m sorry, you were *told*? By whom?”

“The very nice girl that answered the phone when I called. Oh, don’t give me that look, I’m sure she’s not as pretty as you.”

I roll my eyes. “You can’t do that. You can’t set up interviews and make calls without my input.”

He puts a hand over his heart. “My word, I didn’t know I was crossing some invisible barrier. Next time I’ll wake you up from your deep slumber to get permission.”

“Are you always such a prick?”

“I think I’m wonderful.”

“I bet you do. I need to get ready.” I brush past him and head to the bedroom.

“You snore, by the way.”

“And sleeping next to you is like lying in a bed full of hot coals.” I slam the door and stand on the other side, trembling. Inviting him into my bed last night was a mistake—

But staying here for the foreseeable future is going to be much, much worse.

Chapter 12

Angelo

If I never had to go to the Two Lane Inn ever again, I could die a happy man.

I've seen a dozen places like it back home. Beat-up motor lodges ring Philadelphia like ticks ready to suck the blood from weary, unsuspecting travelers and folks desperately in need of short-term housing. They're places for working girls and dealers to sling dope and suck dick, the sort of place that needs to be burned to the ground just to get it clean. The Two Lane's seen some shit, and now it's seen the death of five cartel guys all at once. I doubt that's the worst thing that's ever happened here.

"What's this guy's name?" Sara asks as we sit in the car and case the joint. The front office is a glass-fronted section in the bottom left of the building with huge advertisements for cigarettes blocking the view of the inside.

"Wally Batt," I say and glance at her. "You didn't have that memorized?"

"Believe it or not, he wasn't high on my priority list."

"Pity. Wally's an interesting guy." I nod at the files in her lap. "Take a look."

She flips through until she finds the short informational dossier on Wally. "Oh, wow," she says quietly. "That's one hell of a rap sheet. Why didn't I see this before?"

"Cops basically ignored him, that's why, which is strange. Whenever someone ends up dead, it's always the criminals the

cops bother first. And yet, nobody questioned good old Wally. Criminal motherfucking Wally.”

“Breaking and entering, grand theft auto... How’s this guy not stuck behind bars for life?”

“No clue. Good lawyer.” I shrug and open the door. “Let’s go see what Wally remembers from that day.”

She hurries after me, her heels clacking on the pavement. There aren’t many cars out in front of the Two Lane, and I wonder how this place stays in business. Cheap building, cheap workers, cheap everything is probably how. Not much overhead on a place like this if nobody gives a shit about keeping it clean.

“This time, I’m taking the lead,” she says as she yanks the door open.

“Hold on,” I say, but too late. She’s already striding into the lobby looking about as much like a lawyer as it’s possible to look. She’s about to spook this idiot and she’s got no clue. It’s a small space, rundown and stinking like cigarette smoke. An old TV sits in the corner playing a sitcom. The walls are stained yellow, the single chair for waiting patrons has a deep slash on the seat covered by a piece of duct tape. Magazines fill a side rack, all of them out of date.

Wally sits behind a computer clicking away. He’s in his forties, balding, heavysset with a mole under his left eye and bushy brows. His shirt is wrinkled and his jeans are too small, and he looks up with a scowl like we’re interrupting something important.

“You folks need a room?” he asks and looks Sara up and down. “We do hourly if that’s what you need.”

I try not to laugh. The fucker thinks she’s a hooker.

“Wally Batt?” she asks. “I was hoping I could have a word.”

He instantly shuts down. I can see it happen. One second, he’s curious, the next it’s like he pulls on body armor and gets ready for war. He leans back in his rickety chair and crosses his arms over his big chest. “And who’s asking?”

“My name’s Sara Bray, I work for Klein and Houndson representing—”

She doesn’t get another word out before Wally leaps to his feet, the chair clattering down behind him, and bolts for a back door. Sara’s too stunned to do anything but stand there as he yanks it open, his pants falling off his ass, and darts into the back.

“Good one,” I say and try not to laugh. “You really got him talking.”

“But I didn’t even, and now he’s just—” She gestures at me. “Well? Do your job! Fucking catch him!”

“Your wish is my command, oh, lovely ice queen.” I sketch a bow as her face turns red with rage before I step out front and walk leisurely over to the side of the building.

Guys like Wally, they need to be finessed. With a rap sheet like his, any lawyer or cop or anyone with any connection to the criminal justice system is instantly suspect. Walking in here and telling him that she works for a law firm—that was basically begging him to run away.

Wally’s struggling with the door of his Chevy pickup. It’s an old, beat-up piece of crap, and sometimes the handle sticks. Especially, when a guy like me slapped a bunch of that fancy super duct tape along the bottom, the real strong kind. Wally’s in too much of a panic to notice that the bottom’s not coming loose and all he’s got to do is give it one solid yank with all his might. Instead, he’s jiggling the handle and cursing.

“Hey, Wally,” I say. “Stop trying to run and listen.”

The guy looks at me, looks at the truck, and I can see him doing the math. Motherfucker, he better not bolt like a scared deer, I don’t feel like chasing him down.

But Wally’s not bright. He turns his back and sprints as fast as he can—which isn’t very fast—away from the motel and toward the small wooded area that separates the parking lot from the main road and the sidewalk beyond.

I run after him. Bastard, I didn’t feel like getting all fucking sweaty today. He reaches the woods right as I catch up and

grab him from behind. His yelp is pathetic, and I manage to yank his arm hard and swing him right into a tree. He hits and crumples, holding his face with one hand and waving the other in the air like he's warding off a gun.

"Please, don't, I don't know anything, I really don't, I absolutely swear I don't—"

"Easy, Wally," I say and crouch down beside him as Sara's heels clack on the pavement nearby. I glance over as she hurries toward us, looking horrified. "He tripped," I tell her innocently.

"God damn it, Angelo," she says, shaking her head.

Wally's pale. He's trembling and bleeding from a split lip. But he doesn't seem to mind the pain. "I don't know who you people are, but I don't know anything." He spits blood into the leaves. "I never know anything! I take bookings, I give out keys, and I stay in my office. That's all I ever do."

"Wally." I lean toward him. "That's a lawyer behind me. She's not a cop. She's not a detective. And she's definitely not working for some cartel. Who the *fuck* do you think we are?"

That gets his attention. He takes a few gulping breaths and tries to sit himself upright. I help out, get him to his feet, even brush some dirt off the poor fucker's jeans. He clears his throat and spits again as he leans against the tree trunk.

"I don't like cops," he says. "Or lawyers. Or whatever the hell you are. I don't know anything and I don't talk to anyone. That's all I got to say, all right?"

I glance at Sara as she steps forward. "Wally, running like that is extremely suspicious, you know that, right? I didn't even tell you what we want to talk about."

He opens his mouth as if he's about to blurt it out, but instead snaps his jaw shut and glowers. I almost laugh, the poor bastard. He's stupid, but not that stupid apparently.

"The murders," I tell him. "Five cartel guys, dead in your motel. From what we can tell, you were never interviewed by the cops, and we were wondering why."

He looks surprised. “They talked to me. What do you mean, they didn’t interview me? I spoke to that fucking detective for a half hour. And I didn’t tell her shit.”

I exchange a look with Sara. Now *that’s* interesting.

“Which detective?” she asks.

“It was a woman. Some bitch—” He clears his throat. “Sorry, uh, some lady named Misty Vance.”

“Sounds fake,” I say.

“Detective Vance is very real,” Sara confirms. “You’re sure you spoke to her?”

“I’m positive. And I’ll tell you what I told her. I stay in my office and I don’t hear anything, ever. That’s it.”

“You’re very helpful, Wally,” I say and shake my head. “Who the fuck has you so spooked, huh?”

“Whoever killed five cartel members, that’s who,” Sara says. “And I’d bet a lot of money that you know something about who did it, don’t you?”

Wally flinches like she punched him in the face.

“Just leave me out of whatever you’re doing, okay?” Wally shuffles away, putting some space between me and him, but heading back toward the motel. Cars zip past on the road and he crunches through leaves with each step.

“You don’t care that an innocent kid is going to get life for this, do you?” I ask him.

“Not my fucking problem.” Wally slips past Sara, gives me one last look, and hurries away.

I let him go. Sara watches with her arms crossed over her chest. I can’t tell what she’s thinking, but it’s not good.

“Detective Vance didn’t write up her interview with Wally,” she says and glances at me. “Either that, or the prosecution withheld information.”

“I assume both are pretty bad.”

“Both are pretty bad,” she confirms.

I grin at her. “You were terrifying just now, you know that?”

She snorts. “You’re the one that threw him into a tree.”

“That’s easy. You stood there looking at him like you were going to crucify him.”

“Who said I’m not going to?” She tugs on her hair. It’s a small, nervous gesture. “I don’t like this.”

“You think the detective is involved?”

“I don’t know. Either that or someone higher than her.”

“Five dead cartel members and nobody heard a thing. Makes sense someone in law enforcement might be covering it up.”

“Don’t go there.” She jabs a finger into my arm. “You hear me, Angelo? I know you mobsters love to hate the cops—”

“We love to *love* the cops. They take our envelopes of cash and we stay out of prison. Mostly, anyway. It’s a great relationship.”

She flinches and rubs her face. “I wish you hadn’t said that.”

“Oh, grow up. You think cops love to make eighty grand a year to put their lives on the line and get shit on by the public every day? ‘Back the Blue’ doesn’t mean a damn thing for some guy trying to buy diapers. They take a little something on the side to make it all worth their effort and you people still get to stay safe. It all evens out.”

“Right, the world’s so messed up.” She trudges back to the motel. “You don’t have to make it even worse.”

“Can you really blame me? I was born with nothing and I was given nothing, so what if I bend the rules in my favor where I can?”

“That’s the difference between us,0 I guess. You bend the rules toward yourself, and I stick to the rules to help everyone else.”

I follow after her. I really can’t tell if Sara’s naive or just principled. No reason it couldn’t be both, and I respect her for it, I really do, but I’ve been in this shit long enough that I know how things go.

Nothing is easy and nothing is free—and nobody is too expensive to buy.

Not even cops. Not even detectives.

Chapter 13

Sara

The case spreads out in front of me on the floor of the hotel room.

Files, interviews, photographs, handwritten notes. All the evidence, no matter how flimsy. All my commentary, no matter how worthless.

And it's not enough.

Not nearly enough.

I pull my knees to my chest and keep seeing Angelo chase the manager down in my head. Over and over, the scene plays out: Angelo sprinting after him, the manager slamming into the tree, Angelo standing over poor Wally like an avenging angel. It was everything I didn't want to do and yet I felt a strange, almost sickening rush knowing that Angelo could hurt the guy—would hurt the guy—if given the chance.

If I gave him the word.

That's a strange power, knowing that a man like Angelo would do something like that for me. It's a strange, disgusting power, and I feel an odd self-loathing as the excitement of the idea rushes down into my veins.

Angelo's raw power. He's violence, and fear, and strength. He's everything the law isn't supposed to be and I should try harder to hold him back, but I don't want to.

And that terrifies me.

My whole life I've been told to do the right thing. Work hard, get ahead, stay in my lane. And now Angelo's here and I feel

like breaking away from all that and doing things I never dreamed were possible before.

Horrible things.

The door to the bedroom opens. Angelo comes out wearing a pair of tight joggers and nothing else, a small towel over his shoulders, his hair still damp from the shower. His skin glistens, clean and bright, and he walks over to the minifridge and grabs a drink. “You want something?” he asks.

“Working.”

“You’re always working.” He sits on the chair across from me. “Why not take a break? We could go out for dinner.”

“Are you asking me out on a date?”

He laughs and looks me up and down. God, I hate when he does that, but a strange thrill jolts my stomach. “I was thinking more like a friendly meal between colleagues, but I’d love to make it something more.”

“No, thanks. To both versions.”

“You work too hard.” He sighs and takes a long slug from his can. “Why not relax?”

“Because if I relax then Nicolas remains in jail.”

His expression darkens. “You know I don’t want that.”

“Then you should let me work.”

“All I’m saying is you’re going to burn out and you won’t do Nicolas any good once that happens.”

“I’m fine.” I studiously avoid looking at him. His muscular chest is a damn distraction, and I can’t afford a distraction right now.

“You’re clearly not. You’re trying to avoid reality.”

I scoff and glance over, which is a mistake, because he’s got one arm behind his head and his bicep flexes like heaven.

I quickly look away. Holy hell, that man is beautiful, and it’s really not fair that he loves to walk around without his shirt.

“Since when do you know anything about *avoiding reality*? Did you get a psych degree on the streets of South Philly?”

“Something like that, actually.” He leans toward me. “You think I don’t know how people work? My whole job is knowing what makes guys tick, how to motivate them, how to push their buttons, how to lean on certain angles to get what I want. And not just my guys either, but my enemies too. I need to see how people think and figure out what they need.”

“You think you figured out what I need?”

“You need a release, that’s what you need.”

I roll my eyes. “Typical.”

“I mean it. Do you have any hobbies? Any interests outside of work?”

Anger begins boiling my skin. What the hell does this guy know about me? All he can see is the lawyer version of me, but there are dozens of facets to my personality. But as I open my mouth to rebuke him, the words slowly fizzle out on my tongue.

Because he’s right.

It’s not that I’m only a lawyer—but I don’t do much outside of work these days.

I wasn’t always this way. I love movies and music and reality TV and podcasts, and I used to consume so much media I was like a whale swimming around swallowing as much stuff as possible. But ever since I took on this job, I’ve done nothing but stick to the lawyer-Sara to the detriment of all the other versions of me. I used to love going for runs and hikes and walks, and when’s the last time I took a few hours to head out for a six-mile jog? When’s the last time I went to a movie or saw a show or went to a concert? Heck, I barely ever go out to eat anymore, except for when Brice and Robyn and Cassidy force me.

Angelo’s right that I don’t have much of a life, but I’m doing it on purpose.

It's just the job. It demands so much, and if I want to get ahead, I'd better give it everything I have.

"I don't need to justify myself to you," I say, still itching with anger. "You don't understand what it's like."

"Enlighten me then." He shifts closer, staring into my eyes. "Come on, princess. Tell me why you work so fucking hard."

"Because I need to be twice as good," I say sharply. He barely reacts, and I keep going as something inside of me begins to unwind. "You don't get it. The law world's been opening up for a long time, women are respected, we're not treated like cute little sideshows anymore. But at the same time, it's still a boy's club, still a bunch of old guys and their buddies all getting the best cases and sitting at the top of the firm. If I'm not perfect, I'm nothing. Yeah, things are better than they used to be but they're still not equal and I don't think they ever will be. So while I'm not complaining, this is what I signed up for, I still won't let you patronize me for working so hard. I *have* to work this hard."

He absorbs my speech with a deepening frown. When I'm done, his head tilts to the side, and he looks at me like he barely recognizes the woman sitting across from him. I sink back against the couch and clamp my jaw shut and try not to scream.

I *hate* opening myself up to him like this and I don't know what it is about Angelo that makes me do it. If I could, I'd keep all this inside, keep it all locked up tight where it belongs. I hate complaining and whining and admitting that I'm weak.

But I'm weak. I've always been weak. Only I keep it hidden.

"You don't have to prove yourself to anyone, princess," he says quietly.

"Easy for you to say."

He gets up from his chair and comes toward me. I stare as he sinks down to his knees a few feet in front of me, right on top of some crime scene sketches. He moves forward, staring, and my heart's racing.

“Who are you trying to impress?” he asks. “Are you doing all this for *you*? Or for everyone else?”

“I’m doing it for me.”

“Then why do you beat yourself to hell?”

“Because that’s the only way I can get ahead.”

He leans closer, hands gripping the couch on either side of my thighs, and I’m pinned back and my chest is thumping wildly. “Who says?” he whispers. “Who are you trying to impress? You keep going this way and there won’t be much left of you when you finally get what you want.”

“Stop it,” I say and lean forward. I put my hands on his chest and try to push him away, but he doesn’t budge. “I don’t know what you’re doing, but stop it.”

“You’re enough for me, princess. My frigid little princess. You don’t have to prove a damn thing, not to me, not to anyone. Who said you’re not enough?”

“Angelo.”

He moves closer. One hand brushes against my cheek. “You need a release,” he repeats and now I know what he’s talking about. My cheeks flush and something clenches deep in my core. My hands stay on his muscular chest, my fingers curling into his skin, and when he leans closer, his hand moving back into my hair and gripping gently, my lips part and my breath comes faster as my chest rises and falls.

“And you’re going to give me one?” I whisper.

He kisses me and that’s answer enough.

Maybe it’s the stress. Maybe it’s the fear. Everything’s going wrong and everything’s on the edge of falling apart, but the moment he’s this close is the moment I lose myself completely.

I really wish he’d wear a shirt.

Otherwise, I’d have some self-control.

Unfortunately, I kiss him back.

And god, it feels good. It feels so freaking good.

This is wrong on a million different levels. I keep telling myself I'm not going to do this, I'm not going to kiss this man and moan into his mouth, but that's exactly what I'm doing. This case is getting more and more complicated, and I'm scared all the damn time, and Angelo's going to get us both killed acting like an aggressive asshole—

And none of it matters, not the second I press my lips to his.

I pull him closer. He pins me back against the couch and his tongue flits into my mouth, tasting me, teasing me. He bites my lower lip, sucks it gently, and grabs the top of my sweats.

I wiggle my hips and he stares into my eyes. I'm panting hard and my body's vibrating like a struck bell.

“Tell me to stop.” He says it like a dare.

I say nothing as he pulls off my sweats, sliding them over my hips, over my ass, and tosses them aside.

I'm in only a pair of black panties. His eyes are liquid fire as he yanks my shirt up, exposing my breasts, and he kisses my chest, my collarbone, my nipples. I moan and grab his hair as he bites me, sucks me, licks me, slowly moving down, and down, and down, to my belly button, to my hip bones, to the very tip of my pussy then around to my inner thigh.

My hips are wiggling, my breath is coming fast, and I can barely think as he takes two fingers and puts them in my mouth. I moan and suck them, and he pulls them back and uses them to slide up and down my pussy. I'm slick, so dripping slick and wet, and he spreads me and opens me. He purrs like a tiger on cocaine as he leans down and kisses the top of me then licks me, tongue sliding up my lips to my clit.

An electric shock of pure dopamine blasts into my skull. Pleasure breaks me and rebuilds me, and all my walls, all my defenses, my frozen castle and my armor, it's all crumbling down around me as I grip his hair and he licks me faster. His tongue works up and down, and I'm moaning and rolling my hips as he sucks my clit and goes faster.

“That’s a good girl,” he groans as he slowly presses two fingers deep inside me. I throw back my head and gasp, blinking rapidly. “Oh, fuck, that’s good,” he moans. “You’re so lovely and delicious and tight. I could do this all fucking day, do you know that?”

“Then keep going,” I gasp. “Don’t stop.”

His fingers fuck me like he needs to get me off and his tongue licks me like he needs one last taste. Between the two, I’m glowing with pleasure, my head in the clouds, my body firmly in control of this man. I shiver and moan and whimper his name, and he keeps going, sucking me, licking me, fucking me with his fingers, faster and faster until he pulls back and kisses me, his fingers still buried inside but his thumb working my clit now.

“That’s it,” he croons as he fucks me and I grind against his hand, working my hips into his palm. “That’s a good girl. Keep going just like that. God, you needed this, didn’t you? You walk around all day acting like an ice queen and now you’re melting on my hand.”

“Angelo,” I whisper and bite his lip when he kisses me. “Fuck you.”

“I love it when you talk dirty to me, you filthy fucking girl. Look at you, Sara. All I have to do was lick your clit and make you feel good, and now you’re dripping wet and putty in my hand. God, it’s so fucking sexy, I want to take you right now. Turn you around, fuck you raw and deep and make you scream, but you need to come for me now, my princess, my beautiful frigid princess. I earned this orgasm and I want to watch you fucking moan. You need to come for me and get that release I promised.”

“More,” I gasp, back arching, and he moves back down between my legs, fingers going in and out and faster as he sucks me and finally, fuck, finally, my core builds and builds and clenches down tight until I explode against his mouth, coming in a violent, gorgeous tidal wave of pleasure as I gasp, body bucking, eyes rolled back. It’s explosive and terrifying and beautiful all at once, and I swear I nearly pass out.

But finally, he pulls back and stares at me. My top's up over my breasts and my legs are spread. I'm glistening, dripping on the couch. I'm filthy and spent, and he's right, I fucking hate it, but he's right.

I needed that.

"Good girl," he says and kisses me. "Very good girl." He sucks his fingers and licks me from them.

I stare at him and feel dizzy with lust. Slowly, he gets to his feet, and the outline of his hard cock strains against his pants. "Now you should get some sleep."

"Yeah? Is that how it is now? You tell me what to do?"

He bends close and grabs my hair roughly. "If I got to command you, little princess, I'd make you get on your knees and suck my cock and swallow every drop. But instead, I want to take care of you. Now get up and go to sleep."

I want to be defiant. I want to tell him to go to hell, nobody orders me around, and nobody takes care of me. I take care of myself. But instead, I let him help me get dressed again, and I drift toward the bedroom.

He watches me go. Some stupid part of me wants to invite him in.

But a rational voice whispers in the back of my head.

You're making a mistake.

You're pregnant with his baby.

I close the door and lean back against it, not sure how I'm going to get through this without losing my mind.

Chapter 14

Angelo

I park outside of a rundown dive bar outside of town with a gravel driveway and a sign so worn and chipped it's impossible to read. "Where the hell did you bring me, Angelo?" Sara asks, squinting through the windshield. It's around five on a Saturday and there are already half a dozen cars parked nearby.

"This is the High Noon and it's a freaking cop bar."

She laughs and shakes her head. "You're kidding me."

"Nope, I'm serious. The state police have a headquarters nearby and I guess a bunch of the cops in the area all started congregating here. Don't ask me how that happened."

"I thought they all hated each other."

I shrug and kill the engine. "Here's the thing. I did some research over the last few days."

"Yeah? Did you now? And what did you find out?"

"Our detective, Misty Vance. She happens to come here, to this bar, every single Saturday right around this time."

"And how the hell do you—" She holds up a hand. "You know what, never mind, I don't want to know."

I grin at her and don't bother saying I hounded the secretary that works at the Dallas PD and gave her a big fat bribe for any info he had to share about Detective Vance. This was the only good tip she had.

“Vance is going to be surrounded by her cop buddies in there which means she’s not going to talk. But we might be able to wait out here until she emerges.”

Sara’s lips press into a line. “I’m a lawyer. I could go in there.”

“I doubt they get very many lawyers like you at a place like this.”

“It’s a cop bar, right? That means it’s the safest place in the world.”

I laugh drum my fingers on the steering wheel. “You’d be surprised how *not* true that is.”

“Look, you can stay here, but I’m going in.”

“Sara—”

“This isn’t your show, Angelo.” She gives me a hard look. The soft, moaning, whimpering girl from a few nights ago is totally gone. I thought I saw a glimpse of her the next morning, but Sara’s been rebuilding her walls and putting them up twice as high ever since she gave in and let me make her feel good.

But it was fucking worth it.

The taste of her skin, her hard, pink nipples, her soaking wet little clit, her moans, everything about her was perfection. I wanted so much more and it took all my willpower not to cross that line.

I could see what would happen in her face. The moment the real world began to reassert itself, her walls came back up. She would’ve been freaked out and any progress I’m making on opening her up would’ve been ruined.

I held back. But I don’t know if I can do that again.

She snaps off her seatbelt and goes to get out, but I grab her arm. She glares at me, nostrils flaring.

“Think for a second,” I say quickly. “If you go in there and start talking to her in front of all her cop buddies, what do you think will happen?”

She hesitates. “I’ll ask her to speak privately.”

“And they’ll all know she’s talking to a lawyer. They’ll figure out who you are and connect you back to her one big case. Then whoever is behind this coverup will know we’re after them.”

“How do you know it isn’t Vance herself?”

“You really didn’t look at her files.”

“Yes, I did,” Sara says, sounding annoyed. “Vance is twenty-eight, young for a detective, but decorated. She was promoted six weeks ago—” She stops, lips pressed together. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“She’s a rookie,” I say. “A young detective without much experience. Why would anyone assign her a case like this?”

“Unless they want her to mess it up.” Sara relaxes and sits back in her seat. “I should’ve seen this sooner.”

“You have enough to worry about. If you go storming in there, everyone will know we’re chasing after this lead, and we definitely don’t want that.”

“So what do we do?”

“Sit back and wait.”

Sara glances at me then looks at the bar and sighs. “Stay in this car with you for possibly hours or roll the dice and go inside. I have to admit, it’s not an easy decision.”

“As much as I love your wit and your conversation, this is what’s right for the case. Sit back and relax, my frigid little princess. We’ve got time to kill.”

Sara closes her eyes, curses quietly, but at least she doesn’t move.

Half my job is boring. There are exciting bits, like running after scumbags that won’t pay their debts or breaking knees or killing enemies, but mostly it’s a lot of administration. Making sure guys have product, making sure the stash houses are safe and secure, keeping cops fat and happy, all that shit. I’m used to this sort of exhausting boredom, but Sara’s not.

She gets antsy after ten minutes.

“Tell me something about growing up,” I say just to keep her distracted. “What was it like?”

“I’d rather not give you my sob story.”

“Ah, come on. You’re one of those overachievers. What did Mommy and Daddy do to you?”

Her jaw flexes, but she must be even more bored than I realized, because she answers. “Mom is an alcoholic homemaker and my father is a surgeon.”

“Surgeon. Fancy. Gotta admit though, I know a whole lot of alcoholic homemakers. That’s basically just *wife* where I’m from.”

She gives me a look like she’s sick of my shit. “What about you? Your parents both passed?”

“That’s right. My grandma raised me.”

“She must’ve been a good woman.”

“The best there is, but she couldn’t work much. Had all these health problems. COPD, arthritis, diabetes. Bunch of shit. That’s why I am what I am.”

“And what *are* you, Angelo?”

I consider that question. “I’m a man that looks out for those that I love.”

She seems surprised by my answer, but she doesn’t try to correct me. Instead, she shifts down lower in her seat and closes her eyes. I figure the conversation is over and let her get some beauty rest, but after a few minutes she speaks up.

“When I first met you, I never would’ve guessed you were the type of guy to drop everything to come down to Dallas and help out a friend.”

“Nicolas isn’t just a friend. He’s a brother.” But I doubt she can understand that.

“Even still. I don’t agree with the way you go about things, but so far, you’re getting some results, and you’re risking a lot to do it.”

“In my line of work, you treat your people like kings. You take care of your family and you pay your debts. That’s always been how I live.”

“If you weren’t a criminal, that’d almost be noble.”

“Unfortunately, I’m scum.”

She cracks a smile and turns on the radio.

We get lucky. Cops all across the world tend to be the hard drinking type. It’s the sort of job that sticks with people, that really gets under the skin, under the nails, that’s like a grime under their tongue. Drinking softens some of the bad stuff. Makes some of it almost easy to manage. I’ve met sober cops, but I’ve never met a cop that doesn’t have at least one coping mechanism.

Detective Misty Vance exits the bar flanked by a big gentleman around eight. Only three hours, which is lucky. They pause out front, talk for a few minutes, then go in opposite directions. I’d guess partner, boyfriend, lover. Maybe all three. I nudge Sara and she startles awake.

“Now’s our chance,” I say and open the door. “You ready?”

“Ready,” she says and follows me outside.

Detective Vance’s car is a black Ford pickup. She’s parked at the far end of the lot, and as we approach, she puts her back to the vehicle and turns on us, one hand moving to the weapon at her hip. She’s pretty, short blonde hair, hard eyes, no makeup. Denim jacket over jeans. I give her my best smile, and maybe Sara does too, because the detective squints at us and doesn’t draw the gun.

“Can I help you two?” she asks.

“Detective,” Sara says. “My name is Sara Bray and this is my associate, Angelo. I work for the law firm Klein and Houndson.”

I try not to grin. I’m her associate now? It *almost* sounds like we both work for that fancy law firm, which was probably her intention.

Detective Vance's eyebrows raise. "What can I do for you, Ms. Bray?"

"Sara," she says and clears her throat. "Detective, I wanted to ask you about Wally Batt."

Detective Vance's entire demeanor changes the moment Sara mentions that name. Just like Wally back at the motel, her arms cross over her chest and she shuts down. She's not going to run away like good old Wally did, but the expression on her face is harder than iron.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Bray, but I can't discuss that."

"You spoke with Wally, didn't you?" Sara takes a step closer and Detective Vance flinches. "That's what he told us, but there's no record of your conversation."

"If you have an issue with the files we released, you can take it up with the judge, or you can come down to the station during business hours. Surprising me on my night off isn't going to get you anywhere, Ms. Bray."

"What Sara's trying to say is who wanted that interview to disappear, and why do you look like you're ready to bolt?" I smile as sweetly as I can but Detective Vance looks like she tastes something sour.

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir. If you folks need something, go through official channels. I'm heading home."

"Please, Detective," Sara presses. "There are five dead bodies and an innocent guy's going down for it. Why did your interview with Wally disappear?"

Vance stands with her hand on the handle of her truck, ready to yank it open, but she pauses. She stares straight ahead, not moving for a few seconds, and the night's so filled with tension that I think it's trying to shove its way down my throat. My heart's going fast and I don't know how the detective's going to react to this line of questioning. Some part of me worries she's about to lash out at Sara. Maybe I had it wrong and Vance really is part of the coverup after all.

But she looks down at the ground. "If I was interested in the truth, I'd find that interview. I conducted it and filed it through

the proper channels, and if it's missing, well, I don't know who made it disappear."

"Where should we look?" Sara asks.

But the detective only shakes her head. "Good luck to you two." She opens her door, gets inside, and the engine roars to life.

We move out of the way as Detective Vance drives off and doesn't look back.

"Well, that was interesting," I say and steer Sara to the car.

"We need that file."

"Problem is, where the hell can we find it?"

"Cops are half enforcers and half bureaucrats. They file, refile, and do everything in triplicate. It'll be somewhere."

I get back behind the wheel and Sara clicks her seatbelt on.

"You're a scary woman, you know that?" I smirk as she glares at me. "Going toe to toe with that detective."

"Take us back to the hotel, Angelo."

"Yes, ma'am. It'll be my pleasure."

Chapter 15

Sara

I stand in the doorway to the bedroom at one in the morning that night and stare out at Angelo. He looks back and neither of us says anything for a long moment until he gets up from the couch. “Do you want a drink?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Can’t sleep.”

And it’s true. I’ve been tossing and turning all night and I’m finally at my breaking point.

“Then let’s fix that,” he says with a smile.

I hold up a hand. “No jokes. No comments. Just... sleep. Okay?”

I turn and hurry back to bed. Angelo follows me, undresses, and climbs in on the other side.

We lie there in silence.

I’ve been so good. I’ve gone days without inviting Angelo into this room even though most nights I want to feel his body next to mine, but this case is really getting to me. Even though I know letting Angelo get this close is a huge mistake, he’s also an enormous comfort and I need to balance keeping sane with keeping far away from him.

“I keep thinking about Detective Vance,” I say quietly and I know he’s listening. The sound of his breathing is a slow, steady drone. “She looked so young. And so afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“I saw it the second I told her that I’m a lawyer. She was freaking terrified, Angelo.”

He’s quiet for a moment. My head’s a spinning wreck. I can’t stop seeing that moment of terror in her eyes and it can only mean one thing.

She knows someone’s out to make sure the truth about this case never gets out, and whoever it is scares the hell out of her.

“You think she knows something,” he whispers. “More than she’s letting on.”

“I think she steered us in the right direction without actually coming out and doing it. And I think she’s afraid that if she does any more, she’ll end up dead like those cartel guys.”

“That’s a lot of assumptions based on a short conversation.”

“But I’m right. I’m absolutely sure I’m right.”

He’s shifts until he’s looking at me. “Assuming you are, what do we do with that information? You want to turn around and back off?”

I shake my head, startled. “No, that’s not it.”

“What then? We keep going forward? Even though a detective thinks we should be terrified?”

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“I can keep you safe from most people, Sara. But I’m not invincible.”

“I realize that.”

“Do you?” He comes closer. God, I knew this would happen, the moment I asked him to come in here, I knew it would happen.

And I did it anyway, because it’s what I want.

For days now, everything I do, he’s lurking underneath it all. His kiss, his touch, god, that *orgasm*. He’s so much worse than I ever imagined, so much more vital, so much more present. I thought he’d be a pain in my ass, but it’s infinitely painful.

I *want* him. Just like the wedding. Just like a few days ago.

And now, lying in this bed.

I want him so badly it hurts, but getting involved with this man is a massive mistake.

“You don’t have to watch over me. You’re not my bodyguard.”

“But that’s exactly what I am.”

“Angelo, I mean it. We’re trying to figure out who’s framing Nicolas. That’s all we’re doing.”

He nods slightly and his hand moves over toward my body. I let him touch me—gently. His fingers graze across my belly and I shiver. I’m in shorts and a thin t-shirt, nothing underneath.

“I’m also trying to decide what your deal is, ice queen.”

“My deal? I don’t have a deal.”

“Something’s driving you. Something’s pushing you.”

“Angelo. I don’t want to be analyzed.”

“No? What do you want?”

“I want to know why Misty Vance is so afraid.”

“I don’t think that’s it.” He moves closer. His body is big and hard and gorgeous. “You’ve been ignoring me for days. Why invite me into bed tonight?”

“Because I’m afraid. Don’t make me feel stupid.”

“I’m trying to get you to be honest.”

“That’s the truth.”

He sighs and his mouth brushes against mine. Excitement quivers down into my extremities, and I need to stop this, but I’m not going to.

“Every time something bad happens, you think about me, don’t you?”

“Angelo—”

“Stop it, Sara. No more denying, no more bullshit.” He kisses my neck and I let out a little moan, so soft and mortifying and,

yes, god, yes, this is what it want. “You need comfort. You need me.”

“You’re not some fucking safety blanket.”

“No, I’m most definitely not. I’m way more dangerous than that.”

“So tell me why I shouldn’t kick you back out of this bed and pretend like this never happened.”

“Because you want to feel my cock sink deep between your legs and you’ve been desperate for it for days now. And you can’t take it anymore.”

His mouth finds mine in the dark and I kiss him back. God, he’s right, and it’s mortifying, it’s absolutely embarrassing, but I want this. I need this so badly it kills me.

I push him back and straddle him. His hands explore my body, take off my shirt, cup my bare breasts. He sits up and takes off his own top, and I kiss his neck as he kisses mine until he rolls me back over and pins me down, hands up above my head. He teases my breasts, sucks my nipples, bites them and licks them before chewing on my lip, and slowly he takes off my shorts.

“Look at you,” he whispers, sitting back on his knees and admiring my skin. I try to cover myself with my arms but he shoves them back. “Don’t you dare.”

“Angelo.”

“I want to look at you.” He spreads my legs roughly and teases my pussy with his fingers. “I know you’re scared. I know you don’t understand why you want this so badly. But you’ve been living your life hidden away from the world, a little ice queen in her frozen fortress, and I’m finally breaking you free. I’m finally making you see that pleasure isn’t so bad.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“Liar.” He grabs my wrists, both of them, and holds them to my sides as his mouth dives between my legs. Liar, liar, liar, I’m a freaking liar and he knows it. Every time I call him an asshole, every time I tell him I don’t want him, every time I pretend like he’s getting on my nerves, I’m a liar.

Because I want this. His tongue on my pussy and his mouth on my clit.

I want this. I want more. His mouth on mine, my taste on my lips. His hard cock in my hands. I take off his sweats and stroke him and he kneels beside me as I open my mouth and take his tip between my lips. I taste precum, skin, I suck him deeply, listen to his moans and love them. He pulls my hair as I suck his cock and when I think he's going to fill my throat, he pulls me back and shoves me down again.

"I need you," he says and I believe him as he spreads my legs wide. His cock presses against my dripping pussy and I'm begging for him now, begging for him to fuck me.

"Please," I whisper, fingers digging into his ass. "I want this."

"And I *need* this, princess. God, I've been thinking about this tight pussy for days, ever since I first tasted you. Do you even understand what it's like, being around you? All this anger, all this distance, and all I want to do is tear down your walls and fuck you savage and deep and make you fucking scream. God damn, Sara, you drive me insane."

He grabs my wrists and pins them above my head again and kisses me as his cock drives deep between my legs.

I moan into his mouth. He's ripping me in half and I love every inch of him. I need more, and more, and more, and he starts to slowly grind as I work my hips against him, driving him deeper and deeper, thrusting slow but hard. I moan and moan against his lips, his teeth, and I'm controlled and held down, and I've never felt so helpless and so alive in my life.

Never, ever, *ever* have I let a man have this much of me.

And never, ever, *ever* has it felt so good before.

But he fucks me, deep and slow, and looks into my eyes. He looks at me like he's seeing heaven. He fucks me faster, still deep, groaning his own pleasure into my ear.

"You feel better than I ever imagined," he whispers and takes me. He bites a nipple, kisses my neck, and his hands explore my skin like he can't stop touching me. "You taste like fresh air and feel like heaven. I don't know how you do this to me,

princess, but I need to fuck you, I need to see that skin flush pink and listen to you moan as you come on my thick cock. Tell me you want it, Sara. Tell me you fucking want it.”

“I want it,” I gasp as my back arches and he goes faster. We grind together in a frenzy, a wild and stupid frenzy, desire ringing through my body with each rough thrust. I’m closer, closer, and he doesn’t stop, he’s an animal fucking me now, taking what he wants, taking my body, and I moan into his ear and whisper to him, telling him over and over that I want it, that I need it, and finally, fuck, finally, my core clenches down hard—

And I come in a massive explosive cascade. It rushes down my spine, into my toes, curling them as my back arches. I come and come and he keeps up his pace, moaning in my ear, and I feel him finish between my legs, hot and warm and thick. It pushes me to another level and he doesn’t stop until I can’t moan anymore and I lie there, twitching and spent and grinning like an idiot.

“Beautiful,” he whispers and brushes my hair from my face. “Good girl. Such a good girl.” He kisses me softly and his arms wrap around my body.

“That’s not what I pictured when I invited you to sleep with me, you know.”

“I’m sure it isn’t.”

“Really. It’s not.” I wiggle my hips, grinding my ass against his still-hard cock. “I just needed—”

“Comfort.” His voice is soft. “I get it. I know how this goes.”

I roll away from him. He’s staring back at me and I’m not sure what I see reflected in his eyes—sadness? Anger? But what’s a guy like Angelo have to be angry about?

“That’s all this can be,” I whisper, and he nods in response.

“I know that.”

“So why—”

He comes close and kisses me. “All I want is to stay in this bed tonight. That’s all.”

I bite my lip and nod. “If that’s what you want.” I shift closer again and let him wrap his arms around me. Another mistake, another stupid, stupid mistake, but if mistakes can feel like this then I need to make a million more.

Chapter 16

Sara

I understand that dealing with stress through sex is *not* the healthiest decision in the world.

And it's painfully obvious that this little pattern I've fallen into—inviting Angelo into my bed, going too far with him, acting like nothing happened next day—isn't going to improve anytime soon unless I go back to my apartment.

Maybe it'd be smarter if I got my own room, or if I stayed at a different hotel, or if I just admit that I want to have sex with this man, that I want it so desperately I'm willing to play these stupid games in a vain effort at holding on to my dignity, and maybe then we could both move on and just—have sex as much as we want.

Which is a lot. And often.

But I'm not there. In the cold light of day, all the reasons I had for keeping my distance in the beginning come rushing back.

He's in the mafia. He's dangerous. He's everything I'm supposed to dislike.

And I can't let him find out that I'm pregnant with his child.

The closer he creeps, the more likely he is to figure it out, and I can't have that.

It doesn't help that he follows me to work now and sits on my little chair in my cramped office going through my notes on the case files. It really doesn't help that I find him annoying, frustrating, conceited, and actually pretty useful and insightful.

I wish that weren't the case, but Angelo has an eye for this stuff.

Probably because he's a criminal.

"I'm tempted to break into that freaking police station and steal the rotten interview files myself," Angelo says after tossing down a folder with an annoyed glare. "There are a million different places they could be hiding it."

"Assuming it's even still around. They could've shredded the thing."

"Maybe," he says, making a face, "but why would Vance push us in that direction if they just tore the thing to bits? No, I think they still have it."

"Why? Wouldn't it be easier to destroy the evidence?"

"Cops are still cops and some of them might still be clean. I bet whoever's trying to cover up what really happened can't risk getting caught, so they buried the files instead. Plausible deniability."

"Big words for a mafioso."

"I'm a clever man when I want to be."

There's a knock at the office door. I look up as it opens and my heart instantly leaps into my throat and it feels like the world slows down to a standstill.

My mother shoves her head into the room, smiling like she's about to present us with an award, followed by my father.

This can't be happening.

It's like my body's frozen as my parents stand on the threshold to my tiny office. They've never been here before although I offered to show them around a while back. Mom wasn't interested and Dad was too busy, and I haven't bothered inviting them out to my work since then and seeing them here is absolutely bizarre. It's like seeing two aliens land in the middle of Manhattan, two sludge-dripping monster creatures lurching around and groaning like hungry zombies. God, I'm such a mess right now, I can't even keep my monster-metaphors straight.

“Mom,” I say and get to my feet. “Dad. What are you two doing here?”

“Well, hello, darling,” Mom says, and her fake smile is plastered on her fake face so tightly I think her teeth might crack. “I didn’t know you had a client. We can come back.”

“No, it’s fine,” I say quickly. “This is just Angelo. He’s helping me with a case.”

Mom’s eyes drift down to Angelo and she stares at him like she doesn’t understand what she’s seeing. Angelo grins back at her, and the enormous mobster slowly stands up, his hulking body taking up most of the freaking office, and he holds out a hand.

A hand covered in tattoos.

Mom looks at it like it’s covered in flies.

Fortunately, Dad steps forward and shakes. “Good to meet you,” Dad grunts as he scowls around. “This is the place then? This is your whole office. It’s nice.”

“She’s very proud,” Angelo says, squeezing Dad’s hand before releasing. “You two must be ecstatic to have a daughter as brilliant as Sara here.”

“Uh—” Mom says, blinking rapidly. “Yes, of course we are.”

“Brilliant,” Dad says with his lips pressed together. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Okay, great, glad you all met. Angelo, do you mind?”

He looks at me and shrugs. “Not at all.” But he doesn’t move. My mother stares at him like she still can’t understand how he’s not out on the street begging for change right now, even though Angelo’s gorgeous and wearing expensive clothes. Anything that’s out of the ordinary is somehow garbage to my mother.

“Can I have the office? With just my parents?”

“Right,” Angelo says and slips past them. “Have a nice visit, folks.” He gives me one more hard look before he disappears down the hall.

I thought I might relax without him around, but it doesn't help. Dad's scowl deepens as he comes toward the only chair. Mom lingers by the door. She's in fashionable workout clothing and her hair looks like she spent an hour blowing it out and making it perfect. Dad's in jeans and a button-down, his frameless glasses perched on his nose, his gray hair cut short and close.

I've never wanted to see my parents less in my entire life than I do in this moment.

"Are you busy?" Dad asks and looks at my desk. It's covered in folders. "No, I guess you're not if you're sitting around chatting with your *assistant*."

My face flushes with embarrassment. "Angelo isn't my assistant. I said he's helping with a case. And yes, I'm very—"

"Where did you even *find* that man?" Mom asks, her nose wrinkled. "Honestly, Sara. He looks like a bartender."

That's about the biggest insult my mother can imagine.

"I can't discuss the case with you two, all right? Why are you here?"

Dad turns his hard glare on me. "Is that how you talk to your parents now?"

I stiffen in response. "No. Sorry. I just mean this is a surprise, is all. You caught me off guard."

"You don't need to be on guard for your parents, dear," Mom says from the door. She looks like she'd rather throw herself out a window than come deeper into my office.

Shame hits me hard. I don't keep my space as neat and tidy as I should. It's not bad—it's clean, and I keep it dusted and I have my own organization system—but it's cluttered. That's just how I work. But back when I was a kid, my parents would constantly criticize the way I kept my room. Mom would go on and on about how a cluttered life meant a cluttered mind. Now she must be sick, thinking this is what my brain's like.

"I just mean—I'm working, that's all." I look at Dad, feeling helpless, but he's not about to make life easier on me.

“We heard you have a new case,” he says, eyes narrowing. “A friend of mine told me at the club just last night.”

The Club. He means the Oak Club, this exclusive rich guy place where all his powerful friends congregate. I’ve never been there, but Dad’s famous and skilled enough that all the high-powered wealthy folks who like to have a doctor around granted him a membership.

“Who’s talking about me at the Oak?” I ask, feeling genuinely disturbed.

“You don’t need to know that,” Dad says and crosses his arms. “Sara, dear, you know your mother and I were very happy when we heard you got a junior position at Klein and Houndson, but we didn’t know—” He stops himself and glances back at Mom.

“We didn’t know your office was so *small*.”

I clench my jaw. I wanted to scream at them that I’m lucky to have an office at all, that I’m brand new here and the bottom of the totem pole, that I’m a woman working twice as hard, that I’m freaking pregnant, but I can’t say any of that. Instead, all my anger gets funneled deep inside and channeled into the dark pit I have brewing in my chest, the place where I’ve always shoved my feelings. I plaster a smile on my face and try not to feel like I’m going to snap.

“My office is fine, Mom, and I don’t know what you’ve heard about my cases, but everything’s fine.”

“It’s fine,” Dad says, pursing his lips. “Are you sure about that, dear? From what I’ve been told, you took a case from some very unsavory characters.”

“Is that man who just left involved in all this somehow?” Mom asks. “Darling, you can’t be serious about working for a man like—*that*.”

“Angelo is helping with the case,” I say again slowly like I’m a child trying to explain how I spilled a drink. “I’m working with respectable clients. Brice’s husband—”

Dad sneers at me. “Brice’s husband? You mean that Scavo man? I’ve heard all about him at the Oak. He’s a member

there, did you know that?”

“Yes, Dad, I knew that,” I say quietly. Brice likes to visit the Oak whenever she’s in town. She tells me all about the absurdity of the place, about the giant tree growing in the atrium, about the rich and famous people lounging around at the bar and eating at their exclusive dining room. She thinks the whole thing is absurd—and my father is a part of that world, if only on the fringes, and only because he’s useful.

“Carmine Scavo is *not* the sort of client you want. I understand you have to work hard when you first start, believe me. I had to struggle myself when I was a brand-new resident, and yet I never stooped to something like—*Carmine Scavo*.”

“Honestly, dear, he has a terrible reputation,” Mom says with a shake of her head. “You can’t seriously think it’s a good idea to work for him.”

“I took this case because it’s a good one, and I can’t talk about it with you two. So, please—”

“Drop Scavo,” Dad says, his tone firm. It’s the voice he uses when he’s ordering me around and expects to be obeyed, and every fiber of my being wants to bend over backward to do what Dad’s telling me. “I don’t care how much he’s paying you and the firm. I don’t care if he’s a member at the Oak. Drop him, get rid of his case, and move on.”

I want to thrash and fight and run away like a scared prey animal. I can’t believe this is happening. Mom and Dad are in my office, looking at it like this is the most pathetic place in the whole world, and now they’re telling me to give up on the one good thing I have going for me.

And I want to do it.

Not because I’m giving up on Nicolas and Carmine and Angelo, but because all my life I’ve done whatever my parents asked of me. It’s baked into me, burned deep into my bones. I worked hard, studied all the time, spent my days and nights in the library because that’s what Mom and Dad expected, and now they’re here telling me to get rid of a case I don’t want to stop working. It’s like I’m split in half—the Sara that’s always

done what my parents said wars against the Sara that wants to be her own person, and I don't know what to do.

"Really, darling, listen to your father. And honey, don't show anybody this little *room*." Mom shakes her head sadly. "It's rather pathetic, don't you think, dear?"

"I don't care about the office," Dad says sharply. "I care about you dropping the case and staying far away from Scavo."

"Who warned you about this?" I ask and my voice is a soft whisper. "Who were you talking to at the Oak?"

"That's none of your concern."

"Was it someone in the police department? Dad—"

"Enough," he says through his teeth. "Drop the case, Sara. That's all we came to say." He turns and leaves, brushing past my mother.

"Really, dear, your father is very worked up about this. I'd do what he says if I were you. And for the love of god, please, straighten this little room up. It's so cluttered and unbecoming. Really, Sara, honey, you know what I say about clutter and minds."

"I know," I whisper as Mom hurries after Dad and the pair of them disappear.

I slump back into my chair and stare at the floor.

I feel like someone came in here and bashed me in the face with a hammer. My ears are ringing and my head's spinning, and all I want to do is chase after my parents and tell them that I'm going to do whatever they want if only they'll be proud of me. I have to physically resist the urge because I'm not a child anymore, I'm not that little girl desperate for my absent father's approval and terrified of my drunk mother's scorn. I'm a grown woman with my own life, my own decisions—and my own baby coming.

Angelo appears in my office door. He looks at me for a long moment and I force myself not to stare back at him. He seems different to me now—rougher, harder, much more terrifying. I know that isn't fair, but hearing my parents talk about him that

way, it's like they tainted whatever we had growing between us.

"You good?" he asks.

"I'm fine. Everything's fine. Why wouldn't it be fine?"

His smile is tight. "Yeah, you seem *fine*."

"Why are you even here, Angelo? You don't need to be here, okay? I have work to do and I don't need you hovering over my shoulder all the time."

His face doesn't change, but he seems to deflate slightly. "I can make myself scarce if that's what you want."

I want to tell him no, that's not what I want, that's what my parents want and all I ever do is obey all their *fucking* commands, but I can't find the words.

"Thanks." I flip open a file at random. "I'll see you later."

He lingers in the doorway. I feel him staring at me like a spotlight. I want to lash out at him but finally, he turns away and disappears, leaving me alone in my little room.

Chapter 17

Angelo

The second Sara's parents showed up, something changed. I knew she had a complicated relationship with them, but I didn't know she'd shut down the second they told her to. That sort of dynamic, I can't really understand it—my parents were a couple of dead drunks while my grandmother was a fucking saint, but she was too old and too busy to really look after me. I raised myself, always on my own terms. I helped Grandma buy food and make rent, and we survived, but that's all we ever had. Just survival.

I didn't hear what was said in that room, but I saw the way they looked at me like I was scum. Her mother in particular couldn't have been more disgusted, like I might infect her with my poverty, but her father was even worse—he could tell what I was the moment he stepped up close and shook my hand, and somehow that makes the whole thing that much more messed up.

The arrogant little fuckers.

And now Sara's pulling away. The day after I finally feel like we're making progress, like we're breaking through the walls she keeps pulled around herself, she retreats back into her fortress. Even though she's miserable in here, beset on all sides by the expectations of her family and her own unceasing and impossible standards, it's still the only place she knows.

Maybe it's for the best. Her parents think I'm scum and maybe they're right. I am what I am, and I'll never be a part of Sara's world. I'll never be a man worthy of their daughter, of their

time, and I'm okay with that. I've come to accept I am what I am.

Sara will never accept herself. Not with her parents whispering in her ear, and that's what kills me the most. I don't expect to let this little feeling growing inside of my chest bloom into something real, even if I know it could. With a little time, with a little effort, with some freedom and some joy, this could be massive, life-changing, stratospheric. This feeling, this thing I refuse to even name, it's something I've wanted but could never have, could never let myself think about. Survival trumps whatever else. Until now.

And it doesn't matter. Sara's hidden herself away, and I'm not going to break her open again.

It's late when I park across from the High Noon. I shouldn't be here without Sara but there's no way she'd agree to come with me right now. She's back at the hotel room looking over her files and chewing her nails and acting neurotic, all because of one single visit from her parents, and I can't sit in that room with her and watch that.

Especially not when she looks up and stares at me like I'm tainted.

Like whatever her parents said made her see me in a new light—or at least pulled closed the curtain and threw up the steel walls and made sure I'd never crack through her armor.

I'm here instead, outside of a cop bar at eleven at night watching people come and go with headshots spread out on the passenger side seat next to me. There are a few people in the Dallas PD that might be helpful, a few secretaries that work the night shift mostly answering phones, the sort of folks that might be willing to take a bribe in exchange for some information. If we're going to find that interview with Wally, we'll need someone malleable on the inside, someone that's willing to break a few rules and doesn't really give a shit about their job. That leaves out the day crew. Those are the lifers, the ones with pensions and dreams of retirement. It's the weirdos that I need.

This is reckless. I know it's dumb. Sitting here like this, watching a damn cop bar. It's totally possible that some of the people inside know who I am and what I'm doing, and yet I can't help myself. Every time I think about making the smart decision and driving off, I keep seeing Sara's face, the look she gave me after her parents left and she told me to get lost too. It was sickening, like she was disgusted with herself and hated me just as much, and it sent a shiver of rage into my heart.

I want to hunt down her old man and bash his fucking skull in and make his wife watch.

There's a noise toward the back of my car. A soft thump like someone's tapping on the bumper. I frown and look in the rearview but I don't see anything. As I turn to stare out the windows, the back passenger door opens and a guy gets in.

Adrenaline slams into my veins. I reach for the gun I have stashed under the seat, but something cold presses against my head before I can grab it, and I go totally still.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the man says, low and rumbling. "Sit back up. Do it nice and slow."

I know that voice. I know the tone, anyway. Those fucker's a cop, no doubt in my mind, and cops are more dangerous than gangsters.

Criminals know they can go to jail. Cops think they're above all that. Fuck up and at worst, they'll get fired. Most likely they end up on leave for a few months, on a desk for another few months, before getting back into the thick of things like nothing happened.

The driver's side rear door opens and another person gets inside. "The balls on this fucking guy," the new man says. "Sitting there watching us like we're not going to notice."

"You must think we're idiots," the first one says.

I slowly raise my hands. One false move and these state-sponsored killers will wipe me out. "*Idiots* might be going far. I definitely think you're stupid though."

The second guy laughs as the first grunts and sits back. The gun leaves my skull, but it's still pointed at me.

I twist to get a good look at my assailants.

The man on the left with the weapon is a narrow bastard. Denim shirt, denim pants, cowboy hat. Fucking Texas through and through. His mustache is bushy and ugly.

But the guy on the right sitting directly behind me makes my stomach crawl.

He's a big man, thick shoulders, thick neck, like he grew up eating nothing but eggs and steak. He's pale, wearing a Houston Astros ballcap, with a polo shirt and a pair of faded jeans. He's in his forties, face grizzled and unshaven.

It's the guy Detective Vance left with the other night. The one we assumed was her partner.

My heart races. My head spins. What the hell is happening right now?

"What can I do for you fellas?" I ask, trying to play it cool, but I'm on the edge of something bad.

I'm glad Sara didn't come.

Mustache keeps the gun trained on me. "Right now, you can start the engine and drive."

"I'd rather stay here."

"Not up for discussion. Drive, or I kill you here and now and be done with this whole fucking mess."

"I'd do what he says." Vance's partner grins at me. "I wouldn't fuck around right now, Angelo."

I turn around and jerk the key. The car roars to life and I pull out. Mustache gives me directions: left, right, left, straight for a while. The gun never leaves me. I see it glinting in the few streetlights we pass. We're on the back roads now, away from the bar, away from anyone. Neither of them speaks as we keep going, further and further, and my brain's doing flips trying to figure out what they have planned.

They could kill me. There's no reason they wouldn't, but I suspect that if they pull the trigger and end me here, it'll only make Sara push that much harder. And on top of that, Carmine's strength has been growing down here ever since he married Brice, and I doubt the locals want to fuck with him if they can avoid it.

No, murdering me is going to be a huge headache for them. These guys might be thugs but they're still cops, and cops have to pretend like they're following rules. There are too many eyes on them. Yeah, they're nothing more than thugs with a pension, but I have to keep telling myself that killing me will be worse than keeping me alive. I gotta hope I'm right.

They're probably trying to scare me. But it's a big risk. They revealed their faces to me, which means I know which guys are a part of the coverup, and I should be able to find more of them if I look hard enough.

So murder might really be on the menu this evening.

Fucked up that I'm going to die while Sara's back home thinking I'm a worthless piece of shit.

I hope it doesn't hurt her too badly. Maybe she was right trying to avoid me from the start. I'm only bad news. Only ever been bad news. I think of Grandma smiling at me as she watched her black and white Westerns, smelling like dryer sheets and dirty denim. Grandma loved me at least, even if she was always too busy working to show it. Maybe Sara can meet Grandma one day, but I'm not sure it'll ever happen.

"Pull over here," Mustache says.

"Where? There's nothing but fields."

"Pull the fuck over," Mustache says again.

I jerk the wheel to the right and come to a stop, tires bumping over dirt and grass. We're in the middle of nothing, no lights nearby, no houses, only endless stretches of fields reaching out in all directions broken only by trees in the distance. The shoulder's barely big enough for the car, but there are no other vehicles in sight and haven't been any for a little while.

Vance's partner exits first. He walks to my door and yanks it open. "Out," he says.

Slowly, I step onto the pavement. Gravel crunches under my feet. I'm calculating how I'm going to survive this but my chances don't seem good, not without a gun of my own, but I don't have any weapons on me. Mustache walks ahead and beckons for me to follow him.

Vance's partner shoves me. "Go," he grunts.

I shuffle into the beam of my headlights. Mustache leads us further down the road, about fifty feet from the car, and stops. My mind's calculating. If this is my last moment, I'll meet my end standing up. Fucking Sara. Fucking hell. I'm glad she's not here for this. He turns to face me, gun held out. Vance's partner looms behind me.

"You two do this a lot?" I ask, staring Mustache in the eye. If I'm going to die, I might as well die like a fucking man. "I thought you guys were cops. Protect and serve."

"This is how shit gets done," Mustache says. "You've been poking around a lot lately and that's not smart."

"I'm investigating."

"We do the investigating. And don't tell me you're working for that fucking lawyer girl. She's not stupid enough to employ someone like you, not officially at least, so there's no trail linking you back. Once you're gone, you're just gone. Poof, just like that. Nobody's going to come looking. You think anyone's going to give a fuck about a guy like you? A worthless fucking criminal?"

"Sara cares. You must've realized that by now. She'll search for me, and she'll find me, and then she'll find you. That girl's like a fucking cannonball blasting everything out of her way. You really think Carmine Scavo's going to hire someone incompetent? She's young, but she's good. You're fucked."

"Maybe," Mustache concedes with a shrug. "But lucky for you, that's not what's happening here."

Before I can speak, Vance's partner kicks me hard in the back of the knee. I grunt, crumple down, and he hits me again, this

time in the side of the skull. I topple and slam into the ground hard, try to roll away, manage to avoid a sharp kick to the ribs. I scramble to my feet, swing wildly, and catch Vance's partner in the guts with a lucky glancing blow, but Mustache is there before I can follow up. I want to kill them, I want to murder them with my bare hands, but my ears are ringing and my legs are on fire—

The butt of a gun hits me right above the eye. Skin breaks and blood oozes down from the wound. I'm dizzy, losing strength now. I try to fight back, but I'm blinded and in excruciating pain and outnumbered, and it doesn't take long for them to get me back on the ground, their boots pummeling my side, my back, my head, over and over again. Pain flares, hot and fresh and horrible, and I feel something crack in my chest. Each breath is a struggle, and this is how I die, on a random road beside some empty fucking fields, getting my shit kicked in by two dirty cops.

But as I'm ready for the end to come, they stop. The night goes quiet. There's only the sound of my ragged breathing. Mustache looms over me and he's a shadow in the headlights, haloed by distant stars.

"Stop looking," he says and wipes sweat from his face. "You hear me, Angelo? Stop looking. You won't like what you find."

"Nicolas didn't kill them," I croak at him.

"We know that, you stupid prick," Vance's partner says. "But someone's going down and it might as well be your lowlife friend. Stop trying to save him. Someone's gotta pay."

Mustache bends over, hands on his knees, and stares into my face. "Tell you what. If you're smart and you back off, we'll go easy on the kid. Maybe he doesn't get death row. Maybe he only gets life. How's that sound?"

"Fuck you," I say and show him my teeth. "You're going to have to kill me."

"We can do that," Mustache says, head tilted. "This is your last chance."

“Stop looking,” Vance’s partner says again.

“Good luck getting home.” Mustache walks off with Vance’s partner in tow. They get into my rental and pull out into the darkness, barely missing me as they drive past, spraying my face with dirt. I spit blood and grit onto the cold grass.

I’m left alone. But fuck, at least I’m alive.

I wipe the blood away with my shirt. I have at least one broken rib, maybe more, and the cut over my forehead is going to be a bitch to stitch up. Breathing isn’t easy, but I’m not dead at least.

I slowly get to a sitting position and lean back on my hands, staring up at the beautiful sky.

There are so many fucking stars without any light pollution around.

I grin and start laughing.

Fucking dirty cops had me going for a second there.

I pull my phone from my pocket. My fingers feel heavy and numb, but I manage to dial Sara’s number. It rings and rings and no answer. I call again, and again, and I curse her parents straight to hell but finally she picks up.

“Angelo?” she says. “What do you need?”

“A ride would be good,” I say with a sigh and squeeze my eyes shut. “Maybe a doctor too. I know who’s trying to cover up what happened to Nicolas.”

Chapter 18

Sara

Angelo sits in bed looking like he got hit by a bus.
Which isn't too far from the truth.

His eyes are both bruised and black. The cut above his eye isn't terrible, but it takes a while to stop bleeding. He's hunched over and cradling his side, and I'm pretty sure he needs to see a freaking doctor to make sure there's nothing ruined internally. I fret over him, cleaning the little cuts and scrapes, desperate to do something to help.

But I'm powerless. I've always been powerless in all this, and seeing him in pain and angry and exhausted sends a jolt of anger and fear deep through my core.

"Just let me sit here for a while," Angelo says and each breath is labored. "I'll call Carmine. He'll send someone. But not yet."

"What are you waiting for?" I dab at his face gently, cleaning the blood away. His shirt's ruined, his trousers are drenched in filth and gravel. He looks at me with hard eyes and touches my face. "Angelo. Don't."

"What did your parents say to you?"

"Seriously? You almost got killed tonight, and you're asking about my parents?"

"When they left, you looked at me like I was a monster. Like I crawled out from under your fucking bed and tried to eat your soul."

“It’s not like that.” I glance down at my hands, unable to meet his gaze, because I know he’s right. It’s always been that way: Mom and Dad have that effect on me. Whatever they say, I want to believe they’re right even when I know they’re wrong. “Things are just complicated, okay?”

“I’m not sure they are.”

“My dad warned me away from this case. He heard bad things about it at the Oak Club and—he told me to drop it and walk away.” My words hang in the air between us. Angelo leans his head back against the bed and lets out a soft groan and a curse. “I know, I should’ve told you sooner. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, you should’ve told me, but it wouldn’t have made a difference. I shouldn’t have gone to that fucking bar alone. They wouldn’t have dragged me out to those fields if you were around.”

“You sure about that?”

He shrugs. “Pretty sure. I’m willing to bet your apartment was our first warning. Now my broken rib is our second. Think we’ll get a third?”

“Dad told me this is really bad news. He said I needed to drop it, stop dealing with Carmine, stop working with you.”

“He’s probably right. Look at me right now. You really want to be involved with this?”

“Stop it, Angelo. I don’t need to hear it from you.”

“Then what are you gonna do about it, huh?”

I pull back from him, anger sparking. I pace across the room and feel like my head’s spinning as his eyes track me. He looks like a glorious boxer, sitting there bloodied and battered, shirtless in only his ripped jeans, a wreck of a human and still beautiful. A monster, a beast, a killer, and still lovely beyond words.

I don’t know how that’s possible. I grew up thinking only good people were worthy of my love and respect, but maybe I never understood what the word *good* really meant.

I hate my father. I hate the dirty fucking cops that did this to Angelo. I hate this twisted, stupid world for being so absurd and evil and wrong. I want to yank Nicolas from jail and scream the truth at the top of my lungs, but there's nothing I can do. I'm impotent, powerless. Even Angelo with all his strength and skills couldn't keep himself safe.

If I were smart, I'd listen to my dad. I'd listen to those cops.

I'd drop all this and move on.

But seeing Angelo like that makes me so angry I could cry. It breaks something in me, like something's broken in him. I'm seething, burning, ready to run out into the night and fight the first stupid cop I come across, dirty or not. I have all this pent-up anger and energy, and I don't know what to do with it, but I'm sure about one thing.

I'm not backing down.

Not now, not ever.

Because fuck them if they think they can intimidate me.

"Tell me who they were." I turn to him, hands on my hips.
"The guys that did this. Tell me."

His smile is bitter and tight. "Vance's partner, the one we saw the other night. And I don't know the other one, but he had a mustache and a cowboy hat, and I could pick him out of a lineup if I had to."

"We'll find a directory of cop headshots and you'll show me which one it was. But call Carmine first."

"Come here."

"Angelo. Call him."

"Come here and I will."

I hesitate, but I walk to the bed. He gestures me closer and I crawl in next to him. Some of my anger seeps away, but I'm still on edge as I sit next to him, our shoulders touching, our thighs pressed side to side.

"You know how bad this is going to be, right?" He's whispering, not looking at me. "This is the last time I'll say it.

You can walk.”

“Not going to happen. Not now.” My hand drifts toward my stomach and the baby, but I stop.

Can I really do all this while carrying a child? Angelo’s child?

Guilt racks me. I should’ve told him a long time ago, but I have my reasons. I don’t want Angelo to find out about this baby—I don’t want him involved.

Now I wonder if that was a bad decision.

But Angelo sighs and squeezes my knee. “Yeah, I figured. As soon as those fuckers started kicking me, I kept thinking, Sara’s stuck in this now. She’s not going to let this go.”

“You’re right. I’m not.”

“Good girl.” His smirk is lopsided as he looks at me. “Get my phone for me, will you? I gotta call Carmine before my guts leak out.”

“Gladly.” I get up and toss it over to him.

As he taps the screen, a plan comes to me, half formed and reckless, but it’s a plan, and I’m not about to let these bastards keep me down.



IT TAKES A COUPLE HOURS OF WAITING AROUND ON THE sidewalk, exhausted and strung-out, watching early morning workers hustle past on the way to their jobs before I finally spot her ducking into the fancy coffee shop five blocks from the Dallas police precinct building. I slowly walk over, keeping an eye out for anyone else I recognize, and wait for her to come out again.

Detective Vance looks tired, like she got a late-night call about something important. I don’t know if she’s working another case or if she’s dealing with the fallout from Angelo’s continued investigation, and I don’t really give a shit. She’s in dark slacks, a dark jacket, and she’s holding a big iced coffee with the shop’s logo emblazoned on the side in both hands.

“Misty,” I call out and walk over to her.

She looks back and I swear one hand flinches to the holster at her hip. Instead, she sees me, curses quietly, and her eyes narrow. “Ms. Bray. What are you doing here?”

“Call me Sara.” I fall into step as she tries to hurry away. “Did you hear what happened to my partner last night?”

“You mean the guy that ambushed me at High Noon? I don’t know anything about it.”

“Liar. He’s lying in bed right now half dead with at least a few broken ribs. Guess who did that?”

She refuses to look at me. “I don’t want to hear any more, Ms. Bray.”

“Sara. My name’s Sara, and that guy’s name is Angelo, and all we’re trying to do is make sure an innocent man doesn’t go to jail for the rest of his life. What kind of cop are you, Misty?”

“Detective Vance.” She stops walking and glares at me. “How’d you know I’d be here?”

“I saw the empty cups in your truck. You really need to clear them out.”

She laughs harshly. “That’s what my partner says. It’s a fucking addiction. Sugar and caffeine. I can’t help myself.”

“Why’d they do it, Misty?”

“I told you, I don’t know anything about what happened to your partner.” She hesitates and glances down the block like she’s making sure nobody’s watching. “Is he okay?”

“He will be. I hope anyway. They’re trying to scare us away, which means there’s something to find and we’re getting close. What are we looking for?”

“I already told you everything.” She turns and starts to walk again.

“If you keep going, you’re gonna run into someone from the precinct. Do you really think they’ll see you talking with me?”

That makes Misty stop. She turns back, jaw working. “You’re a pain in my ass, Sara.”

“Good. I’m glad.” I move closer to her and drop my voice lower. “Just tell me what to look for. I’m not asking you to put yourself out there, but we need something more. Where’s that interview hiding?”

Misty grimaces and looks down at her shoes. “What makes you think they didn’t burn it already?”

“That’s what Angelo said. But there’s no way that dirty cops are ripping up paperwork, not without getting caught. They’re hiding it somehow.”

“It’s always fucking paperwork,” Misty says with a bitter smile. “That’s the thing, right? That’s the reason we fill out all these goddamn forms. So when shit like this happens, there’s a trail to follow.”

“Where’s the interview?”

“You have to understand something. Not everyone working in my department is crooked. Some of them are, some of them aren’t, and the problem is you never know which is which.”

“I can tell you one of them has a mustache. The other is your partner.”

Misty’s mouth drops open. Her jaw works back and forth and she shakes her head. “You’re lying.”

“The guy you left the High Noon with that night, right? Him and another guy, someone with a bushy mustache and a cowboy hat, they jumped Angelo. Nearly beat him to death. I think they also ransacked my apartment in an attempt at scaring me away. Help me, Misty.”

“Shit,” she says quietly and rubs her face. “I knew John was in deep, but—” She takes a long drink from her plastic cup. “There’s a series of documents. The series isn’t publicly known for obvious reasons, and if you ever tell anyone about this stuff, I’ll find some pretext to lock you up for life. But this series of documents, it’s a way of burying shit without destroying it as a sort of backup in case Internal Affairs starts sniffing around. We can point to that paperwork and say oh,

hey, here it is, it just got lost in the shuffle, ha-ha, sorry about that. When really it stays fucking buried in the archives.”

“What are they called?”

“Forms 83612-B and 83613-C. Request all of them from around the time of the murders, about a week before and after should do it. The interview will be in there along with a mountain of other shit.”

“Thank you, Misty. You’re one of the good ones.”

“Yeah, one of the fucking few.” She shakes her head. “Request the files in person. If John hears you’re still sniffing around before you get your hands on them, he won’t go easy.”

“I have a feeling Angelo would love a second round.”

“I bet he would. Fucking mobsters and fucking lawyers. Don’t get yourself killed, Sara.” Misty turns and stalks off.

I watch her go, body ringing with excitement. Finally, I have the lead we’ve been needing. If I can get my hands on that interview, and if it says what I think it says, it’ll blow a bunch of massive holes in the prosecution’s case.

Chapter 19

Sara

“**Y**ou should’ve stayed home,” I say as Angelo limps into the Open Records Unit. It’s housed in the far end of the police department, which is a massive building with a huge Texas Rangers star at one end. It feels like an office building, but with more cops loitering around, and I’m terrified as we slowly make our way to the bank of windows up ahead where bored older women glare at the gathered hopefuls waiting to be called.

“I’m fine,” Angelo says. “Besides, if someone decides they want to hurt you—”

“In the middle of the police department?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“You’re paranoid.”

“No, I’m in pain because a couple dirty cops kicked my ribs in.”

“Okay, fair enough.” I gently steer him toward a chair on the side of the waiting room. “Just sit, okay?”

He glares, but doesn’t argue.

I grab a number and we get to waiting. The line isn’t too long, but I pace anxiously, unable to keep myself calm. There are a thousand ways this can go wrong and they’re all pretty bad. But worst of all, the documents might not be there, and Vance sent us on this wild-goose chase for nothing.

“You’re drawing attention to yourself,” Angelo says as I move past him for the tenth time. “Come sit on my lap. I’ll calm you

down.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“Seriously. Sit your fine ass down.”

I suck in a breath and slump into the chair beside him.

“Happy?”

“Not remotely. I hate these places.”

“I bet you do. This is your worst nightmare, isn’t it?”

He stares straight ahead and shakes his head. “It’s not because they’re cops. I mean, I don’t love cops, but I understand that they’re a necessary evil to keep our society functioning smoothly. No, my problem is with offices.”

I stare at him, bewildered. “Offices?”

“Yes, Sara, *offices*. Especially these big, sterile, bureaucratic fucking nightmares.” He shivers and runs a hand through his hair. “The DMV is like my version of hell.”

“*Why?*”

“People like me, we aren’t taught how to navigate this shit. Everything is like maze and each wrong turn costs you more and more money. Worse than that, this is where the spirit goes to die. No, don’t give me that look, I’m not being all woo-woo about this shit, I really mean it. Folks come into these places and get a nice job and sit around and time just slips past, second by second, and it all feels like an eternity but it also feels like nothing, and then one day you’re old and retiring and what did you do? You shuffled a bunch of papers around.”

“We need places like this, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” He crosses his arms. “I just don’t like it.”

“Number six-one-two,” the woman at the window calls out.

“Come on, that’s us.” I head over with Angelo limping along behind me and give the cashier my biggest smile. “Hello, ma’am. I’m looking to requisition forms 83612-B and 83613-C from the last three weeks.” I push over the prefilled paperwork and she starts to go over it with a critical eye. After

a short interrogation, and more hemming and hawing, she finally gestures for us to come around to the side door.

It unlocks with a click and we're allowed back into the belly of the beast.

"Those forms aren't allowed to leave the premises," the woman says. Her nametag claims she's named Janet. "You'll have to read them back here. You can take pictures, copies, whatever you need, but the originals stay."

"Understood," Angelo says as we're shown into a bare room with nothing but a table and three rickety chairs. Once she's gone, he leans toward me and his eyebrows raise. "If this is hell, I think we just met the devil herself."

I roll my eyes.

Janet returns an agonizing ten minutes later with a large filing box. She drops it on the table. "Good luck," she says and heads out.

"Don't look so excited," Angelo says with a sigh as he leans back in his chair.

"You gonna help me?"

"Absolutely not. This is like your World Series right now."

"I'm not that much of a nerd." I start to pick my way through the papers. There are dozens, maybe hundreds, and I start to despair. "This is going to take hours."

"Great. Wake me up if you need something. Like a gun to end your misery." He leans his head against the wall and closes his eyes.

"Asshole."

But Angelo's right. This *is* like my World Series. It's a challenge, and while it's a boring one, at least it's noble. I start going through each form, looking for that damn interview, and I marvel at the sheer amount of stuff the cops are trying to hide. Dozens of reports, evidence lists, ballistics, coroner stuff, all of it shoved down here in the records department and hidden away in boxes and plastered over with these fake-as-hell forms to cover up their tracks. I wonder if anyone's ever

bothered to look through this stuff before. Probably not. I bet only cops even know it exists.

Finally, after I'm starting to think Misty lied to me, I come across a bundle of pages that look familiar and my heart starts to race. Right there on the front is Wally's name, followed by Detective Vance, followed by her handwritten signature.

"Wake up," I whisper harshly.

Angelo cracks one eye open. "Got it?"

I grin at him and wave the pages in the air. "Got it."

Together, we photograph everything. When that's done, I email it all back to myself, just to make sure I can't lose it. "Let's get out of here." I start jamming pages back into the box.

But there's a noise out in the hall. Voices, whispering urgently to each other. I pause, straining to hear, but I can't make out what they're saying. Angelo looks unhappy as he climbs to his feet, and one voice raises, getting loud and closer.

Janet sounds distressed. Poor Janet. "I'm sorry, Detective, but this is very unusual, you can't just—"

The door rips open and there he is.

Detective Vance's partner.

John himself.

Angelo jumps to his feet. John looks from me to the box and back to me again and I can see the rage in his eyes. His fingers twitch like he's reaching for his gun, but Janet appears at his side, looking furious, her matronly face yanked into a frown.

"This is a breach of protocol, Detective," she says harshly. "I *will* be reporting it to your superior."

"Fuck off, you decrepit paper-pushing harpy, or I'll break your fucking nose," he growls at her.

Janet looks affronted and scurries away.

"How'd you find us?" Angelo asks, slowly putting himself between me and the detective.

“Don’t worry about that.” John stares at Angelo and a grin breaks across his face. “I thought you learned your lesson. I’m impressed you’re walking around right now. You in the mood for another dance?”

“I’ll remind you that we’re in police headquarters right now, Detective,” I say sharply as terror rings down my spine.

“I’d love another go,” Angelo says softly. “This time, keep the gun holstered. Make it a fair fight.”

“Boys,” I say loudly. “Enough.”

Detective John slowly looks at me. “You made a mistake coming here. I don’t know how the fuck you heard about these papers, but you shouldn’t have come sniffing through our dirty laundry.”

“I’m not interested in all the bodies you’re trying to bury, Detective. All I want is the truth about *my* case. Who killed those cartel men, Detective? You know, don’t you? Or maybe you don’t and all you’re doing is following orders. Either way, Nicolas Cavallo is innocent, and I intend on proving it.”

Detective John’s sneer drips with scorn. “I don’t know why you care about scum like him. Maybe he didn’t do *those* murders, but you think your boy’s got clean hands? They’re all the same, him and this one, all a bunch of fucking worthless assholes.”

“You’re right, Detective,” Angelo snarls. “We’ve all got dirty hands. Let me show you mine.”

“Angelo.” I grab his arm and dig my fingers into his muscle. “Stop provoking him.”

There’s a thick, tense moment. Detective John stands there, staring at Angelo with a rough grin, and Angelo’s glaring back like he’s about to start a fight right here in the freaking police headquarters. This is basically my worst nightmare, mostly because Angelo’s too hurt to do much more than get himself killed, and I’m not going to be much use in an actual altercation.

“Here’s the deal,” Detective John says, his voice a soft rasp. “Because that pushy fucking archives bitch is hovering around

and watching my every move, I'm not going to kill either of you. But I am going to warn you one last time. That makes three, which is more than most people get. You keep this up, someone's going to die, and I can promise it's not going to be me."

"You must have great bosses, Detective," Angelo says. "Since you're willing to kill for them."

"I'm willing to do what's necessary, now shut your mouth, you filthy fucking creep. You two have no clue what you stepped into."

"Who's paying you, Detective?" I ask him. "What's worth all this mess? You know you can't kill me. And if you kill Angelo, you're going to piss his boss off."

"You think I give a fuck about some East Coast gangster?" Detective John glares at me. "And don't think you're above reproach. You wouldn't be the first young lawyer to kill herself in her first year. Shit happens sometimes. It's a hard job."

"If you go near her, I will cut your throat," Angelo says quietly. "And that's not an empty threat."

"I get it, you're both big and bad." I tilt my chin up at Detective John and muster all my harsh coldness. "You can sit there and make all the threats you want, but that doesn't change anything. You're *not* going to murder an innocent lawyer even if I am a pain in your ass, and you're not going to get away with this coverup. If you're smart, you'll make sure everyone *else* goes down, and you avoid going to prison."

His eyebrows raise. "You're trying to get me to help you?"

"I'm trying to get you to do the right thing."

"You're fucking crazy. Really, you must've lost your mind." The detective steps back out of the room and lingers in the hall. "Don't forget what I said. My bosses don't give a shit who you are. If you keep pushing, there will be consequences."

Angelo stares him down and says nothing as Detective John turns and walks off, leaving us alone in the room.

“That didn’t go great,” I say.

Angelo grunts and turns to me. “You should’ve let me hurt him.”

“You can barely walk. You really think you’ll win that fight?”

“Yes. I do.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s all talk. And besides, we have the transcript now.” I shove the remaining papers in to the box and drop the lid back on. “Let’s get out of here before our friendly detective decides to come back.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to my office. You know, your personal hell.”

Chapter 20

Angelo

Carmine leans his elbows on the bar and takes a long drink from his glass of whiskey. A jazz trio plays standards on the stage behind us and I feel out of place in the Oak Club. Even though I'm a guest of Carmine's and I'm wearing a suit more expensive than most people's mortgage, it's like everyone's staring at me, like they know where I belong.

On the street somewhere far from a place like this.

I hunch forward and try to focus on the satisfying bite of alcohol on my tongue but it's not enough. Carmine swirls his glass, and it's like he doesn't notice that we're surrounded by people that hate us. We're trapped in this hall of power, and he sits there drinking like somehow we belong here even if we're only interlopers that took the right to show up and sit on these fancy stools by force.

But it feels good to see him again after the struggle of the last few weeks.

"How's the case going?" he asks after the usual small talk's been exhausted.

"Going good. I think we're getting close."

"Yeah? You want to share some details?"

"I'm not sure I have any worth sharing just yet." I grimace as I adjust myself. The broken rib's still healing, but the doctor assured me I'd be fine with some rest. Only I'm not sure when I'll actually get to sit down and get myself straightened out,

which means this thing's going to be bothering me for a lot longer.

"Tell me something anyway."

"Sara's going through some documents we found and I think it'll prove that Nicolas didn't do those killings, but it might implicate some other people." I glance at him, eyebrows up. "Important people."

"How important are we talking? Senators? Congressmen?"

"Cops."

He nods slowly. "Cops. It's always the fucking cops, isn't it? Them and their fucking blue line."

"I don't know how high up and I don't know how many, but I can tell you they've been trying to get us to back off since we started looking into this."

"Typical fucking police covering their asses."

"We don't know what went down at that motel for sure just yet, but I think we're close."

"Good. Keep it up. When you find out what really happened, come to me. I'll handle the rest."

I sip my drink and stare at the bar top. "There are other things. Other complications."

"Let me guess. You and Sara."

I grunt and nod once. "I'm not sure when it happened."

"Pretty sure it was back at the wedding."

I give him a look. "That was a one-time thing. A one-night stand. Nothing important. This is something more."

"Really?" He raises an eyebrow in surprise. "Never thought you were the kind of guy to settle down."

"I never thought you were either, but you found Brice."

"And it looks like you found Sara."

"Not exactly." I sigh and push the glass away. "Whatever might be brewing between us, it'll never happen."

“Why not?”

I stare at my hands. My rough, dirty hands. I can dress up in expensive clothes all I want, but I’ll always be what I am. “She hates people like me. She wishes I had nothing to do with her.”

He laughs quietly. “Sounds familiar.”

“There’s not much I can do about it. The girl’s fucking stubborn.”

“So you’re giving up?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Carmine leans back and crosses his arms. I glance at him as he grins at me for a long moment and I regret mentioning this. The shit with Sara, that’s all private, and half of it is pure speculation. We’ve slept together, we’ve had our moments, and there’s a feeling building inside of me, but I don’t know what she’s thinking or what she really wants. Maybe this really is only sex and comfort for her, and everything else is a product of my imagination. A hallucination, a cheap trick. I could be fooling myself into thinking there’s something real between us, but it feels so fucking big and just past my fingertips, like it’s right there beyond my grasp.

“You want some advice?” Carmine asks.

“Absolutely not.”

“Here’s what you have to do. It’s going to blow your mind, but you can handle it. You ready?”

“Not interested.”

“You have to talk to her.” He leans closer. “That’s all.”

“Thanks, wow, you really did just turn my world upside down.”

He laughs and holds his glass up. “Here’s to communicating like grown-ass adults.”

“Here’s to you not understanding the nuances of my situation.”

We both drink.

“Why don’t you stay here and have a few more on my tab?” Carmine asks as he pushes away his glass and stands. “I have to go meet Brice for dinner. The staff won’t kick you out so long as you stick to the bar and don’t make a fuss.”

“I think it’d rather throw myself off that fancy fucking tree than sit around in here for longer than is necessary.”

“You really hate this place, don’t you?”

“I don’t belong.” I stand and we walk out together slowly, heading back into the massive atrium lobby. “This place makes me feel wrong. The way the people act, the way the staff talks to us, it’s just—it doesn’t fit.”

“This place means nothing,” Carmine says, looking around. “It’s all show. It’s all facade. I’m starting to see what’s underneath it, and I’m telling you, Angelo, it’s all rot.”

“Yeah? You think? I know rot. I’ve seen rot. This shit’s pretty nice.” I run my fingers down a gleaming railing and gesture at the giant oak tree growing in the middle of the lobby. “That’s almost magic.”

“It’s all show.” Carmine jabs a finger into my chest. “You have more than any of these petty fuckers will ever have. You’ve got heart and blood and muscles and brains. You had to earn your place while most of the rich fuckheads in here were handed everything. Hell, even I was born into my father’s family. I struggled, but not like you did. You think it’s hard to stay rich once you’re fucking rich? It’s really not. It’s a lot harder to be born with nothing and to end up with something, and look at you now.”

“Tell that to Sara. When she looks at me, all she can see is the street kid. All she can see is the blood and sweat.”

“If that’s a bad thing to her then maybe you really should let it go and find someone else. Angelo, you’ve got to accept the man you were because you’re still him and you always will be. You’ve got to let go of how everyone looks at you. Do you really think I give a fuck that the snobby cocksuckers in here see me and think I’m beneath them because I’m a Don?”

“You don’t seem to mind.”

“Not one tiny bit.” He turns to me and squeezes my arm. “You know why? Because I know what I am. I know how hard I worked to get here. I know how much blood’s on my hands, and what that blood means.”

I give him a tight smile. “Thanks for the pep talk, brother. But the fact remains that Sara’s parents have her thinking I’m nothing but a lowlife, and they’re not wrong. I am a lowlife.”

“I’d rather be a lowlife than a prissy little shit.” Carmine sighs and turns away. “Just don’t let that stop you from taking what you want. That’s the thing. These bastards, they have everything, but they still want more. If you’re going to get a piece, you need to fight them off and grab hold of what you need with both hands and rip it from them. Leave them bloody and begging in the end.”

We reach the far side of the lobby and head into the night. The valet goes out for my car while Carmine’s driver pulls up and waits for him to get in.

“I’ll consider what you said.” I shake Carmine’s hand. “And you think about what I told you about this situation. We’re dealing with dirty cops, and I don’t think it’s just a few low-level uniforms. I’m thinking this goes up high.”

“I’m familiar with the Dallas police at this point. If there’s something I can do, I’ll do it.”

“I’ll keep you updated then.”

“Good luck. And hey, Angelo, fuck these people, right?”

Now that I can agree with. “Fuck ‘em.”

He gets into his car and the driver glides off.

I watch him go before turning back to the Oak Club. The doors are closed to me now—if I tried to get in, they’d throw me on my ass. This place is the beating heart of the elite’s social circle, and more shady business happens in that place between supposedly decent businessmen than happens in rundown motels like the Two Lane.

Carmine’s right. I let the way Sara looked at me after her parents got in her head fuck with my own self-image. I know

what I am and I know what I'm capable of, and if I wanted to burn all this shit to the ground, I'd make it happen.

But I don't. The tree in there, it's cool as hell, and it'd be a shame if it went up in a blaze.

As the valet returns with my rental, my phone rings. Sara's on the other end, sounding breathless. "I found them."

"You found who?"

"Them. I know who did it. I figured it out, Angelo."

My heart starts racing. I knew we were close—but I didn't know we were already there. "Hold tight. Where are you?"

"In the hotel."

"Don't move. I'll be there soon."

"Angelo. I know who did it." She laughs, sounding giddy. "And we're going to *ruin* them."



SARA'S PACING BACK AND FORTH, WAVING HER PHONE IN THE air. "It took me forever to read and transcribe those freaking pictures," she says. "Seriously, never, ever let me do something so stupid again. I should've made a photocopy."

"But now it's done and you think you found something."

"Oh, I don't think it." She stops and grins at me and taps her phone. "I *know* I did. Listen to this." I sit on the couch, legs crossed, and watch as her face lights up. She clears her throat and starts to read.

MISTY: SO YOU SAW THE VANS PULL UP AND WHAT HAPPENED next?

Wally: These guys got out. Like, I don't know, twenty of them. All in black and carrying these big guns.

Misty: What kind of guns?

Wally: Big ones. Like, rifles. Machine guns. I don't know, I'm not from Texas, I don't even like guns.

Misty: Okay, big guns, I got it. What happened next?

Wally: They ran up the steps to that room and gathered around it. I was standing down near the office smoking and couldn't pull my eyes away, it was so fucking insane. I kept thinking I should call the police, but then—

Misty: Then what?

Wally: They kicked the door down. Someone threw something inside and there was this loud thump, and this crazy bright light, and they're all yelling, police, police, police, and someone else was shouting back at them in what I think was like Spanish or something weird. Then the shooting started.

Misty: Shooting. I was told there was no shooting.

Wally: Whoever told you that is a fucking liar. There was a *lot* of shooting. It all happened at once, like an explosion, and the guys in black went absolutely nuts. They stormed into the room, bang, bang, bang, you know what I mean, just shooting like crazy. So many bullets. I hit the ground, you know, because I'm smart like that.

Misty: Very smart. What next?

Wally: Things got weird. I couldn't see it all from where I was but I heard some of it. The shooting stopped, it lasted maybe ten seconds, but it felt like forever. Then the guys in black were swarming the place, making calls, talking to each other. They were lingering, you know what I mean? I got up and started toward them because I thought maybe I could help, but one guy pointed a gun at me and told me to get the fuck back inside. He told me to forget I ever saw anything.

Misty: How did he sound? What did he look like?

Wally: Texas accent. White guy, short hair. Like a guy from around here.

Misty: Okay, a local guy. What next?

Wally: Well, I went back into the office. I mean, the guy with the gun just told me to get inside, so I listened.

Misty: Smart.

Wally: Right.

Misty: What next? Did they talk to you anymore?

Wally: That's the weird thing. I expected more police, but then there was nothing. The guys got back into their vans and just... drove off. Dead silence. And it stayed like that for a while until you folks showed up.

SARA FINISHES READING AND LOOKS UP AT ME. I STARE BACK at her, dumbfounded.

One part of the transcript rings in my head like a gong. *Police, police, police.*

"I'm not sure what I just heard," I say slowly, heart pulsing in my ears as I try to digest it all.

She waves her phone in the air. "Angelo! Think about it!"

I slowly get up off the couch, cradling my side, and walk to the window. "All right, so a lot of guys showed up. There was a firefight, which I kind of figured... but the police didn't respond to that. It sounds like they were working as a unit, with legitimate tactics and gear... and they were yelling..." I turn to face her, eyebrows raised, head pounding. "You think it was the cops themselves the whole time?"

"Yes!" She laughs and there's a manic edge to her voice. "Think about it. Who has the most to lose in this situation? The police! They're trying to protect their own."

"What's your theory then? The cops just rolled up and murdered those cartel guys out of nowhere? I don't get it."

She shakes her head. "I think they went in for a drug bust. I bet they didn't realize there were so many men inside and there weren't any actual drugs. I think they kicked down that door expecting to find some heroin or cocaine or whatever, and instead, the cartel guys started shooting, and the cops shot back, and a lot of men died inside. It was a bloodbath, like the cops ran in there and executed everyone, because they kind of did. And because the whole damn country hates the police

right now, they decided to cover it up, especially when a very convenient fall guy appeared out of nowhere. They bought off all the other employees but didn't get to Wally before Detective Vance did her little interview."

"But they got to him eventually, that's why he was so scared." A cold rage rolls down my spine. "The cops murdered those cartel members and instead of calling it self-defense and making it public, they decide to toss Nicolas under the bus and blamed him for it. All for fucking *public relations*."

"Exactly. They paid off everyone working and threatened the rest. They made the interview Misty did with Wally disappear. Misty knows what happened, but she's a cop too, so who's she going to side with?"

"Fuck." I shake my head. "That's it then. The blue fucking wall. They're closing ranks to protect themselves. They're going to let Nicolas rot in prison to avoid some bad fucking headlines."

"*Really* bad headlines, but yeah, pretty much."

I pace back and forth, feeling about the way Sara looks. My whole life, cops have been fucking with me, bending the law to fit their narrative, and none of this is surprising but it's all so ugly and bleak. "I shouldn't be so fucking mad, but god damn, it's disgusting. They screwed up, they rolled into a bad situation and made it worse, and they refuse to face any scrutiny over it. And some expendable, worthless criminal gets to go away for life."

"Angelo," Sara says softly.

The anger is white-hot now, nearly overwhelming. "No, you heard that piece of shit detective. Nicolas didn't kill those cartel guys, but he's not innocent, so why not throw him away? That's how they see all of us, including me. Yeah, I know, don't give me that fucking look. We break the law and that makes us monsters. We know the risks, right? But you're right, we do know the risks, and we assume that if we're going down, it's for something we actually did, not some trumped-up bullshit, all because we're worthless trash. All because the

world we were born into demands blood and sacrifice if we're going to get a piece of anything."

"Angelo," Sara says, harder this time, and comes toward me. "You're not worthless trash."

I stare at her and I'm not sure if she knows what she's saying, but I close the distance between us. She sucks in a breath as she backs away and bumps up against the wall. I pin her there, staring into her eyes, anger raging in my chest like a forest fire.

"I know I'm not," I say and my lips are so close to hers. "I know Nicolas isn't either. I know what I've had to do just to survive, all because of the shit circumstances I was born into. I know I'm not a monster, but do you?"

She says nothing for long, painful seconds. "What do you want from me, Angelo?"

"I want you to admit that the supposed good guys are going to throw an innocent man behind bars for life. I want you to understand that there is no black and no white but an ugly shade of gray. Nothing's obvious, nothing's certain, and you can keep on thinking that my guys and my people and I are all monsters, but the real monsters are killing with no repercussions and ruining lives to cover it all up."

"I know that, okay?" Her voice is angry, defiant. "You think I don't see it?"

"I think you're so poisoned by your parents that you don't know what you see."

She shoves me back, both hands on my chest. She heaves, glaring at me, teeth clenched together. "Don't bring them into this."

"Fine," I say and move right back in front of her. She sucks in sharply and her fingers dig into my arms. "Tell me you don't want this. Go ahead, say the words. I'm sick of dancing around how I feel."

"How do you feel?" she whispers.

"I want you. I've wanted you since the second I saw you."

“I don’t know what to do with that.”

I tilt her chin. I stare into her eyes. “Want can turn into more. I can feel it. Can you?”

She says nothing. Her lips part. Those perfect lips. Her small, white teeth. Her scared, sad eyes. I lean closer and she closes the gap between us.

I kiss her hard and grip her hips and hold her against me, tired of pretending like this isn’t all I think about, like she’s not the whole reason I can’t let go.

Chapter 21

Sara

I hate the way he looked at me. I hate the pain in his voice. I hate how he flinches and grabs his ribs when he stands up too fast and most of all I hate the stupid looping voices in my head, the voices of my parents and everyone like them, my teachers, my babysitters, the voices of all the people that think they know better telling me to get away from this man, that Angelo's poison, that he'll kill me if I let him.

But if poison tastes this good then I'll drink it all down and die happy.

He gathers me up and pulls me into the bedroom. My top comes off, my pants. His mouth and hands explore my skin, moving down my neck, to my breasts, to my hips. He shoves me onto the bed and licks my nipples before kneeling down before me.

I moan as his tongue laps me top to bottom and dig my fingers into his hair.

I should be scared of him. This man is everything I was taught to fear and to avoid. At Blackwoods, back when I was an undergrad, Brice and Robyn and I tried our best to stay far away from the dark side of the college. From the gangsters, the thugs, the kids with dirty money. I thought I was so much better than them. My hands were clean.

But nothing's clean.

Nothing's right.

There's only people trying their best under bad circumstances.

There's only what feels good.

There's only this, with Angelo here in the bedroom, his mouth between my legs, the knee-shaking pleasure, the wetness of his lips and tongue on my soaking pussy. It's animalistic, it's intense, it's pure.

This is all I want.

The world goes away. All those voices are silenced. In that silence, I feel him fill the void, the darkness where I've hidden myself away. His moans, his licks, his wet noises as he sucks me. Those cover me, wrap me up, let me float in pleasure and joy. I whimper for him and he growls, loving it. His fingers sink inside of me and I roll my hips, pushing my clit against his thumb as he comes up and kisses me. I taste pussy on his lips. My own taste on his tongue.

"When I wake in the morning, this is what I think about," he whispers as his fingers keep going, in and out, fucking me to my rhythm as my hips work. Sweat rolls down my back. My breasts shake with each gasping breath. "I roll onto my side and think about you there next to me. I think about kissing your throat, holding you down, fingers deep between your legs just like this. I love the way you move your body, the moans you make, the pleasure in your eyes."

"Angelo," I groan and lean forward. I bite his lower lip. "Please."

He knows what I want. I help him undress, trying to be as gentle as I can, but I'm impatient. Ugly, yellowing bruises mottle his chest and side, and I touch them gently, running my fingers over their misshapen lines. I kiss him slowly, along his wounded and mangled skin before I push him back onto the mattress.

"Oh, fuck," he whispers as I stroke his cock and take him into my mouth. I roll my tongue along his tip and taste his precum before sliding him deeper into my throat. I gag and pull back, wiggling my hips, losing my mind. The way he looks at me drives me crazy and throws me to a level I never knew existed. I want his man, I want him so badly it hurts.

And I don't care anymore.

I don't care about the voices, about the disapproval in my mother's eyes, about the disgust on my father's face. I don't care if I'm letting them down or wasting my potential or any number of ways I could fail. I don't care, not anymore.

This is mine. This is all mine.

I straddle Angelo. His shaft is dripping with my spit as I arch my back. His hands grip my ass and I slide back, taking him inside. I shudder, moan, and he tries to sit up.

I push him back down. "You're hurt," I say and move up and back slowly. "Let me."

"You have no idea how hard it is to hold back right now."

"Good." I grin at him and keep going. "I like that you're suffering."

"You're sick," he says and pulls my hair. "You like that this hurts? You like what you do to me?"

"I love it," I gasp as he thrusts into me hard. I ride faster, working my hips, and he slaps my ass hard once, twice, three times. "More," I whisper, and he spanks me as I lean forward, riding him up and down, bucking my hips. I'm breathless and moaning and panting in his ear and he's moaning right back.

The noises this man makes, the sound of our bodies coming together, it's driving me wild. This is what I need, what I want, and I don't care if it's wrong. I don't care if we're from two different worlds.

Want could turn into love.

Want could turn into so, so much more than just love.

He fucks me deep. I ride faster, faster. "You feel like fucking heaven," he whispers. "Your slick fucking cunt sliding up and down my cock. I love splitting you in half. God, I want to fill you, I want to come inside of you, I want to make you scream my name. I want you to come for me, beautiful girl, you lovely girl, I want you to come and scream and moan and feel me deep between your legs."

“Angelo,” I groan and I feel it right there. I keep going, dragging my clit against him, taking his cock as deep as I can go, getting so close. “I want to feel you,” I moan. “Pull my hair. Fuck me. Fuck me, Angelo.”

He growls, yanks my hair, and he rips into my pussy. I gasp, back arching, and I come in a wild cascade of intensity. I come and come, and it feels like it lasts forever, until his own orgasm fills me with a lovely, perfect warmth. I bite his lip and when we’re both finished, I collapse beside him, panting and sweating from all that hard work, and glowing with a beautiful pride.

“Good girl,” he says and pats my ass. “Good fucking girl.”

“Did I hurt your ribs? I didn’t mean to push you, I just got a little carried away.”

He laughs and kisses me. “I’m fine.”

“Good.” I snuggle close to him, grinning from ear to ear, feeling lighter than I’ve felt in a really long time. “You were right, you know. What you said to me.”

“When? I say a lot of really smart, insightful things.”

“You said I needed a release.”

He laughs and squeezes my ass. “That’s all?”

I shrug, nuzzling against him, wanting to crawl into his lap but afraid of injuring his broken rib. I feel so good, so vulnerable, and that scares the hell out of me but it’s also exciting. For so long, I’ve let the expectations of others wrap me in a kind of armor. It’s been a way to keep me safe, a way to keep a distance from anything that might hurt me.

But it also holds me back.

It’s an excuse. It’s a way to avoid getting hurt. If I listen to my parents and do what I’m *supposed* to do, then whatever goes wrong isn’t my fault. I did everything right. I followed the rules. If things still don’t work, how could anyone blame me?

But this, right here, lying in bed with this man, with this criminal, this is all me. This is my choice, pure and simple. If this goes wrong, it’ll be my mistake, and that’s strangely

exhilarating. For the first time in a long time, I want to make my own mistakes. I want to let down my walls.

I want this. I want Angelo.

And want could turn into more.

Maybe into love.

I kiss him and he kisses me, and we don't say anything, not for a while at least, because I've already said enough.

Chapter 22

Sara

I get dressed. Angelo takes a shower. “Gotta wash off that fucking fancy Oak Club,” he grumbles as he turns on the water.

I put on sweats and head into the living room, thinking about room service, when the phone rings. I frown at it, not sure what to do, since I’ve never actually heard it before, but decide to go over and answer.

“Ah, yes, Mrs. Fabbri.” I smile to myself. That’s Angelo’s last name—they must think we’re together. “You have a visitor down at the front desk. He says he’s your father.”

My blood runs cold.

“My... father?”

“Yes, ma’am. Shall I send him up?” I can’t speak. My mouth opens and closes. How did he find me here? What the hell is he doing, showing up at our hotel at eight in the evening? “Ma’am?”

“Yes, uh, yes, send him up.”

“Gladly. Thank you.” The front desk manager hangs up with a click.

I stand there, feeling overwhelmed, and a sense of panic starts to rise in my chest.

Dad knows I’m staying in a hotel with Angelo.

Panic turns to horror.

Dad knows I’m *here*, in a room, with *Angelo*.

The terror overwhelms me and I can't move. I can't do anything but stare at the door. Dad's coming, right now, he's coming. Right after I had sex with Angelo, my Dad is coming to visit, and I don't know why. I'm so afraid of what he's going to say and what he's going to make me think, and I suddenly want to call the front desk back and beg them not to let my father come up here.

But it's too late. I hear footsteps outside above the drone of the shower in the other room.

He knocks twice and I move forward woodenly.

"Hello, Sara," Dad says, and I open the door a crack. "I wasn't sure you'd let me come up."

"Dad. How did... what are you... what's happening right now?"

His lips press into a tight line. "I told your friend Robyn that there's a medical emergency and that I needed to speak with you right away. She told me that you've been staying here, at this hotel."

Robyn. Shit. "Is there an emergency. Is Mom—?"

"No, Sara, everything is okay. Except for you."

I'm so mad I could scream. "You lied?"

"Not exactly. There *is* a medical issue, and besides, I did what was necessary. You weren't at your own apartment. I checked, multiple times, and you simply weren't there anymore. I had to find my own daughter."

"Dad, you could've just asked me."

"And, what, let you mislead me?"

"Funny, considering."

He gives me a harsh smile. "We need to talk."

I swallow a lump in my throat and step aside. Dad breezes into the room and looks around. I'm suddenly very aware that Angelo's been using the couch as a bed. There's a folded blanket, a few pillows. It's obvious I'm not alone in here, and I can feel Dad's disapproval growing.

“Can I get you something?” I ask, feeling stupid and not sure what else to do.

He slowly turns to me. “You’re staying with him, aren’t you?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Tell me what to think then.”

I clear my throat. How can I explain this to him without sounding insane? “You know the case I’m working on is dangerous.”

“I was under the impression that it’s unsavory. But dangerous?” He makes a face. “What have you gotten yourself into, Sara?”

“Angelo’s just... he’s a friend and he’s helping me. He’s keeping me safe.”

“Oh, honey, this is unacceptable. It’s simply unacceptable. How could you?”

“Dad, please, before you rush to judgment—”

“You’re staying in a hotel room with a goddamn *criminal*, Sara. My daughter, my only child, is sharing a bed—”

“We’re not sharing—”

“—my only daughter is living with a goddamn gangster. Tell me why I shouldn’t be upset. This is embarrassing. This is mortifying. Can you imagine how this is going to look?”

I open my mouth to apologize—

And stop myself.

Why the hell do I care how it’s going to look? What does it matter to me if Dad is embarrassed? So what if his judgmental asshole friends at that snooty horrible club think his daughter is a tramp or whatever. None of that matters, not anymore.

“This is my decision. This is my life. If you don’t like it, you can walk out of that door.” I stand aside and gesture. “Go ahead. Leave.”

Dad’s face twists with rage.

I've never stood up to him before. My head's dizzy and my heart's going on overdrive. I've never wanted to deny him, and for so long I thought my father was perfect, or at least that he knew the right way to live. I thought if I could only meet his exacting standards, I'd finally be happy. I wanted success and money and prestige and everything he's managed to build, and I wanted his love and approval.

I wanted to be worthy of my famous surgeon father.

Now all I want is to be left alone.

"You don't understand what's going on here," Dad says softly like a white-hot fire crackling through the room. "I *know*, Sara."

"You know what?"

"I know that you're pregnant."

My mouth opens. I feel like I've been hit with a truck. I try to find words. But I don't know words anymore. I don't know how to move, how to think. My hands cover my belly instinctively and I try to make sense of what he just said but it's like a black hole in my brain.

This can't be happening.

This isn't possible.

I haven't told anyone. I've kept this a total secret from my friends, from my employers, from absolutely everyone in my life. Nobody knows, not even Angelo, the father.

Except Dad.

"How?" I whisper, and I feel like I'm going to fall apart.

He sneers at me and shakes his head. "I ran into Dr. Bernetti at a conference a week ago, and you know what she said? She said, *congratulations on your grandchild, you must be so excited*. I pretended like I knew what she was talking about, but can you imagine how I felt? I thought she must be wrong, she must be confused, but she wasn't, was she? My own daughter, pregnant. And I didn't know."

Dr. Bernetti. Oh, god. My OB. And if my father wasn't sure before, I just confirmed it for him. She was the only other person in the entire world that knows. She happened to run into my father and one small comment, one tiny breach of ethics and trust, and now—

I feel like I'm falling into a pit.

Dad comes closer. He looks like he's ten feet tall and growing bigger. "Your life is going to end, Sara, and any freedom you once had is finished. You can't take care of a child and still work at Klein and Houndson, and forget about meeting with friends for drinks or going out to dinner or any of the other minor pleasures you might have in your life. That's all gone now. You have no clue what you've done. How far along are you?"

"About ten weeks now," I whisper.

He groans. "Ten weeks. My god. You're almost at the end of your first trimester for fuck's—But no, it's not too late. You can still take care of this. You can solve this problem and you can still have the life you've always wanted, if only—"

The door to the bedroom slams open and Angelo storms out. He's in a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, his hair soaking wet. "No," he roars, and his eyes are wild as he advances on my dad. "No, no, no, that's *my* fucking baby, that's *my* child, and you're not going to make her *solve* anything you sick, twisted piece of shit."

Angelo looks like a crazed rhino ready to charge.

My father stands his ground.

I stagger back, heart racing. Angelo stands seething near the bedroom door while my father tilts his chin up, his eyes gleaming horribly, an awful smile on his lips. I look between the two men, from beautiful and terrible Angelo to my father, the man I've always looked up to, always respected, my rock.

"*Your* baby?" Dad asks quietly, and Angelo steps forward, hands curled into fists. "Do you really think you can claim ownership to something you accidentally squirted into my daughter? You have no rights to her and no rights to this baby."

You'll only drag them down to your pathetic level at best, killed at worst. Or perhaps dying now would be a mercy over letting you anywhere near my grandchild."

"You piece of shit," Angelo snarls. "You motherfucking—"

"Please," I choke out. Tears roll down my cheeks, fat and hot. I don't remember starting to cry, but I can't stop it now. I manage to keep the sobbing under control, but the tears won't stop flowing. "I didn't want you to find out like this."

Dad seems surprised. His mouth opens, and he looks from me to Angelo and back again—and he laughs, a bitter and ugly sound. "He didn't know," he says. "She kept it from you."

Angelo's jaw works. He stares at me now, eyes beseeching, pleading for something, but I don't know what.

"I didn't want to get you involved," I say and wipe my face but it doesn't help. More tears replace whatever I manage to push aside. "I didn't think you'd want anything to do with—this." I put my hands over my stomach.

"How could you have known that?" he asks quietly. "That's my baby, how could you have thought I wouldn't want to be in your life?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Dad says before I can reply. "Look at you, boy. You're a walking disaster. You're a criminal and you're basically one misstep away from being thrown in jail for the rest of your worthless life. Can you really blame her for want to protect her baby from you? Do you want your child to grow up with a father behind bars?"

"My baby," Angelo whispers. He's staring at me, ignoring my father, and it's killing me, it's like a knife's jammed down my throat and I want to scream it out but I can't. "You've known all this time, haven't you?"

I nod, lip trembling. "I thought I was doing the right thing. Not for me, but... for the baby."

"Of course she did," Dad says, coming closer. "She wants to protect her child from you. Can you really stand there and say you'd make a good parent? Do you really think you'd be the

father my grandchild deserves? You know what you are, Angelo. Why make things harder for her?"

Angelo stares at me for a beat longer before taking a step back. He turns to my father, and he's trembling, his face red, barely holding back his rage. "You don't know me. You don't know what I am."

"I know that I can help my daughter more than you ever could. I've raised a child once already, and I can raise a second. I have money, I have security, I have stability. What can you offer?"

"I don't—" Angelo starts and stops himself. "You just told her you want to *handle* this problem. I know what that means. You want to kill my baby. I'm the father. That's my baby." His eyes move to my stomach and his lips are pulled back.

But I don't want him to look at me,

I never wanted this to happen. I knew putting off telling him the truth while also getting closer to him would backfire eventually, but I kept hoping something would happen to take the decision out of my hands. I kept thinking, maybe I'll tell him, maybe I'll let him find out, and it would be ugly and hard, but we'd get past it and move on eventually. Only I didn't know how he'd handle finding out the truth, and I was afraid that it would only push him away when whatever we have brewing between us is still so fragile.

I didn't want to risk losing him.

Now I see how stupid and naive I've been.

Angelo doesn't want to be a father. He barely wants to be a boyfriend. This man is wild, careless, beautiful and incredible, but also dangerous. Dad's words keep playing in my ears. I don't want my child to grow up in the shadow of his gangster father. I don't want my child to visit their father in prison.

I want my child to have a future like mine.

"I can help you," Dad says softly and puts a hand on my shoulder. I flinch, but I don't pull away. I close my eyes, crying. "Come home with me. Your mother and I are disappointed, but we love you, Sara. We can help with this

baby, but only if you swear you won't speak to this man ever again. We'll hire nannies, we'll get you diapers and bottles and a crib, and you won't have to give up your life for this baby if that's the decision you make. But please, honey. Let me help you."

I open my eyes again and Angelo's standing there, jaw tight, looking at me like he's going to break.

And I know how he feels.

Because I'm feeling it too.

I think I'm going to crack open and shatter. It's like there are two halves of me, each fighting for control.

There's the Sara I've always been, the rule-follower, the good girl, the straight-A student, the honor roll overachiever, the girl that wants to go home and sleep in her old bed and let Mom and Dad tell her what to do.

Then there's the new Sara, the one that's falling for this strange gangster, this violent thug, this clever and funny and gorgeous man, the new Sara that wants to be free of her old life, that wants to find something new and perfect and all *mine*.

Both parts of me want opposite things and I don't know how I can survive.

"That's too much," I say and wipes my eyes. "I can't—he's the father. I can't just cut him off."

"You can," Dad says. "If you want your baby to have a chance, you will."

"Sara," Angelo says, and he opens his mouth as if he wants to explain something, as if he wants to beg me to stay with him—and I want him to say it, I want him to ask me to stay, to ask me to give him a chance, to beg and plead and make me believe him, and if he does then I will, I know I will—but the words dissipate and he only shakes his head. "Don't give up your life for me."

My stomach twists and the tears come faster, heavier, thicker. I want to drown in these tears. The room blurs, and I never want to see the world again.

“See, honey? Even he knows this is the right choice.” Dad steers me away toward the door. “Come on. Come home. We’ll talk about your options and we’ll take care of everything. All you have to do is leave him behind.”

Leave Angelo behind.

The moment things were beginning to turn—now I’m walking away.

But I’m doing it for my baby.

I don’t want this. If I could have it my way, I’d stay here in this hotel with Angelo and explore this new version of myself that’s only just beginning to blossom. I want to revel in freedom with him, in a physical and visceral experience I’ve never felt before. I want him and all of him, unmediated, closer than I ever thought possible.

But I have to think of my baby now, and Dad’s right.

My parents can give me stability. They’ve been through this before—they know what to expect.

They can help me, and I won’t pretend like I’m not scared of what’s going to happen.

To my body, to my life.

Even Angelo knows it’s true.

I shouldn’t give up my dreams for him.

Dad keeps steering me and I keep walking, moving woodenly. I want to turn back and go to Angelo, to kiss him, hug him, tell him that everything’s okay, tell him that he can be the father of this child if that’s what he wants, but I can’t bring myself to do it.

All my life, I’ve tried to do what’s right.

I’ve followed the rules.

Even when the rules chafe against who I really am.

I’ve done it because it’s *right*.

And I’ll do it again now.

Right now, at my lowest, at my worst, I’ll do the right thing.

For my baby.
Even if it kills me.

Chapter 23

Sara

My old bedroom has pink walls.

The desk is the same. The bed is the same. It's amazing how much my parents didn't bother to change things. My ancient CDs are still in the closet along with my iPod and the typewriter I bought at a flea market when I was fifteen and thought I wanted to be a poet. Old jeans are piled on top of a shelf.

It only takes three days at home with my parents until I start to feel like I never left.

Like I'm the same girl I was back when I last lived here.

The first morning was the worst. My mother's quiet scorn could've burned a hole in a steel wall. She kept looking at me and shaking her head and mumbling about babies out of wedlock. I wanted to melt into the floor and never come back.

Except she also made me doctor's appointments. She got me prenatal vitamins and asked how I felt and talked about her own pregnancy and what I can expect.

Her disappointment is palpable, but it also feels good to have someone around that understands what I'm going through.

That first morning, I told them in no uncertain terms that I am *not* going to terminate this pregnancy.

I am keeping my baby.

Dad wasn't happy, but Mom seemed more understanding.

And now we have a truce. My parents accept that this baby is coming, but so long as I stay here and listen to their advice, they aren't forcing me to do anything I don't want to do.

I feel like a sullen teenager.

I feel pathetic and stupid, not at all the impressive lawyer I pretended to be.

It's like I've reverted to my old self again.

And I hate it. I hate the way I keep my head down and listen when Mom goes on and on about how distasteful men like Angelo are and how they're all absentee fathers. I despise the condescending way my father explains how my life is going to be different from now on, and how he's the only reason I'll even survive having this baby. I hate feeling like I'm trapped, like I have no other options, like my life isn't exactly my own anymore.

And most of all, I hate thinking about the look on Angelo's face.

The pure rage. The total broken sadness. The pain.

I don't know how long I'll survive here, but I'm trying. For my baby, I'm trying.

My phone rings and I answer right away just to have something to distract me for a few pathetic seconds. I'd talk to anyone right about now. I'd listen to someone explain how my social security number was canceled or how my car's extended warranty is nearly over if it means not thinking about my baby, about Angelo, about everything I'm giving up.

"Sara? Hey, how are you?"

Brice's voice. Warm and slightly concerned. Fear blossoms in my chest. I've been ignoring her calls and texts, like I've been ignoring the dozens of calls and texts from Angelo, and now she finally caught me. I'm terrified of what she's about to say. I betrayed her and Carmine almost as much as I betrayed Angelo.

"Hey, Brice," I say and curl up on my bed. I do my best to keep the terror from my voice. "Sorry I haven't been easy to

get ahold of lately.”

“Yeah, seriously. Where have you been?”

I chew my lip, considering what I should tell her, but I opt for the truth. “I’m home with my parents right now. Things haven’t... they haven’t been going so well.”

Brice is quiet for a second. “Angelo spoke with Carmine.”

“How much do you know?” Dread pits my stomach.

“Mostly everything, I think. Can I come see you? Can we talk?”

I close my eyes. Tears threaten to spill down, but I push them back. “Yeah, I think that’d be a good idea.” I can explain to her. I can make her understand.

“When and where?”

“Come over here, my parents are both out. I’ll text you the address.”

“Sounds good. See you soon.”

I send her a message right away and get changed. I try to look presentable, but the girl staring back in the mirror looks like she’s haunted. I’m a pale specter. I’m a shadow. My face is gaunt, and heavy black bags hang under my eyes.

Brice shows up a half hour later and I lead her through the house and out back. We grab chairs near the pool and sit in the shade as the midafternoon Texas heat pulses all around us.

Brice looks worried and scared, and I can’t blame her.

“Are you doing okay?” she asks. “Angelo told us about, you know, the baby.”

“I’m fine.” I stare down at my lap. I hate that everyone knows now, but it’s not like I could keep it a secret forever. All my life I tried so hard to keep my feelings buried down deep, but now it’s like they’re spilling out for everyone to dissect. “My parents are helping.”

“Right. They’re helping.” She clears her throat. “Sweetie, are you sure you want to be here?”

“I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

She sighs and moves closer. “Honey, you could come stay with me and Carmine if you don’t want to be alone. We could —”

“No,” I say more sharply than I’d intended. “No, it’s just that, you’re too close to Angelo and I don’t want to see him right now.”

“Right, okay.” Brice chews on her thumbnail. “Do you want to talk about him?”

I close my eyes. I very much do *not* want to talk about Angelo, but I know I can’t avoid it. Only I don’t know what to say, especially to Brice.

How can I explain that I’m afraid of him? Afraid of how he makes me feel? Afraid of letting him into my baby’s life?

She married her Angelo.

Her husband Carmine is the Don of the Scavo Famiglia, and he’s equally as dangerous and connected as Angelo if not more so, and to tell her that I can’t let Angelo in my baby’s life because he’s a gangster, that I’m afraid he’s not fit to be a father—that would be like insulting every choice she’s ever made.

And yet it’s the truth.

“It’s not easy,” I say after a long pause. “It’s not simple either.”

She laughs quietly. “I know that. Believe me, if anyone understands what you’re dealing with right now, it’s me. Are you going to talk to Angelo about, you know, the baby?”

“No. I don’t know. I just—” I clear my throat and stare at the pool. “I don’t want him in the baby’s life. Or at least I didn’t when we were still basically strangers and he was just a one-night stand. Now I don’t know what I really want and I’m terrified. I’m so scared of—” I stop myself.

“You’re scared of what he is,” she says softly.

I glance at her. “You’re not mad at me?”

“Why would I be?” She sounds surprised.

“You know, because—” I clear my throat. “You married Carmine. I’m running away from Angelo. And it’s like—”

Brice leans forward to put a hand on my knee. “Sweetie, stop it, okay? It’s totally fine. My relationship with Carmine isn’t the same as your relationship with Angelo. We’re all different people, even if Carmine and Angelo have some... similarities.”

“I just don’t know how you did it. How you took that leap.”

“I wasn’t pregnant for one. That helped a lot.” Her smile is sad. “And I almost didn’t. I was scared, and alone, and angry, just like you are.”

“How did you come back from that? I feel like I’m trapped, like no matter what I do, I’m making a mistake.” I sit up straight and rub my eyes, willing myself not to start crying again. I’ve cried more these past few days than I had in my entire life combined. “I could stay here and let my parents help me, and maybe that would be the best thing for my baby. I know growing up without a father wouldn’t be great—but maybe I’ll meet someone else. Or I could go with Angelo, take a risk, live a little, and he might even turn out to be a good partner. But I don’t know, and whatever I decide isn’t only about what I want anymore.”

“It’s not easy,” Brice says. “You have more than yourself to think about. I really don’t know what I would’ve done if I had been in your position.”

I collapse back against the chair. A strange relief floods through me. “I thought you’d be so mad,” I say and laugh stupidly. “I’m so happy you’re not.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Brice moves closer and hugs me. I’ve never been the emotional type, and I feel so pathetic every time a lump forms in my throat and I have to swallow it away or else end up sobbing again. Brice holds me tighter and I hug her back and I stay like that for a minute, because she’s right, she’s the only person in the whole world that comes close to understanding what I feel right now.

“I just need to stay here for a while longer and figure out what to do,” I say and wipe my eyes. “Fortunately, work is being flexible for once.”

“Well, speaking of work—” Brice shifts uncomfortably. “Carmine wanted me to ask you about the case.”

“I think I need to step aside,” I say and look down at my hands. “Tell Carmine I’m sorry.”

“Are you sure?”

“I did a lot of the legwork already. Angelo knows the details. Bring what I found to some other lawyer, someone expensive. They’ll get Nicolas out of trouble.”

“We could do that,” Brice says and sighs as she leans back. “But don’t you want to get credit?”

“I just want to get through today,” I say with a laugh.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do when it comes to Angelo, but I do think you’re making a mistake with the case.”

“Why? It feels like I’ve gotten as far as I can go. Maybe if I weren’t pregnant, and maybe if things weren’t so weird with Angelo—but that’s not where we’re at.”

“From what I understand, this whole thing is massive. Police corruption, murder, coverups... this is the sort of case that can make an entire career. You say you want to do what’s best for the baby, and I believe you. Wouldn’t it be good if you took this thing all the way?”

“That’s why I took it in the first place,” I admit. “I hoped that doing something big would get me noticed in the office. But now I’m thinking it’s just not worth it anymore.”

“Don’t walk away. Do what you need to do with Angelo, but finish the case. Bring Nicolas home.”

I rub my face with both hands. I don’t *want* to give up. At this point, the case is the only thing keeping me going, giving me purpose. I helped crack it alongside Angelo, and I want to be the one that negotiates with those rotten cops to bring Nicolas back home. He deserves freedom, and the longer we wait to confront the prosecutor with this new evidence, the longer he

stays behind bars. Vance's partner is wrong—the kid doesn't belong in jail for something he didn't do even if he might commit a crime equally heinous in the future. That's not how our criminal justice system works. Innocent until proven guilty and not the other way around. We don't punish people for something they haven't done yet.

I glance at her. “You're killing me here, you know that?”

“Good. I think it'd be a huge mistake you'd regret forever if you let someone else finish what you started.”

“You say that with such confidence.”

“Well, I *am* very smart.”

“Fine.” I wave a hand at her like I'm trying to swat a fly. “I'll stay on, okay? But tell Carmine that Angelo has to go. I'll finish things on my end, but I'm not working with him anymore.”

“Understood. I'll pass that along. And, Sara, if you need anything, anything at all, you can come to me. Carmine would be happy to give you whatever.”

I smile at her and squeeze her hand. I can't say anything because I'm afraid I'll start crying again.

That offer means more than she knows. I feel so alone right now, so disconnected from my old life, like I've given up the girl I used to be and the girl I wanted to be to embrace this new person totally devoid of a safety net and friends and anything resembling security and stability and joy.

I'm a shell, but knowing Brice is here for me helps.

We chat for a little bit longer but she leaves after that. I hug her and she promises things will be okay. I smile and nod and try to keep my chin up because that's what Sara always does, but inside I feel like I'm breaking apart.

For one brief moment, I had more.

There was Angelo, and there was whatever we had developing—desire, lust, something bigger, broader, deeper. Something that encompassed all of me and more. Something that felt *good*, something I've never had before.

Now it's gone and it's like I sacrificed a piece of myself and ended up back where I started.

Back under my parents. Afraid, worried, lost, and embarrassed.

The ice queen is dead. The frigid princess is no more.

I'm one massive mistake, and I don't know if I'll ever come back from this.

But there's still the case. There's still Nicolas. And there's still the corrupt cops that deserve to pay for what they did.

I can hold myself together at least long enough to see this through.

Chapter 24

Angelo

“**D**rink this. You’re not going to like what I have to say.”

Carmine shoves a whiskey into my hand. I take it, throw it back, and savor the sharp bite as it slides down my throat. He grabs the glass and puts it down on a table before steering me into a chair in front of the fire. We’re in his gorgeous apartment in the office with its windows overlooking downtown Dallas and the gently crackling flames despite the Texas heat.

It’s been three days since Sara went home with her father. Three horrible days. I haven’t heard a word from her despite the calls and the texts, and I’m close to marching over to their house myself and dragging her back to the hotel.

But instead, Carmine told me to meet him here, and now I wish I hadn’t shown up.

“She wants you off the case.” He stands in front of me, arms crossed over his chest, staring me in the face. That’s Carmine: no bullshit, no dancing around the topic, just straight to the bad news.

I sit up straighter. “Sara wants me off the case,” I repeat like I can barely understand what he’s saying.

“You’ve done good work, Angelo. I know you want to get your boy out of prison—”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He flinches slightly, but he had to have known I was going to say that. There's no way in hell I'm going to turn around and head back to Philly, not when Nicolas is still behind bars. I don't care what kind of personal shit I have going on with Sara, I'm not going to leave my soldier no matter what.

But Carmine shakes his head. "You've done everything you can do and now it's time to step aside and let the process complete itself."

"Are you fucking joking right now?"

"Angelo. I'm not your friend right now. I'm your fucking Don."

That makes me sit forward. I show him my teeth. "Then as my *Don* you should tell the little lawyer to suck it the fuck up and deal with her problems. I am *not* going home."

"Angelo—"

I stand up and storm to the windows. I'm seething, boiling over with rage. This anger is misdirected—Carmine doesn't deserve my ire right now and I know it—but I can't help myself. I've been living with low levels of mind-numbing anger ever since Sara's father showed up at the hotel and I found out the truth.

She's pregnant with my baby.

Even now, even three days later, I still can't believe it. We first slept together a couple months ago at Brice and Carmine's wedding, and she's been pregnant this whole time. From the start, she's been hiding the truth about the baby, maybe hoping I'd give up and go away, maybe thinking everything would work itself out.

But it hasn't. If anything, things are so much worse.

Because now I'm attached to her, and I'm attached to my baby.

"You can't ask me to leave, Carmine." I stare at the clouds, at the buildings, at the cars moving down below like beetles crawling in the grass. "You know you can't."

"I can and I am."

“That’s *my* baby.” I turn on him, hands curled into fists, barely holding myself back. “You understand that, don’t you? Sara’s carrying my child, and her fucking family is turning her against me. We had something—”

“Angelo, listen—”

“We *had* something,” I snarl at him. “We were so fucking close. And now all that’s ruined, all because she kept this secret from me. What the hell was she thinking, Carmine? What the fuck did she think was going to happen, like I wouldn’t notice it when she suddenly had a child running around?”

Carmine holds up his hands and lets out a long sigh. “I don’t know what she was thinking, brother. I really, really don’t. But you’re on the edge right now and I’m afraid you’re going to do something stupid.”

I work my jaw, glaring at him, but I know he’s right. I have this fantasy where I roll up to Sara’s family house and murder her father in cold blood. In my fantasy, I shoot him in the skull, throw Sara over my shoulder, and carry her back to the hotel where we live happily ever after. I raise my baby, she becomes my wife, Nicolas gets released from prison, and the cops involved in the coverup all go to prison.

It’s absurd and it’s never going to happen.

But some sick part of me wants to do it.

“She was afraid,” he says and sits down heavily. He gestures for me to join him, and though I hesitate at first, eventually I take the chair by his side. “You know people do dumb shit when they’re afraid.”

“I could’ve helped her. I could’ve done something, but she didn’t give me a chance.”

“That’s just it, people don’t always make rational decisions. You know that better than most.”

I grunt and stare at my hands, at my scarred and callused hands. I’ve seen plenty of irrational in my day—plenty of fear, plenty of anger. I’ve felt it all, over and over.

“She’s not taking my calls,” I say and still can’t look at him. “She’s not even giving me a chance to explain. If she’d listen, I could tell her—I could make her see—”

“What would you tell her?” Carmine asks. “Would you ask her to marry you? Do the right thing?”

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“Do you want to be a father? Do you want this baby? No, don’t look at me like this, be fucking honest. Before you knew she was pregnant, did you want to have a child?”

“No,” I say and speaking that word out loud nearly kills me. “I never thought I could ever be good enough for that.”

“And there’s your problem. If *you* don’t believe it, who’s going to?”

I look up at the ceiling and don’t reply. I hoped Sara would’ve, but now I see how naive and fucking stupid that was.

Wanting could turn into more—

But only when we can see each other clearly, and I don’t think Sara’s ever really looked at me.

Not really.

All she can see is the gangster, the pain, the violence. She doesn’t see my loyalty, my protectiveness, my deep caring, my abiding love for everyone in my family, everything I sacrificed for my grandmother, everything I sacrificed for Carmine, and everything I’d sacrifice for Sara and my baby.

She only sees the tattoos, the bruises, the pain.

“I thought we were starting to build something,” I tell him. “But it was resting on a shaky foundation.”

“I know, and I’m sorry things worked out this way. But Sara doesn’t want you involved in the case anymore, and if I’m going to convince her to see this through then I have to respect that. I need you to back down, Angelo.”

“I’m not going back to Philly. Not until Nicolas is out.”

“Fine. You can stay. But you need to leave Sara alone, at least until she decides she wants to talk.” I say nothing and let my silence speak for me. It stretches and finally Carmine rubs his face and stands. “You’re a pain in my ass, Angelo. You know that?”

“I’m aware.”

“All right. Get out of here. Say hello to Brice on the way out. And Angelo, think about things and don’t do something stupid.”

I nod and head into the hall. Carmine stands behind, staring into the fire. I find Brice in the kitchen, kiss her cheek, make short small talk, then ride the elevator to the ground floor.

Once outside, I stand in the heat on the sidewalk and look out at the street.

An ugly, sinking feeling lodges itself in my gut.

There’s no way I can leave Sara alone. Not while she’s in the clutches of her parents. Not while she’s carrying my baby. I’m staying here for Nicolas, but I’m also staying here for her.

For the first time in my life, I’m going to go against my Don’s wishes, because Sara and my baby matter more than anything else now.

It took me a while to come to grips with everything. At first, I felt desolate and broken like I’d never come back from this. I thought about leaving, thought about forgetting her, thought about giving her what she wanted and pretending like she didn’t exist.

But that’s what everyone expects from a guy like me.

A guy that doesn’t step up. A guy that ignores his family, that doesn’t take responsibility for his own mistakes.

I’m not that guy. I refuse to be what everyone thinks I am.

Sara is mine. That baby is mine. And I’m not giving up on them.

Only I have to find a way to rip her from her parents and make her see me for what I am.

Loyal. Brave. Deeply, madly, stupidly in fucking love with her.

And I don't turn my back on the people I care about.

Chapter 25

Sara

Visiting Nicolas in prison is a lot harder without Angelo, but I refuse to admit that I need him here to keep me calm. I don't need anything from anyone, at least that's what I'm telling myself, even if I keep thinking about Angelo's voice, the way he would stand slightly in front of me like he was shielding me from the world, the way he would check in and make sure I was okay.

Really, I'm so damn terrified all the time, from the moment I wake up to the second I close my eyes at night, and it never goes away.

Nicolas looks better. The bruises are faded and he's sitting up straighter like his ribs aren't bothering him anymore. He seems almost in a good mood as he grins at me from across the table.

"I didn't expect you to show up alone," he says and drums his fingers on the table. "Where's Angelo at?"

"Angelo and I aren't working together anymore." I do my best to keep the nerves from my voice. I expected him to ask and I'm glad we're getting it out of the way up front. "I'm only here to ask you a few questions about what happened."

His eyebrows raise. "You two get in a fight or something? Angelo's got a rough exterior, but he's a good guy on the inside. I doubt anyone else would drop everything to fly down here just to try to pull my ass out of prison."

"Our plans changed, that's all." I sit up straight and give him my best no-bullshit lawyer stare. "If you wouldn't mind, let's

focus on the case, since we don't have a lot of time." I begin asking him questions before he has the chance to push the Angelo thing harder, and he reluctantly starts telling me everything he remembers, starting from the moment he pulled up to the Two Lane and ending with when he left.

There's nothing new. At least his story hasn't changed, which is a good sign. I wasn't sure if I could trust him at first, but the more I get involved in this case, the more I'm sure he got caught up in something *much* bigger than him.

"I wish I had more to say, but that's all," he says, looking slightly more defeated. "I have to admit I'm not feeling great about my chances right now."

"Are you sure you didn't notice anything off about the motel room? Anything at all, no matter how minor?" I want to push him on the crime scene more but I also can't lead him into giving me the answer I want. This is being recorded and if I'm going to use it in court, it has to be perfect.

"There were a lot of bodies and there was a lot of blood." He clears his throat and leans forward. "I told you, I was busy freaking out. I didn't see much. It's kind of hard to take things in when there are, like, five corpses staring at you."

"What about the walls? The carpets? Anything on the tables?"

"Uh, everything was bloody. And..." He trails off, hesitating. "Okay, this could be something. There were bullet holes everywhere, like the place was totally lit up, but there weren't any shell casings. I remember thinking that as I backed out of there. I didn't step on a single one. Someone must've shot, like, a few dozen times, but there wasn't a single casing anywhere."

My heart starts racing. That's it, right there. I try not to let my excitement show as I nod to myself and takes notes. "Where could the casings have gone? Explain like I don't know anything about guns." Which I don't.

"Well, when bullets fire, the back little part of it gets ejected from the gun. The holes in the walls were pretty big, which means the guns were powerful, which means the bullets were

pretty large. A few dozen holes means a few dozen big casings and that many would be impossible to miss. It seems like whoever did that shooting also bent over and picked up the spent casings after it was done.”

I nod to myself and clear my throat. “Okay, that’s good. I’m going to walk through this again. You said there were a lot of holes in the wall?”

“Oh, sure, tons of them.”

“Meaning someone shot a lot of bullets.”

“Right.” He tilts his head. “I mean, there were five dead guys, so—”

“And if there were a lot of bullets, that means there were a lot of bullet casings.”

“True, that’s right.”

“Which means whoever did that crime also spent a lot of time cleaning it up.”

He leans back, his mouth open. “Well, okay, yeah, I hadn’t thought of that. It must’ve taken... I don’t know, it must’ve taken a while to pick each and every one up.”

Adrenaline pumps into my blood. I lean closer to him and lower my voice. “I think whoever did this hit was able to make it disappear. I think they cleaned up their tracks, took their time, really swept the room, before bribing or threatening all the employees at the Two Lane.”

“Motherfuckers,” he whispers back, blinking rapidly. “They know I didn’t do it.”

“I think so.”

“Then that freaking maintenance guy—”

“He lied, Nicolas,” I tell him with a gleam in my eye. I consider showing him the interview Detective Vance did with Wally but decide against it. That’s my smoking gun, the real proof that it wasn’t Nicolas, and if he goes around blabbing to the wrong guys, some jailhouse snitch might ruin this for all of

us. “And I think we can prove it, or at least we can cast enough doubt to get you out of here.”

“Holy shit.” Laughter bubbles up from his chest. “I honestly didn’t think this would happen.” He grins huge, and there’s a renewed excitement and hope in his eyes. “No offense or whatever, I just didn’t think it would happen, that’s all.”

I smile at him and nod like I understand. “I’m not promising anything, but there are too many holes in the story. There’s too much uncertainty. No matter how badly the prosecution wants to pin this on you, I don’t think it’ll stick.”

“Fuck.” He sighs and leans his head back. “You know, I really was starting to think I’d never see the outside again.” He sinks down in his chair with a groan. “It’s going to be good to walk around a free man again.”

“Just hang in there and we’ll get this figured out. Until then, think back to everything you saw in that room and tell me any details you remember, no matter how insignificant. Write them all down if you can.”

“I will.”

I push my chair back and stand.

Nicolas flashes me another charming smile. “Thank you. Seriously.”

“Just doing my job.”

I leave him there. The guards take me back out through the lobby, and I stand on the front steps breathing the fresh air. Back inside, Nicolas is probably being taken to his cell again where he’ll stay for a while longer, at least until I can finally gather all my evidence and get him out.

For a second, I can almost feel like myself again. Following this case, figuring it out, working all the angles—it makes me feel like I’m alive, like I’m smart and capable, like I’m more than just a girl that follows orders and tries not to break any rules. I’m saving someone right now and that’s a good feeling. I’m worth something.

Slowly, I head down the steps. I try not to think about what's waiting for me at home. A pink bedroom, an old desk, a version of myself that I thought I'd grown out of. And my father and my mother, their disappointment, their control, the big quiet house with all my ancient memories. I'm not that girl anymore but I'm also still her and staying in my old room in my old house is slowly warping me back into the shape my parents want.

I slow as I approach my car. I parked way in the back, as far on the other side of the lot as I could, mostly because I wanted to stay in the shade. A big black pick-up truck is parked next to me and the doors pop open when I'm close. Two men get out, and my feet go numb with terror.

Detective John and Mustache stand side by side, staring at me, getting between me and my car.

Nothing happens. Detective John looks tired and pale. Mustache is more or less what I pictured: craggy, thick facial hair, cheap cowboy hat, slim denim jeans, boots. He looks like a walking cliché, like he's about to rope cattle or go eat barbecue.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" I finally ask, breaking the tense silence.

"Depends." Mustache spits on the ground. "What did you tell your client in there?"

"That's between me and him, or have you forgotten about privilege?"

"Fuck privilege," Detective John says. "And fuck you, stuck-up bitch. What did you tell him?" He steps closer and I'm very aware that we're all alone in the parking lot. Even though we're at the far side, we're still within sight of the prison, which means lots of cameras. The guards inside might hear me screaming, and these two aren't stupid enough to hurt me where they'll get caught.

"I didn't tell him about the interview, if that's what you're wondering." I do my best to pull my walls together. I keep my insides frozen and glare at them, mustering all my scorn into

my stare. “What do you think he’d do if he knew the cops were the ones fucking him? That it was your brothers-in-arms that murdered those cartel men?”

“Allegedly,” Mustache says.

“What we did or did not do is none of your concern. I don’t know how many times I have to keep doing this, Sara. But I’m sick of having conversations. Now I’m going to *show* you why you can’t talk.”

He walks toward me. Mustache grins viciously. I back away, hands raised, and drop my briefcase on the ground. It clatters, bounces. “You can’t do this,” I say, heart racing, a sick fear rising in my throat. Oh, god, my baby, if they hurt me, if they beat me, what will happen to my baby? “The prison. There are cameras—”

“You stupid girl,” Detective John says viciously. “You really fucking think we can’t make that go away too? You’re on *our* turf.”

He reaches for me, and I yank away before he can lock his fingers around my arm. My heart’s going wild and all I can think is *my baby, my baby*, as I stagger back, nearly turning my ankle in my low heels. I turn and run, arms working, and Detective John chases, with Mustache on his heels. I’m freaking out, gasping for air, trying to keep it together. If I can reach the lobby, the guards will have to do something—they won’t stand by and watch these men beat me to death—

A car pulls up and slams on its brakes a couple feet away from me. Detective John curses and I stagger, trip, and fall. I catch myself on my hands and gasp as my knee gets skinned and my palms dig into the gravelly asphalt. I turn, look back over my shoulder, and suck in a breath as Angelo gets out of his car, a gun drawn and aimed at Detective John’s chest.

The detectives both freeze, looking horrified, enraged, and afraid.

“Turn around and leave,” Angelo says. His voice is shockingly calm, despite the fact that he’s brandishing a weapon barely fifty feet from a prison.

“You stupid cocksucker,” Detective John growls. “You’re making a mistake.”

“Turn around and leave before I kill you right here and now. You think I can’t get away with it? You think I can’t put two in your chest, one in your partner’s skull, and drive off into Mexico for a few years? You know what I am, Detective. Turn around and leave.”

Detective John’s teeth grind together. Mustache puts a hand on his arm. “Come on,” Mustache says.

“Fuck you,” Detective John spits out. “You’re dead, Angelo. You are *fucking* dead.”

“Leave,” Angelo repeats.

Detective John stands there seething for another second before he lets Mustache pull him away. Both cops walk to their truck, and Angelo remains standing there waiting until they drive off. Only then does he holster his gun and turn to me.

I stare at him, sick to my stomach, in pain and afraid. He walks over and extends a hand.

I stare at it without moving.

“I didn’t want to see you,” I say quietly.

He laughs once sharply. “That’s an interesting way of saying thanks.”

I glare at him, but I take his offered hand and he helps me stand. “Why are you here? What are you doing?”

“If it helps, I wasn’t following you.” His eyes narrow as he looks toward the road. “I was following them.”

I let that sink in. He was tailing Detective John and his little mustache pal, whoever that guy is. Angelo must know how dangerous it is to do something reckless like that, and yet here he is, and I’m glad he did it. Otherwise, I don’t know what would’ve happened to me.

“Thanks for helping,” I say and brush past him. “But I meant it when I told Carmine I don’t want to work with you anymore.”

“Don’t sit on that interview,” Angelo says. I hurry to my car, hands shaking. My stomach churns and my throat feels thick and I’m afraid I’ll vomit on the ground but I manage to unlock my doors. “Whatever you’re planning, do it soon.”

He stands a few feet away like he doesn’t want to come too close. I look back and it breaks my heart—he’s staring at me with a strange intensity, like he can’t look away, like all he wants in the whole world is to walk over and take me in his arms and kiss me.

And a piece of me wants that too.

Except I think of my baby. I think of my future. And I look down at the ground.

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.” I get into the car and shut the door.

He doesn’t move as I start the engine and back out. He watches as I drive away, face twisted in pain. My hands tremble and tears roll down my face, and I hate leaving him like that, especially after what he just did.

For all I know, he saved my life and the life of our child.

No, not *our* child.

My child and mine alone.

I have to keep going. I have to stay the course. I’m doing the right thing—I always do the right thing—no matter how badly it kills me.

Though he’s right.

I’m out of time.

Chapter 26

Angelo

Detective John Bridle is a paranoid bastard.

Steel bars over his windows. A heavy gate over his doors. Multiple cameras around the property.

He lives in a single-family rancher in a nice little neighborhood on the edge of Dallas. Lots of trucks, nicely mowed lawns, neatly trimmed bushes. The sort of place where kids run around during the day.

Except there are no other cars in his driveway. No minivan, no bikes, no toys.

He lives alone. No wife, no family. Strange, for a detective his age, but I know a lot of guys like him.

Guys with deep scars, shallow pockets, and miles of trauma streaming out behind them. The job takes, and it keeps taking, and it rarely gives back. Some men turn to drinking, some turn to worse. Some shrivel up and turn in on themselves, cocooning their minds against the outside world. I think Detective John's one of those, wrapped up in layers and layers of obfuscation and justification to explain the small and large traumas he deals with on a daily basis. I wonder if that's how he got involved in all this.

I wait until it's late, until it's past one in the morning, and jump his back fence. I land quietly and press myself up against the wall, waiting. There's a camera, but all that'll show is a guy in a black ski mask sneaking around. Nothing identifiable, nothing he'll be able to use. Not that I expect him to use it. I head around to the back gate and use my lock pick set to get

the bolt open. The thing with most locks is they can be picked. They're really there to keep out the lazy and the uninformed. Getting it open takes longer than I wanted and all the while I'm thinking about Sara, about the look on her face at the prison, about the fear in her eyes and the sadness and the want.

Like she needed me to come to her. Like she was begging me to cross that line.

But I can't do it, not yet.

She's lucky I was there. I almost didn't follow Detective John and his little shitstain friend Mustache, also known as Detective Danny Allen. I almost thought it would be too much of a risk rolling up to a prison after a couple of crooked cops, but I figured I'd give them a quick drive-by just to see what's going on.

I'm glad I did.

God, those pieces of garbage. I don't know what they would've done, but it wasn't going to be good, and she's pregnant with my baby. I can't risk letting them hurt her, letting them hurt the baby. There's no way in hell I'd allow these sick bastards anywhere near her even if she doesn't want me around.

I'll keep her safe no matter what. I've been through enough in my life to know the only important things in this world are friends and family. I pay my debts and honor my promises. And I promised myself I'd watch over Sara until this was all over.

The gate creaks open and I work on the back door. That's easier, a basic commercial lock, and eventually I'm inside. The kitchen is dark and smells like bacon grease and fried chicken. Plates teeter in the sink and the remains of his dinner sits on the table. I tiptoe into the living room, heading to the hall that leads toward the bedrooms. There are pictures on the walls, photographs of smiling people: a pretty girl, a couple of kids. Maybe Detective John had a family once. Not anymore. Beer cans litter the coffee table. A fifth of vodka sits on the floor next to the toilet.

He's snoring when I crack open his bedroom door.

I creep toward him like a ghost, like the specter of death, like the grim reaper himself. His room is a mess: clothes on the floor, cigarettes in an ashtray on the nightstand, more empty beer cans. Detective John's got some bad habits. This is the room of a man deep in a very dark place.

I press my gun against his face. I'd be easy to kill him. Pull the trigger and bang, Detective John isn't a problem anymore. But killing a cop is complicated, and I can't be sure I didn't leave some evidence. Besides, it would only make Sara's life harder.

"Wake up," I say softly.

He shifts, grunts, snores again.

"Wake up," I say louder and press the gun harder to his forehead.

He sucks in a breath and tries to swat it away. The sheets move down—the fucker's in a stained white t-shirt and boxer shorts.

"John," I croon. "Oh, John, wake up, my lovely John."

He starts and shuffles back. "What the fu—" But before he can finish, I smack him across the face with the butt of my weapon.

He grunts and rolls sideways. His hand flashes out, reaching for something under the pillow beside him, but I press my gun to his skull. He stops, fingers inches away.

"Don't," I say. "I'd happily kill you if you made me."

He freezes. "Angelo?" He asks, sounding disoriented. "Am I dreaming? What the fuck is this?"

I reach out and grab the gun he was reaching for. I toss it aside with a sigh. "You're definitely not dreaming, John. I'm here to talk."

He slowly turns to face me. His expression is hard, and a bruise is already forming on his cheek where I hit him. Blood trickles from a small cut. He's trying to hold it together, but I can see the fear. "You're a dead man now," he says and shows his teeth. "Maybe you weren't before, but now—"

I hit him again. I don't need to, but it feels good, and I want to wipe that smug grin off his stupid, stinking face. "You shouldn't threaten me right now, John," I say and nudge him with the gun.

"Fuck," he groans, hands pressed against the wound. More blood pours from a new cut above his eye. "You piece of shit. You lowlife scum."

"That's funny coming from you, considering you're covering up a crime."

"Fuck you." He snarls at me and I caress him gently with the gun barrel.

"Listen to me, John. Listen to me good. I am going to kill you."

He freezes. Goes very still. I've seen this before—it's the reaction of a man faced with the impending truth of his mortality. "You're fucking insane. You can't kill a cop."

"You think a gun and a badge will protect you after what you did? Oh, John. You never should've bothered Sara."

"The lawyer? You really give a fuck about that?"

"Here's the deal, Detective. I'm going to murder you and then I'm going to run to Mexico. I'll live there for a while, lose myself in the smaller towns, maybe do some work for the cartels. Just like I told you earlier today. Then in a few years, once the heat dies down, Carmine will bring me back. I'll keep on living, and you'll still be dead. How's that sound?"

He blinks at me, sweating, blood dripping onto the sheets. "You don't have to do this."

"Here's your other option. I'm going to beat you the way you beat me. I'm going to hurt you, very badly, and you're going to take it. When I'm done, you'll tell your buddy Detective Danny with the mustache that you two aren't going to bother Sara ever again. Because if you do, I will be back, and I really will pull the trigger. Don't think that I won't be able to get inside a second time. Add all the cameras you want. All the locks you want. Nothing will keep me away from you, Detective."

“Fuck, you don’t know—”

I hit him with my gun. I hit him again, and again, and I drag him from the bed by his ankle. He falls to the floor with a thud and I kick him, over and over. I wore my nice boots for this. I make sure I hit him in the chest just the way he hit me, toe angling at his ribs, trying to break them. I want him to suffer like I suffered. I want him to feel the pain I still feel now. And most of all, I want him to think twice the next time he considers touching my Sara.

When I’m done, he’s a bloody mess. He’s groaning and barely conscious. I take out my phone and snap a picture.

“Beautiful,” I say quietly and bend over to pat his cheek. “Remember what I said, Detective. If you go near Sara, I’ll come into your house and end you. There’s no such thing as safety anymore.”

I turn and leave. I send Sara two messages on the way out.

The first is the photograph of Detective John. I crop out his face, but she’ll know.

The second is a message. *He won’t bother you again.*

I hit send, hop the fence and stroll back to my car, whistling.

Chapter 27

Sara

I stare at the picture of Detective John's beaten and bloody body as I sit in the passenger side of my father's car while he drives us to the Oak Club.

Since the moment I woke up to this horror, I haven't been able to look away.

I don't know what Angelo was thinking, sending me something like this. The body on the floor is gruesome, and I keep thinking he's dead, but I didn't see anything about a murdered detective on the news. I kept thinking about responding, but what am I supposed to say to that? *Thanks for beating the shit out of that dirty cop for me, I still don't want you anywhere near my kid?*

It's insane. It's unhinged.

And I feel better.

I know I shouldn't. This sort of thing should make me sick and scared. But knowing that Angelo hurt that bastard makes me feel like some justice was served in this, even if there won't be any real justice for the kills. Detective John deserved to get beaten, even beaten to death, and I want him to limp around and think about Angelo anytime he moves too fast or twists the wrong way or so much as bends over to tie his shoes.

I want him in agony, mostly because he nearly hurt me and nearly hurt my baby.

"What do you keep looking at on your phone?" Dad asks.

I quickly turn off the screen. "Nothing. Instagram."

“Social media.” His lips curl. “Well, daughter, you’d better keep your phone away. The club looks down on that sort of behavior.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

Dad drops the car at the valet, and we slowly walk in together. I don’t know why he’s bringing me tonight but when he said there was an important matter we needed to attend, I figured it was another discussion about my future. Dad likes to save the big stuff for fancy restaurants as a way to lull his victims into complacency, and I figure that’s what he’s doing with me. Take me to the Oak, wow me with its majesty, and get me to agree to some new demand.

And I have to admit, it might work.

The place is beautiful. Marble floors, shining wooden details, antique chandeliers worth millions, and the tree in the lobby: an enormous oak, an actual living plant with massive branches and a trunk at least ten feet around, probably more. It’s impossible, and it’s beautiful, and I’m staring around like a dumbstruck kid as Dad takes me into the restaurant.

“Now, Sara, I want you to have an open mind,” Dad says as the hostess guides us toward a private booth in the very back. “I understand this will be a surprise, but believe me, this is for the best.”

“I’m sorry, what are we doing here?” I frown at him, and my stomach suddenly feels like it’s made of lead. My mouth waters and my fingers tingle with nerves.

A man’s sitting alone at the table. A man with gray hair, a straight back, a lined face. He’s in his sixties, and he’s wearing a simple button-down shirt, a pair of blue jeans, and a bolo tie.

He nods to my father. “Thanks for bringing her,” he says.

And my heart almost stops.

“Of course, Chief Corvine,” Dad says. “I’ll be over in the waiting room when you’re finished.” Dad squeezes my arm and walks off.

Leaving me facing the Chief of the Dallas Police Department, Brett Corvine. He smiles at me, grandfatherly, his blue eyes sparkling, and gestures for me to join him. There's a glass of water waiting. I don't know if that's a reference to my baby or if it's just polite.

Chief Corvine sips a beer and tilts his head. He's looking at me like I'm a long-lost friend and I bet that's part of his charm. "How are you, Sara? Your father speaks highly of you, you know."

"Does he?" I ask, taken off guard, and as my initial shock wears off, it's replaced by a cold and seething anger.

He set me up.

My own fucking father set me up.

He brought me to this club tonight to speak with Corvine as some political favor or something like that. Which means Corvine knows about the coverup, which means this case goes all the way up, all the way to the top, to this animal.

I am *way* out of my depth here and I'm tempted to run away. Maybe I could sneak off, hide in the bathroom, and call Carmine—if he's in town, he could come here and help.

But that's stupid.

This is my case and we're in a public place.

I'm as safe as I'll ever be.

"I bet you're wondering why you're here." He tilts his head. "Or maybe not. You're a smart woman. Klein and Houndson? Straight out of law school? That's not a small task. That's a real nice firm, though I hear those guys are somewhat conservative over there."

"Conservative is a nice way of putting it, Chief Corvine, but thank you. I'm very happy to be a part of such a good firm."

"I bet you are, I bet you are." He chuckles softly and leans back. The chief is known for his good old boy routine, but he's not someone I can take lightly. A man like this only gets into his position by being absolutely ruthless. The chief of police is a political position as much as an administrative one, and any

worthwhile chief knows how to play both sides. He's a hard man used to taking care of his cops and doing a hard job, and he's a clever man used to playing the city hall games. He'll roll over me if I let him.

"What can I do for you, Chief?"

"I understand you found an interview," he says, still smiling like this is no big deal, but my heart patters fast in my chest. "Seems someone told you about our unusual filing system."

"Yes, sir, I did find an interview. It seems it was lost in the archives."

"Well, you know how that goes. Sometimes things get shoved into boxes and folders and put away and, hell, it just disappears." He laughs and sips his beer. "I'm glad you fished it out for us."

"Are you, sir? I'm happy to hear it."

"It's only that this puts us in an awkward position. Are you aware of the around this country right now? Are you aware of the threats my officers face daily? The danger they walk into every time they pull over a car for a routine traffic stop?"

"Sir, I am very sympathetic to the police," I say as carefully as I can, although I want to point out that being a cop isn't even in the top five most dangerous jobs, not even close.

"Well, something like this little interview, it can make my job that much harder. It can put the lives of my men in jeopardy. And I assume you don't want that."

"No, sir. I don't."

"Good. Good. That's really good." Another sip. Another pause. He laughs quietly. "You know, at a firm like Klein and Houndson, having a friend at the top of the police department might be a good thing."

"It would," I say and lean forward. "What are you offering, sir?"

"I'm not offering anything. I don't make offers." His eyebrows go up and he gives me an exaggerated innocent look. "I simply make observations."

“All right, then here’s an observation for you, sir. Nicolas Cavallo is innocent. He’s currently in jail for a crime he didn’t commit and is facing serious time behind bars. Possibly life in prison. That’s a travesty if I’ve ever heard of one, and it’s not the kind of justice system I want in our country.”

“Interesting,” Chief Corvine says, eyebrows raised. “You really give a damn about that gutter rat, don’t you?”

“He’s a human being, sir. An innocent one.”

He holds up a finger. “He’s not *innocent*. I know what Nicolas Cavallo is. That boy works for the Scavo Famiglia, which is a massive and growing organized crime family from Philadelphia. But you know about them already, don’t you? Seeing as you’re friendly with Carmine Scavo’s wife.”

My blood runs cold. I have to grip the edge of the table to keep myself steady. “My friendship with Brice has nothing to do with putting an innocent man in prison for life.”

“But you know, don’t you? You can’t sit there and feign ignorance. You know what the Scavo Famiglia does, and you know why that Nicolas boy was down south meeting with members of a cartel to begin with. You know what he planned on doing. You understand the deal he was going to make.” Chief Corvine leans in, still smiling, like a snake. “You think he’s innocent?”

I let the silence fall over us like a blanket. He drinks his beer, grinning away like this is some fun game. The sound of the dining room filters through—forks against plates, the clink of glasses, the murmur of conversations—but I feel like everyone’s staring.

Chief Corvine’s like everyone else. He’s like Detective John, he’s like my father. He’s like all the men in power that can only see what they want to see. They don’t think of Nicolas as a person, but as a problem that needs to be solved, and who cares if they happen to fix another problem in the process? Nicolas is nothing to them.

Like Angelo. Like Carmine.

But I don't see that when I think about them. I see Angelo's loyalty. I see the way Carmine looks at Brice, the way he kisses her, the way he loves her. I see Nicolas hunched over the desk in the visitation room with those ugly bruises on his face. I see people, and decisions, and the complicated circumstances that led them to these places.

They're humans, human beings, with wants and fears and loves. They're flawed, and they might be dangerous, but I refuse to give in and treat them like rats.

"Here's what I'll offer," I tell him. "Release Nicolas. Drop all charges. You do that and the interview I read will disappear. The truth will disappear with it. Maybe you'll have five dead bodies you can't account for and your stats will suffer, but oh, well, life is hard. You'll manage it. That's my offer, Chief Corvine. I won't take less."

His smile slowly fades. He turns his glass in circles, staring at the dregs of the beer, before he tosses it back. "You're really going to torch yourself for this kid? This lowlife fucking nothing? Your father said you were a reasonable girl. He said you'd do the right thing."

"*Fuck* what you think is the right thing, sir. All due respect." I slide out of the booth, shaking. "By the way, the worthless scumbag you're so keen on throwing away noticed something else. There were dozens of shots fired into that room, but no shell casings, no forensics. Not to mention he was only in that room for a short period and there's no way a jury's going to believe that lone kid somehow did all that violence and straightened up after himself in less than five minutes. Someone else was on the scene long enough to gather everything up, and I bet I can guess who."

"You're playing a dangerous game," he says slowly.

"You have my offer, sir. Think about it."

His eyes meet mine. "What if I just kill that thug of yours, huh? What if I do the same to you? Ruin your daddy? Ruin your momma too? Burn you all? Don't think I couldn't, girl."

I take a slow breath and let it out. “I know you could, sir. But you’re smart enough not to take the risk over one man.”

“Over a worthless piece of shit. Over a criminal that deserves to spend his life on death row.”

“No, sir, just a man, flaws and all.”

“You’re fucking up, girl. You just lost a very important opportunity. You realize that if you walk right now, I’m going to make sure every big firm in the state of Texas stays far away from you? Klein and Houndson doesn’t want someone like you as a partner, girl. Think about your future.”

I smile at him. I give it some thought.

“Good luck, sir.”

I turn and walk away from the table on weak knees.

I don’t know why I just did that. A smart person would’ve played along, maybe even given in and did what he said. Chief Corvine really could be a good ally.

But I’m not going to sell my soul to a man like that.

I want to pretend like I’m doing this with my head held high, but honestly, I’m scared as hell and worried I just made the biggest mistake of my life.

My father’s waiting for me. He grins as I step around the corner, but the smile slowly fades when he sees the look on my face. “What did you do?” he says.

I stop right in front of him and jam a finger into his chest. “You set me up, you spineless asshole.”

His eyes go wide. “You can’t talk to me that way.”

“I’m calling a car. I’m not coming home.”

“Sara,” he hisses but I’m already walking away. “Sara, stop it.”

I keep going. Dad follows for a few feet, but he stops.

He must be afraid of making a scene.

I don’t cry as I get out my phone and summon an Uber. I don’t tremble as I stand outside alone in the darkness of the long

driveway waiting for it.

I don't let myself despair thinking about what I've given up
and what's coming for me now.

For once in my life, for the first time ever, I did the right thing.

Chapter 28

Sara

“I basically told the chief of police to go fuck himself. Are you *sure* you want me to stay with you?” I stare out from under a mountain of blankets on Robyn’s couch, feeling like a rundown hermit. I’m tired and my head hurts, and I’m wondering if I’m basically toxic to everyone around me at this point.

But I don’t hate myself at least.

“A little late for that, isn’t it?” She sits next to me cross-legged and hands over some coffee. I take it and feel a little better after I get some caffeine in my body, though I can’t seem to wash away the bad taste in my mouth.

I got my first glimpse into the world of politics and power, and I didn’t like it.

“Seriously, letting me crash here last night was such a big help, but I can go find a hotel,” I tell her. “You don’t need to put yourself out.”

“Stop. You’d do this for me.”

“I’m not so sure I would.”

She laughs and shrugs. “Well, I guess that means I’m a better friend than you are. Now quit acting like the world’s ending and pick yourself up, okay?”

“Yeah, right, totally. Now that the whole Dallas PD wants to put a bullet in my head, I’ll totally just shrug it off.” I groan and lean back against the couch.

“It’s that bad, huh?”

I nod slowly and cradle the mug in both hands. “It’s that bad.”

We sit in silence for a bit. Robyn’s apartment is nice: blue walls, lots of thrift store tchotchkes, plants hanging from the ceiling with pretty flowers and deep green leaves, lots of blankets and pillows and candles, very comforting and comfortable. I didn’t know where else to go after I packed my stuff and skipped out from my parents’ house after the disaster at the Oak Club, but Robyn didn’t even hesitate when I asked if I could crash on her couch.

It’s strange, having a friend like her. No matter what happens, how long we go between texts or dinners, regardless of anything, we always help each other. I’d honestly do anything for her, and I know she’d do anything for me.

For the longest time, I never understood why, but now I can see it.

These relationships matter. The relationships I choose—those are the ones that are important. I was stuck with my parents and didn’t get any say in how I was raised, but this friendship? I can leave it whenever I want, and *that* makes it important.

Because I choose to be here, and she chooses to have me.

“Can I ask you something?” She glances over, frowning. “I know this is random and delicate and whatever, but... I haven’t seen you drink since Brice got married.”

I nod miserably. “Yeah, that’s true.” I should be afraid. I know where this is going, but I don’t have it in me right now.

“I figured it was some diet or cleanse or whatever. You know, a few dry months? But it’s not that, is it?”

“No, it’s not.”

“You’re pregnant.”

“Yeah. I’m pregnant.” I close my eyes and sigh, leaning my head back. I was dreading telling people, but now that it’s out, it feels pretty good. I feel lighter—not better, but like there’s one fewer thing trying to crush me. “And Angelo’s the father.”

“Shit.” Robyn comes closer and hugs me. “Are you okay?”

“No, not even a little bit.” I manage to put my coffee down before I cry, but I’m basically a sobbing machine these days. It’s like the dam’s been broken and now I can’t help myself—I fall apart at the slightest hint of emotion.

Robyn’s there for me. She hugs me tight as the tears flow, and I bet she’s pretty freaked out. I’m Sara, I’m the frigid princess, the ice queen, I’m the one that’s cold and emotionless and never, ever, *ever* lets other people see me break down, except now I can’t help it anymore. I’m overflowing with feelings and I wish they’d stop, I wish they’d disappear and go back to the dark hole from which they came, but I’m totally overloaded.

I get myself together after a minute or two and wipe my eyes and feel drained, so deeply drained, like I’ve been twisted and pulled and every drop of *me* has been squeezed into the dirt.

“You must think I’m losing it,” I say with a stupid smile.

But Robyn shakes her head. “No, honey. I think you’re pregnant, scared, in way over your head, and barely hanging on. What the hell was Brice thinking, letting you get mixed up in this?”

“I don’t think she knows how bad it is.”

Robyn’s jaw works. Her anger’s refreshing—I’m so used to sorrow that Robyn’s indignant glare is actually pretty nice—and I’m not used to someone looking out for me. “She knows what her husband does for a living. She should never have let him get anywhere near you.”

“Stop, it’s not Brice’s fault. Carmine told me what the deal was the second he walked into my office and I took the case myself. I took his money and I accepted the risks.”

“Still.” Robyn squeezes my hand. “I’m pretty pissed.”

“Brice didn’t know about the baby, but I think she found out. I’ve been ignoring her calls.”

“Who else knows?”

“My parents. Angelo.”

She lets out a breath. “Okay, that’s good. Angelo knows. Where is he right now, anyway?”

“We’re... sort of... finished.” I look down at the floor, feeling stupid, naive, angry.

Her eyebrows raise. “You’re what?”

“Finished. I sort of ... walked away from him. I told him I didn’t want anything to do with him anymore.” I want to squeeze myself into a tiny black hole and zap out of existence.

“And he accepted that?” She doesn’t sound happy.

“I don’t think he had much of a choice.”

Robyn groans. “Sara! Why would you do that?”

“Because he’s a criminal! Because I don’t want my baby to grow up with a father behind bars. There are a thousand reasons to keep Angelo away from this child! Don’t give me crap right now, Robyn, I’m giving myself enough.”

Robyn stands and paces across the room. She grumbles to herself and I know what she’s feeling because I feel it too—I made a stupid decision, one for halfway decent reasons, but still.

I walked away from Angelo for my parents.

I gave up on the first good thing I’ve ever had all to myself for my mother and father, two people that only care about controlling me and making me act like the perfect, obedient daughter.

My father cares more about scoring points with the chief of police than he does about helping me.

I keep seeing his face when I told him I was walking away.

It was rage, pure rage. The idea that I might not simply do whatever he asked of me was too much for him to bear.

He wanted to kill me.

And heck, the feeling is mutual.

But I only have myself to blame here, because if I hadn’t gone with Dad then none of this would be happening.

“You like that guy,” Robyn says, standing with her hands on her hips. “Tell me you don’t.”

“It’s complicated,” I say.

“Is it though? Look at Brice, she got over her whole squeamish fear of criminals, and she’s doing okay.”

“Carmine and Angelo are different, and you say that like it’s totally normal to date a mobster.” I chew on my lip. Are Carmine and Angelo that different though? Carmine was born into this life, into power and wealth, and Angelo struggled to take what he has. But they’re both of a type: intense, terrifying, violent, willing to do whatever it takes to get what they want.

“Sara, ever since I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you into a guy like you’re into Angelo. No, don’t try to tell me I’m wrong, I can see it every time you mention him. You like him and you like him a lot, and he’s the father of your baby. I know that makes things harder, and I know he has an unconventional job, but seriously. How can you turn your back on him?”

“Robyn,” I say, looking down at my lap. “I don’t know. And saying he has an *unconventional job* is the understatement of the century.”

She softens a bit and spreads her hands. “Look, honey, I love you, you know I do, but this whole thing is frustrating. You like this guy. You like him a lot. So why are you pushing him away? Why not take a chance?”

I rub my face and pick up the mug again. I cradle it, feeling the warmth of the coffee in my palms. How can I explain this to her? How can I make her understand? “Angelo represents everything I’ve been taught to hate,” I say and clear my throat to stop myself from crying again. “My parents raised me to follow the rules. To respect my superiors. To do the right thing. And all this time I thought I knew what those things meant. I thought that even if I’m not happy, even if I’m spending all my time on things I don’t care about, at least I’m on the right path and maybe happiness will come one day. I thought if I just listened to my parents, did what they wanted, studied hard and got a good job and smiled in pictures—”

“You smile in pictures?” Robyn asks. “I thought you only scowled.”

I wave her off. “—I thought then I’d get ahead. And now here I am, working at a law firm, on the exact path I’m supposed to be on, and all I want to do is get off it and go find Angelo. I thought my parents could keep me safe and help me with the baby, and now I’m realizing that all this time, it’s never been about me, it’s always been about them. My job, my life, my career, even my pregnancy, it’s about what they want and need, and I’ll never be the priority. Unless I make myself the priority.”

“Damn right,” Robyn says and walks over. She collapses back onto the couch beside me. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to get Nicolas out of jail. I’m going to win this case.”

“Great, but what about Angelo?”

I glance toward her window where the morning sunlight’s slanting through. “I guess I should call him.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“But I don’t know what I’m going to say.”

“Then don’t say anything. Just tell him how you feel.”

“I don’t know how I feel, either.”

“Sara.” She gives me a look. “You’re very frustrating.”

“I’m aware, but I’m new to this whole... living my own life, thing. You know, feeling feelings. That’s not really my jam.”

“I’m proud of you at least.” She squeezes my knee. “For trying.”

“Yeah, well, this isn’t over. We still might end up little blood smears on the floor.”

She stands and stretches. “To die by your side is such a heavenly way to die.”

“Don’t quote The Smiths at me.”

“Call him,” she says and walks toward her bedroom. “I’m taking a shower.”

I watch her disappear into the hall. I glance back at the window, then down at my coffee, and I take a long sip. I see Dad’s face again, his anger and rage when I walked away from Chief Corvine. I see Mom’s disappointment, her scorn, her simmering discontent. I see two people like me, two people that do the *right thing* but are still miserable, utterly miserable, because they’re playing someone else’s game.

I’m going to play my own.

Chapter 29

Angelo

The hotel lobby is empty. The girl behind the desk is busy looking at her cell phone and occasionally answering the phone while only a few guests hurry through on the way to the elevators. I watch each face, wondering if I'll catch sight of Detective John or Mustache or some other cop here to put a bullet in my head for what I did.

Instead, there's nothing.

No calls, no handcuffs. No shouting or violence or circling cars.

I knew that fucking coward would back down the second I pushed him like every other cheap high school bully.

The doors open again, and my heart skips a beat. She steps inside and looks around, wearing tight jeans and a dark sweater, her hair up the way I like. She scans the room and spots me, and her face shifts from her usual icy glare to a soft, almost apologetic smile.

Sara walks toward me and I stand to meet her.

"I'm glad you came," I say and kiss her on the cheek.

She looks uncomfortable. "I'm the one that called you, remember?"

"I know that, but you did make it clear that you don't want anything to do with me anymore."

"Not like you gave a shit about that."

I quirk a smile and shrug. "That's fair. But you're here now."

“I’m here now.”

We linger and the tension grows. She didn’t tell me what she wanted to talk about over the phone and I’m not sure if it’s professional or something else. I don’t want to get my hopes up—I don’t think I can survive getting crushed again—so I’m here with no expectations. I’m here to listen.

“Can I tell you something?” I ask her as I guide her to the couches.

She sits down and crosses her legs. “Sure, go ahead.”

“I decided something recently.” I sit down in the chair next to her and turn slightly so I can see her face. “Back when I was in Philly, I never thought about who I am and how people see me. I was surrounded by the Famiglia, by men like me, women that are used to men like me, and nothing else mattered. I have my brothers, I have my friends, I have my work. That’s all I needed, at least until I met you and started questioning all that.”

“Angelo,” she says, panic in her eyes, but I hold a hand up.

“I decided I don’t give a fuck what anyone thinks. I care about you, and I care about that baby you’re carrying, and it doesn’t matter if I’m some lowlife criminal that has to fight for every scrap. You can tell me you don’t want to see me again, you can tell me you hate me, and I still won’t abandon you. I’m done pretending like being good matters. I am what I am, princess. And I won’t change.”

“I don’t want you to change.”

My eyebrows raise. “Then why did you run away?”

“Because I was scared.”

I stand and move toward her. I sit on the couch and she shifts closer. My heart’s racing, and tension and nerves tingle down my arms and into my core.

“You don’t have to be.”

“But I do. It’s not just about me anymore—it’s about this baby too. You’re right, you are what you are, and I can’t ask you to

change. I won't ask you to change, and that scares the hell out of me."

"So why come back?"

"Because I want to be scared."

I let out a soft grunt. Is she saying what I think she's saying? I feel hope blooming, and I have to work to stomp it back out. No, no fucking hope. Not until this is done.

"I want you, Sara. I want that baby. And I told you, want can turn into more. I feel it turning into more. You can run back home and pretend like none of this is real, but I feel it, and I know you feel it too. I'm not letting go."

"I don't want you to let go." She moves closer. "Angelo, I told the chief of police to fuck off last night."

I let out a disbelieving laugh. "You did *what?*"

"My dad set me up. He took me to the Oak Club like he wanted to have a nice dinner but instead he sat me down in front of Chief Corvine."

"That fucking bastard," I say and rage simmers down my spine. "Your own father ambushed you."

"Because the chief knows he's screwed. There's no way their flimsy charges will stand up to scrutiny and he's scrambling. He offered me some bullshit deal to keep Nicolas in jail and he'll become my patron or something like that, but I told him to fuck off. I told him to free Nicolas or I'm telling the world the truth."

"Which is what?"

"The cops did it. I don't know how or why, but they must've thought there were drugs in that motel room. Something went wrong, someone got spooked, and they started shooting. They murdered those five cartel guys, and under normal circumstances they could've played the self-defense card, and who the heck's going to care about a bunch of dead criminals? But the cops panicked, they thought they screwed up, they figured public opinion would turn against them and there'd be

riots, so they tried to cover it up. And the coverup is way worse than the crime.”

All that makes sense. It fits the story I have in my head about what really happened, and now I can see how Nicolas got roped into this nightmare. They were reacting, and reacting poorly, and grabbed Nicolas without thinking through the ramifications of how that would play out. Ever since then, it’s been damage control.

“I broke into Detective John’s house and beat him bloody and shoved a gun in his face.”

Sara sits up straight. “What? You did *what?*”

“It was fun. Fucker had it coming.” I laugh miserably. “I guess we’re more alike than I realized, we just go about things differently.”

She stares at me, her mouth hanging open—and she smiles. A beautiful, lopsided smile. “You’re insane.”

“He threatened you. He deserved it.”

“He did, but he’s a cop.”

“Fuck him. He’s a dirty cop doing dirty work for the chief. You know he won’t do a damn thing.”

“God, Angelo, how did we get here?”

I move closer and reach out. She doesn’t flinch back as I brush my knuckles against her cheek and run my fingers against her neck. “Slowly, step by step, but we’re almost at the end, aren’t we? They can’t hold Nicolas. They can’t risk you telling the truth about what happened. But mostly they can’t let the coverup get out.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“They’ll either kill us or cut a deal. Which do you think they’ll do?”

She takes a deep breath and lets it out. “I don’t think I care anymore. Let them figure it out.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.” I lean closer and brush my lips against hers. “I’ve got better things to do.”

I kiss her then, deep and slow, and taste her tongue and lips, and fuck, I wouldn't let myself imagine this was a possibility, but now that she's kissing me back and she's making that lovely, amazing, earth-shaking whimper, I'm going to hold on to this. I'm not going to let it go.

Everything I've done until now has been for me and my grandmother. All my struggle, all my pain. It's been for my family.

And now Sara is part of that family.

It doesn't matter what the world sees in me. It doesn't matter what her parents think I deserve, or what the people in power think should happen. I'm Nicolas, I'm Carmine. I'm Angelo, and I don't give a fuck anymore.

I take what I want and I keep what I love.

I want to be a father, most of all. I'm not my parents. I'm better than that.

Sara is mine. This baby is mine. And I don't care what I am—I don't care what she is, either.

This is all I need.

Chapter 30

Sara

I feel exhausted.
Good, but exhausted.

I'm aching all over—between my legs, my arms, my shoulders, my back, the bruises on my ass—but they're good aches. They're a reminder of the last couple nights I spent with Angelo making up for lost time.

I lean back in the passenger side seat of his rental truck. He grins at me and takes my hand, squeezing it gently. "Think they'll show?"

"I doubt they have much of a choice."

He tilts his head. "I don't know. Cops don't like to admit when they're wrong."

"Hence this whole stupid mess?"

"Pretty much." He glances at me, grinning. "It's good to have you back, my frigid princess."

"Don't start with me."

"I mean it."

I smile at him and kiss the back of his hand. "It's nice to be back."

In between sessions of extremely intense and sweaty sex, we spent a lot of time talking about our lives, about the future, about what we want from the baby, about everything. We didn't come to any conclusions, but I know him a lot better

now than I did before, and he's exactly what I assumed: loyal, loving, demanding, intense, and beautiful.

And above all, overprotective and dangerous. In a good way, of course.

All my life I've been looking for a cliff to jump from. A leap of faith, an act of reckless selfishness that might prove I'm truly alive. I've been drifting from one thing to the next, walking along the proper path, never deviating, too afraid to fail and too nervous to do anything but mindlessly go forward, but it feels like Angelo is the clouds, he's the wind whipping through my hair and the second of being yanked down to earth, he's the scream on my lips, the exhilarating excitement in my veins as I plummet down, down, down, past where I was meant to be and on to something better. Something my own.

He's my jump, my leap. And I can't say what's going to happen tomorrow, or the next day, or a month or a year from now, and that's what I love so much about it.

Everything else, my entire existence, it was planned and perfected.

This is messy and wrong and dangerous.

And I need it so badly it hurts.

The parking lot outside of the U-Haul place is deserted. The place is depression incarnate, like something from a movie: weeds sprouting between cracks, plants growing up in the nearby grass, a rusting old truck with windows so covered in dirt they look tinted black. The building is abandoned. It's hard to say when it shut down, but probably in the last year or so. The interior is barren, all the boxes and packing materials taken away to somewhere else, wherever closed stores go when their doors lock for the last time.

Another truck glides into the lot and pulls across from ours. It's midday and we're near a major road, but there aren't any other pedestrians around. Only a gas station a half mile back, a storage facility, and this abandoned building. A good place for an ambush.

“Stay in here,” Angelo says and taps the gun at his hip as he opens his door. I wish he didn’t need that thing. “Come out if it’s safe.”

“Be careful,” I say, and he only nods at me as he walks forward.

I watch him, fear ringing down my spine. It’s a real fear, a visceral fear, the sort of terror usually reserved for thoughts of my baby.

I don’t want to lose Angelo in the same way I can’t imagine losing this child.

It’s strange, how fast I fell and how hard.

But I took my leap and I won’t turn back.

The other truck’s door opens and Misty Vance steps out. She’s in jeans and a denim jacket, her hair pulled back. I note a lack of a holster at her hip. She comes closer to Angelo and there’s nobody else with her. I wait a beat and hop out, approaching somewhat skittishly, wondering if Misty got turned and took over her partner’s position as the chief of police’s new lackey.

Misty nods to me and her eyes narrow at Angelo. “You have no clue how pissed off John is right now,” she says. “What’d you do to him?”

“How’s he doing? He healing okay?”

Misty’s jaw works. “You know what, if he didn’t deserve it, I’d kill you myself.”

“Good thing he deserved it,” Angelo says. “Why’d you come here? I thought we’d meet with Danny.”

“Danny got reassigned. John’s on medical leave.”

“I take it the chief’s cleaning house, huh?” Angelo glances at me. “You must’ve really spooked him.”

“What did you two do?” Misty asks, glaring at me. “The whole precinct feels like a graveyard right now. I tried to help you, but god damn it, Sara. You stirred up some serious shit.”

I lean back against the front bumper of the truck. “I told the chief the truth. I told him everything I know and everything I

guessed. And I told him he can fuck himself.”

Misty barks a laugh. “You told Corvine that? That old cowboy asshole?”

“Sure did.”

“Good for you. I never did like him.” She looks at Angelo and back to me. “I was sent to make a deal. I don’t want to be here because I find this whole mess extremely distasteful, but I agreed to do it anyway. Since I figure I’m just about the only cop left that doesn’t want to kill you both.”

“We only have one demand. Nicolas goes free,” Angelo says. “And we decide whether we release what we know to the press. That’s the deal.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Misty says. “We need assurances. Real fucking assurances. If we release Nicolas, we need to know this whole goddamn, shit-stain mess stays buried nice and deep.” She jabs a finger in my direction. “I can’t risk this one deciding she wants to take this into court just to get some false sense of justice.”

“I have no interest in making enemies with the Dallas PD for the rest of my life,” I say and nudge Angelo. “Same with you, right?”

“Hell, no. Fuck them. I don’t care if they hate me.”

“Angelo.”

He sighs. “Whatever Sara says, I’ll go with, but I want it on the record that I’d rather burn your whole fucking precinct to the ground than cut a deal. You slimy fucks.”

Misty gives him a hard look. “You’re preaching to the choir. Believe it or not, there are some of us that don’t agree with pretending like cops can’t fuck up sometimes. But unfortunately, I’m in the middle of this now, and all I want to do is get it over with. We release Nicolas, you all bury what you know, everyone walks away happy.”

“What about the case?” I ask.

“Our stats take a hit, but fuck the stats.” Misty smiles tightly. “I heard that’s what you said to the chief. Is it true?”

“More or less.”

She laughs and seems genuinely delighted. “The balls on you, girl. You would’ve made a good detective.”

“I’d rather work for Carmine Scavo than you people,” I tell her. “At least he’s got honor.” Which is true. Carmine doesn’t hide what he is and what he does. He obfuscates, he layers himself in protection and keeps some plausible deniability going, but it’s not like he’s walking around pretending to be a saint. The cops, they’re supposed to protect and serve. They’re supposed to be the good guys. Right now, they’re just a bunch of thugs with guns and badges protecting their own asses.

Misty’s smile disappears. “Right, let’s finish this then. We’re working on the honor system here for obvious reasons. In the next day or two, Nicolas will be released from prison and the charges will be dropped. We’ll cite new evidence or some shit, I don’t know. The prosecutor’s office will deal with that. Once he’s free, you destroy everything you have on what happened at the Two Lane Inn. And I mean *everything*. If so much as a whisper leaks about what really went down, there will be consequences.”

“You gonna follow through with those consequences, Misty?” Angelo asks.

She ignores him. “Do we have a deal?”

I hesitate, watching her. I hate this. Every piece of this. It’s my father’s world: a smoky room, a shady handshake. Except it’s hot out and we’re in some beat-up parking lot. It’s corrupt from the top to the bottom. And here I am, thinking I can do better.

There is no better—there’s only different.

I became a lawyer to fight this garbage.

But I’m not that girl anymore. The world isn’t black and white—it’s an ugly shade of gray—and I want to get Nicolas out of prison.

Nothing will bring back those dead cartel men. Not that I particularly mind. And the cops won’t ever face consequences for what happened, though I figure this whole ordeal is bad

enough. Maybe they'll think twice the next time they go off on some half-cocked raid.

"We have a deal," I say.

"Great," Misty says and makes a disgusted face. "I hope I never see either of you ever again. I fucking hate this trash." Misty turns on her heel, marches to her truck, and gets inside. I stand next to Angelo and his hand slips into mine as she drives off.

"How's it feel?" he asks once she's gone.

"I don't know," I admit. "It's almost anticlimactic. I expected some big fight, some dramatic confrontation, but we already did all that, didn't we?"

"You confronted the chief of police. I beat the shit out of that garbage detective. I'd say we've been busy. What else did you want? Some protracted gun battle? This is the real world, princess."

"Yeah, you're right. Just none of it feels good."

He hugs me against him. It feels good, his big arms, his warm chest. "This is corruption. This is how it happens. And you know what? If it saves an innocent life then fuck it." He kisses my cheek. "I'm proud of you."

"I'm proud of myself." I grin at him and stand on my toes to kiss his lips. "What are the chances this is really all over?"

"I think Corvine is smart enough to cut his losses and move on, but I'll make sure Carmine keeps an eye out for the wily old bastard."

"Think I can count this as a win? Even though nobody's going to know that I solved the case?"

"I think you deserve as much credit as you can take."

"Sounds good to me."

He wraps an arm across my shoulder and hugs me tighter. I lean into him, breathing his smell, smiling. None of this was perfect. The bad guys aren't going to get punished. There aren't any good guys, either. It's just a bunch of people making

dumb decisions and groping their way blindly forward,
struggling in the dark, doing what they think is right.

I'm done with *right*. Now I just want what feels good.

And that's Angelo.

Chapter 31

Sara

I stretch back against the arm of the couch and put my feet in Angelo's lap. I sigh and close my eyes and hug myself tightly as he slowly kneads my heel. I'm wearing only an old white t-shirt and a pair of his running shorts, and I feel like I spent the last week sitting in a hot tub and getting deep-tissue massages.

Instead, I've been doing nothing but moving from the bedroom, to the bathroom, to the sitting area in this hotel room and letting Angelo explore every inch of my body.

"I've been thinking a lot lately," Angelo says quietly, still looking at my foot as he rubs it.

"Think all you want so long as you keep doing that," I say.

He laughs and glances at me. "I've been thinking about what happens once this is all over."

"Have you? I was thinking I'd order room service and take a hot bath."

"I'm serious." He squeezes my toes and I wriggle away from him, sitting up. "What are your plans?"

"Do I need plans? I've had plans my whole life and right now I'm pretty happy without them."

He shrugs and looks at my stomach and back to my eyes. "The baby?"

"Right. The baby." I sigh and lean my head against the couch. "The baby will come. That'll be that."

“I’ll help. I want to be here.”

“Isn’t your whole life in Philadelphia?”

He shakes his head slowly. “My family’s there. My grandmother’s still alive and walking around South Philly like she owns it. My crew’s waiting for me to get back. My turf’s still mine to do with as I please. Yeah, everything’s waiting for me back there.”

“You’re going home.” A pit opens in my chest. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought of this already, but of course he’s going home. Angelo was only ever in Texas until Nicolas got released, and now that Nicolas is getting out—

Angelo’s going home.

He’s got a life there. He’s got the Famiglia, and friends, and everything like that.

What’s there for him in Texas, except for me? And the baby?

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.” He leans closer. “Could you come with me? Back to Philly?”

I blink and chew my lip. Could I do that? I try to picture myself living there but it’s hard—I’ve only ever known Dallas and Blackwoods College, and that’s it. My entire life has happened in this tiny, insular little world, and he’s talking about yanking me away from it.

Robyn’s here. My family’s here, even if I’m not talking to them right now. Dallas is my home. “I don’t know,” I say quietly.

“I’m not going to ask you to give up everything and come with me. That wouldn’t be right and it wouldn’t be fair. But, Sara, I want to be in this baby’s life... I want to be in your life. That’s going to be hard from halfway across the country.”

“Flights aren’t that expensive.”

“Sara. I don’t want to miss my baby growing up.”

“I don’t want you to either.” I stare down at my hands. We should’ve figured this out before letting things go this far, but

now it's too late. I'm attached—I'm wound up—I feel like I'm hanging on by a string. And it's all because of him.

He moves closer and reaches out. I nuzzle against his hand, hating myself for being so vulnerable and stupid, but we've come so far. I've done so much. I stood up to Corvine, my father, my mother. I ran away and chose Angelo over all of them, and now reality's shoving its stupid face into our perfect little storybook ending, and I don't know what I'm going to do.

I can't move to Philly. He can't move here. We're stuck, torn between worlds.

"There's got to be a way." He pulls me onto his lap. I shimmy my hips down against him and enjoy the feeling of him already starting to stiffen as he kisses my lower lip. His hands move up my body and palm my breasts, his thumbs rolling over my nipples. "How about we buy a place halfway and stay there two weeks out of the month?"

"That seems impractical." I release a little whimper as he bites and kisses me. "Also, you're distracting me."

"Yes, well, it's hard to keep my hands to myself."

"Seriously, Angelo. How did we think this would work? I've been so busy running for my life and now that we're finally slowing down, it's like—we should've thought of this already."

"Here's the thing." He kisses me again and his lips move to my neck as he pulls off my top. I let out a little groan as his mouth finds my breasts, sucking my nipples, teasing me. "It's hard to think with you around. All I want to do is kiss you and make you melt, my little frigid princess. My ice queen."

"How nice for both of us."

He laughs and teases me with his teeth. "But I'm not going to just give up. Just because I live in one place and you live in another. We can figure out a way to make it work."

"I want to," I whisper.

“I do too.” He pulls back and stares into my eyes. “I love you, Sara. I fell in love with you a while ago, and I don’t plan on losing you, not over something as simple as... moving.”

“I love you too,” I say, and tears spring into my eyes. God, when did I become a girl that cries all the time? I wipe them away, shaking my head, and he kisses me, holding me against him in his lap. I feel his warmth, bask in his taste, and I wonder how I ever got to a place where I felt like I deserved this, and yet right now I couldn’t peel myself away from this man even if someone tried to force me.

Because it’s my decision. He’s my choice. Like friendship, like family. He’s what I want, and he’s how I want it, and I can walk around through my life and drift from moment to moment but it will never be as sweet and as good as when I’m doing it all with Angelo. He makes me better, stronger. He makes me want to take good risks, live a little bit, open up. And yes, I’m still me, I still have my walls, my frozen palace, but he melted it a little bit. He cracked those walls, scaled the parapets, climbed into my heart.

And I can’t let him go.

“I love you,” he says as he slips a hand between my legs and feels my wetness. “I love you, Sara, I love you and everything you are.” He teases me, slides his fingers inside, rolls them around my clit until I’m holding on tight to him and moving my hips and moaning, over and over, *I love you too, I love you too*, my mind a blurry blank, and I keep going, going, until I come like that in his lap, my mouth open and gasping.

I collapse in a puddle in his lap. He holds me tight, arms wrapped around my body. I love him—he loves me—and we haven’t fixed a damn thing. Nothing is resolved, and I don’t know how it ever will be.

Until my phone starts to ring.

“Go away,” I grumble, still buzzing on my orgasm. “Angelo, go turn it off. Throw it out the window, I don’t care.”

He laughs and puts me down on the couch as he walks over to where the phone’s buzzing on a table. But instead of turning it

off, he holds it up, eyes hard. “Carminе.”

I manage to drag myself up from the couch. “Carminе?”

“Answer.” He tosses the phone over, and I snatch it from the air.

“Hello?”

Carminе’s voice on the other end. “Sara. They let him go.”

I blink a few times, trying to process. I look at the clock—it’s ten at night. “Seriously? Just now?”

“Just now. I thought it would be tomorrow, but—he’s out.”

“He’s out.” I stare at Angelo, and Angelo’s blinking rapidly in surprise. “Okay, we’ll go get him right now.”

“Thank you, Sara. For everything. Seriously.”

“Yeah, sure, Carminе, sure. You’re welcome.”

I hang up.

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Angelo says, sweeping into the bedroom. He starts getting changed as fast as he can and I hurry after him. I grab pants, new underwear, basically all new clothes that don’t smell like sex. “They let him out now? Right now?”

“One last spiteful fuck you, I guess,” I say and grab his arm. “But who cares? He’s out, Angelo. We’re going to go pick up your guy.”

He laughs and kisses me and grab his keys. “Come on. Let’s go bring him home.”

Chapter 32

Angelo

A haze of smoke hangs over the room as Nicolas puffs on a cigar and drinks a whiskey and laughs with Carmine.

Brice grins at the boys while Sara sits with Cassidy and Robyn and a few of the Scavo guys that flew down for this little celebration. We're in a back room of the Oak Club, and this is only possible because Carmine pulled some strings and paid some bribes, but it's a damn nice spot: free top-shelf alcohol and zero oversight all in a high-class atmosphere.

I hate it. This place, anyway. The Oak Club represents everything I despise. The money, the power, the control. The people in this place look at me like I'm scum, the same way they look at Carmine, and Nicolas, and all the other guys like us.

"Why do you look like we're at a funeral instead of a party?" Sara asks, leaning up against me. She's in this incredible black dress, the sort of dress that hugs her curves and makes her look like she belongs on the cover of a magazine. Her dark hair's up in a tight bun and her lips are red, and she's looking at me like I'm the only man in the room, and those eyes are heaven.

"Just thinking about this place is all. How nothing good ever happens here."

"Except for this party." She takes my arm and leans her head on my shoulder. "We got him home. We should celebrate."

"Yeah, you're right." Except I don't feel like celebrating but I can't say that.

When this is over, I'm supposed to go back to Philly with Nicolas. We got a flight and we've got plans. I have a crew waiting for me, more men that need my leadership, and I've been away for long enough already. The bastards are probably forgetting about me, and I'm going to have to reassert myself the second I step foot on my own turf.

And I'm fucking dreading it.

Not because I can't do it—that won't be a problem—but because I'll be *there* when I want to be *here*.

Only it's my responsibility. I'm a Capo in the Scavo Famiglia. I'm a made man with a crew and with people counting on me to earn for them. If I stay, I'll let them all down, but worst of all, I'll let Carmine down.

“Come on, have a drink. Make it a double, have one for me and one for you.”

I kiss Sara's cheek. “You're just trying to get me drunk so you can take advantage of me.”

“Do I need to get you drunk for that?”

“Absolutely not. All you've got to do is wear that dress and I am down to do whatever filthy thing you can think of.”

She blushes slightly and swats my arm. “You're a pig.”

“Does that mean you'll let me hike that skirt up and fuck you raw from behind in the bathroom?”

“It means wait until we're back at the hotel, you pig.” She walks away, shaking her head, but she's smiling.

And I'm smiling back.

And that makes it harder.

Because tomorrow, I'm leaving.

Carmine catches my eye. He comes over and leans up against the wall beside me. “Not like you to watch a party from a distance.”

“I've got stuff on my mind.”

“Why? Relax, kick back, have a cigar. They're Cuban.”

“I bet they are.” I shake my head. “How can you stand this shit?”

“It’s all just a show, my friend,” he says and sighs. “You’ve got to get over it, you know?”

“Nah, that’s not me. I’m a street guy, you know what I mean? I run my crew. I roam my territory. That’s all I do.”

He narrows his eyes at me for a second then gestures with his head. “Come with me. I want to talk.”

I hesitate, but he leads me out of the private area, down a side hall, and through a doorway.

The garden is big and beautiful. It’s right in the middle of the Oak in a hidden courtyard. There are big bushes, blooming flowers, a gravel-lined path, and benches at even intervals. Lights glow from the ground like a magic hive’s buzzing in the earth. I walk with Carmine, sipping my drink as he puffs away, and when we reach the middle of the area, he stops beside a bench.

“You like it here,” he says and faces me.

“Texas? It’s fine. It’s not home.”

“But you like it anyway.” His eyebrows raise. “Because of her.”

I don’t need to ask who he means. Sara’s face drifts into my mind. Sara laughing, Sara smiling. Sara kissing me, Sara moaning, Sara coming. Sara biting my lip and curling up against me.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Why haven’t you asked me yet?”

“Asked you what?”

He sighs like I’m being fucking obtuse. “Why haven’t you ask me to stay?”

I stare at him, not sure what to say. “I didn’t know that was an option.”

“Jesus fucking—Angelo, brother, Sara’s pregnant with your child and you’re making fucking flights back to Philly. What the hell is wrong with you? I should slap you upside the fucking head. Your grandmother would be absolutely ashamed.”

“I mean—hey, first of all, fuck you, don’t bring my grandmom into this. And second of all, Philly’s my home. I’ve got the crew, I’ve got my obligations.”

“Fuck the crew. I can get somebody else to take over.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Carmine, are you fucking firing me right now?”

He sighs and softens as he puts a hand on my shoulder. “No, you stubborn asshole. I’m trying to help you.”

Let that sink in. I glance back over my shoulder toward the building and all I want to do is turn and go back in that room and find Sara. I want to kiss her, hold her, and keep on doing that every day, every night, from now until we’re old and decrepit. But I’ve always seen my life one way—in the streets, in Philly, running a crew—and this is something else.

“I want to stay,” I tell Carmine and look him in the eye. “How do I make that happen?”

“Cancel your flight, you big fuck.” He grins at me. “As it happens, I’m starting something here in Texas. You could call it an affiliate family. An extension of the Scavo. I’ve been traveling too much between here and home, and things are fractured, but I think this is a way to tie it all together again.”

“An affiliate Famiglia. Like we’re some corporation.”

“Exactly.” He jabs a finger into my chest. “Listen, Angelo. You’ll keep on being who and what you are. That won’t ever change. But I’ve learned some things in my time with Brice, and the Famiglia’s got to change if we want to reach that next level. I need you here, in Texas, helping out with the transition.”

“A transition to what?”

“Something bigger, brother. Something fucking huge, and you are going to be a part of it. Assuming that’s what you want.”

I step away from him and look at the flowers, at the bushes, and up at the sky. It’s not *my* sky, not the vague black expanse with the few little twinkling dots that hangs over Philly. No row homes, no skyscrapers. Nothing like the place I’ve known and loved my whole life.

And to hell with all that.

“If it means I get to stay here with Sara, I’ll take the job.”

“I thought you would.” Carmine pats my shoulder. “Go tell her. I bet she’ll be happy.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, please, and stop fucking moping around. God damn, that was getting annoying.”

“Asshole.” I grin at him. “But thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m going to rely on you down here, Angelo, and it won’t be easy.”

“I never wanted easy.” I walk away and he stays behind, smoking and watching me, and I know I’m in for something hard, something dangerous, something wrong—and none of it matters.

Because I’ll have my Sara. My baby. My future.

I walk back through the Oak. I find the private room. And I go right up to my girl. “Can I borrow her?” I ask Robyn and gently help Sara to her feet.

“Bring her back in one piece, please,” Robyn says. “Preferably without any stains.”

“Oh, god, don’t be gross,” Sara says, glaring at her.

I steer Sara out into the hall, pin her up against the wall, and kiss her. “I’ve got good news,” I whisper.

She kisses me hard, a little surprised, but eventually bites my lip. “Hey, asshole, you heard what Robyn said?”

“Sorry. I’m getting carried away.”

“What’s the good news?”

I step back and look into her eyes, grinning my fucking head off. “I’m staying in Texas.”

She stands there like she doesn’t understand. “For another few nights?”

“No, princess. I’m staying in Texas for as long as you want me here.”

Her eyes go wide. “You’re joking.”

“Carmine’s starting something down here. Some new venture he wants me to work on. But who the fuck cares about that? This means we don’t have to worry about anything anymore.”

“But your family, your friends, your grandmother—”

“I’ll visit my grandmother. We both will. And fuck everyone else, that’s what Facebook is for.”

She laughs. “You have a Facebook?”

“Nah, but I should probably make one. Or hell, fuck that too, I don’t care. All I want is you and that baby, and I’m not going anywhere.”

She pulls me against her and we kiss, deep and slow, an exploring kiss, a celebratory kiss—the first of many kisses like it.

I can barely comprehend what my life’s going to be like. I’ve been in one place since I was a kid—I’m Philly, born and bred, and the rivers and streets of that place are in my blood, etched into my skin, broken into my bones.

But my life is in Texas now. My future is here, my heart is here, my love and my child are here. Sara, this baby, this is where I have to be. I’ll still be in the Famiglia and still work for Carmine, but I’m leaving everything I’ve ever known behind.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she whispers, holding me tight. My fingers lace in her hair. “It’s asking a lot. We can split time, I don’t know, figure it out—”

“I want this more than anything.”

She nods once, grinning at me, tears in her eyes. My ice queen, my frigid princess. Her frozen little heart's just about bursting now, and I love her so much for it.

I kiss her again, hold her there in the hallway, and tighten my grip in her hair, because I'm never letting go.

"Should we tell everyone the good news?" I ask quietly.

"Let's enjoy it ourselves for now and tell everyone tomorrow. It's Nicolas's night, right?"

"All right, good point."

She pushes from the wall and takes my hand. "Come on. Let's go enjoy ourselves."

"There's no rush anymore."

We head into the party holding hands.

Chapter 33

Sara

F *our Months Later*

ANGELO TURNS TO ME WITH A HUGE SMILE ON HIS FACE. “What do you think?”

He gestures at the enormous sunlit kitchen. A big bay window overlooks a hilly back yard speckled with flowers, bushes, and trees, and a patio with a table and chairs, and a beautiful pool beyond that. The kitchen itself is modern, clean, marble and glass and polished wood. I can picture sitting in here on a lazy Sunday morning drinking coffee, bouncing the baby on my knee, laughing with Angelo over some joke or whatever while he makes pancakes. I can see myself in this house, but best of all, I can see myself with him.

“Can we afford it?” I ask and run my fingers along the island. I really *want* to afford it but my head’s filled with thoughts of diapers and cribs and all the little expenses that come with a baby.

And ever since I walked away from my parents and told Chief Corvine to fuck himself, I’m estranged from dear old mother and father, which means no more financial fallback plan. I’m out on my own, totally and completely.

It feels so freaking good I could cry. Which I sometimes do now, because apparently the ice-queen thing was a trauma response. I mean, I’m still about as closed-off as a person can get, but at least now I don’t bottle up *everything*.

Angelo puts an arm around me. “We can afford whatever you want. As it turns out, working for Carmine comes with certain perks. Like a lot of cash.”

“Oh, do you think you’re the only one making good money now?” I push against him, grinning. “You’re not even the only one working for Carmine these days. But seriously, this house is really, *really* expensive. Maybe it would be smarter to start with something smaller?”

“Fuck starter homes. I want this one. What do you say?”

I sigh and lean against him. “I say show me the rest of it.”

He leads me on the tour. Huge downstairs with perfect space for entertaining, an equally spacious upstairs with several bedrooms perfect for a growing family, and the master bedroom with an attached bathroom and a closet about the size of my old apartment.

“All right, I’m convinced,” I say, running my fingers along the shelving and picturing all my clothes fitting in lovely little piles. “You could’ve just showed me this closet first, you know.”

“I wanted to save the best for last.” I turn to face him, heart swelling, and totally freeze.

Angelo’s down on one knee, staring up with me with a serious look in his eyes.

“What are you doing?” I ask, both my hands moving to my visibly pregnant belly. I’m about ready to burst and looking forward to not waddling around anymore feeling like an overblown balloon, but also dreading those first few months of baby hell.

And now this.

“I love you,” he says quietly and reaches into his pocket. The ring he takes out is beautiful: glittering diamonds, smooth white-gold band, and it must’ve been obscenely expensive. “I should’ve done this months ago.”

“Angelo.”

“Marry me, Sara. I want you to be my wife. I want this baby, I want this life. I want to take care of you until the day that I die. I want to build a family with you. Marry me.”

I step closer and hold out my hand. My fingers shake, my stomach twists, and I swear the baby’s kicking. Maybe she feels how excited and scared I am right now.

This was always part of my path. Good job, good husband, good kids, a nice little unit, all propelling me to greater heights. Except this isn’t the man of my dreams, he’s not what I pictured when I was a little girl growing up and my mother told me I needed to find Prince Charming one day.

Angelo’s rough. He’s violent, and dangerous, and beautiful and loyal, and loving and way more caring than anyone I’ve ever met. He’s a monster, a killer. He’s the father of my child and the only person I’ve ever really loved.

“This isn’t what I pictured, but it’s so much better.”

“Okay,” I say, grinning like an idiot. “I’ll marry you.”

“Damn right you will.” He slides the ring on my finger, stands, and wrap me in his arms. The kiss he plants on my trembling lips is like heaven, like the first kiss but better—it’s a promise of all the days to come, all the kisses still waiting, the thousands of moments we’ll share, the highs and the lows, the pain and the pleasure. I want it all, and I want it with him. “You know, I’m glad you like this place, otherwise I just proposed to you in some random house.”

“Seriously, what if I hated it?”

“I would’ve called our realtor and told him to rescind the offer.”

“Angelo! You didn’t!”

“I know, don’t be angry. I just can’t wait a single day to start our life together.”

I kiss him hard and blink back the tears. “We’re really doing this, aren’t we?”

“We’re really doing it,” he confirms. “Buying a house. Having a kid. Getting married.”

“And working for the Scavo Famiglia.” I sigh and lean my head against his chest. “I never really pictured myself as the sole council for a gangster, you know.”

“You’ll pick up other clients, but I’m sure Carmine will pay you to stay exclusive too, if that’s what you want.”

“The fact that I have options is good enough for now.”

“And listen, no matter what you choose to do, I’m here.” He tilts my chin up and looks into my eyes. “Hear me? No matter what.”

“Even if the cops decide they want revenge for the whole Nicolas thing?”

“Especially then. I can’t *wait* to have an excuse to break some police knees.”

“You’re such a doll.”

He smirks and cups my face. “We both know you’re the doll here.”

I roll my eyes, but he kisses me, and I let him.

I don’t know how I ended up here in my house, with my husband and my baby, living *my* life.

But it feels good. And I’m not letting it go.

“Come on,” Angelo says and takes me by the hand. “Everyone’s waiting.”

“Everyone’s... waiting?”

“You know, your engagement party.”

“Angelo!”

“Sorry to ruin the surprise but I decided it’s not a great idea to shock a woman as pregnant as you are.”

“You’re insane.”

“Seriously, I’m *really* happy you liked this place.” He laughs as he leads me outside, into his truck, and away.

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Preview: Ruined with a Promise

If my cousin Sara Lynn fell into a vat of boiling Pepsi, I'd stand back and watch her drown.

I wouldn't even feel bad about it.

While she begged for my help, I'd remind her about the time she pulled my chair out from under me and I fell straight onto concrete and broke my tailbone, or the time she recorded me sleeping and sent the video to all her friends with the caption 'Neanderthal Snoring,' or the time she broke into my room and stole my pillows and refused to give them back until I admitted that I was the ugliest girl in the whole family. I gave in and said it, and she still wouldn't return them and I slept on an old stuffed bear for a week before Grandpa made her hand them over.

Which is why I never should've gone with her to this homecoming football game.

But the offer was too tempting. She's a senior and I'm barely in eighth grade and I'd never been to a high school football game before. She said she'd take me in front of the whole family at dinner, which meant it was really happening, and I was too excited to really think through what it meant. That I'd be at her mercy there with no adults to help. At the time I figured her mom and dad made her do it out of pity.

Now I'm pretty sure it was another in a long line of torturous practical jokes that aren't funny and only prove that she's an actual monster.

Sara Lynn's smirk is vicious. Light and shadows play across her face as people above us on the concrete bleachers move around between plays. "Stop staring at me like that, Kit-Kat. If you wanna get out from under here then you're gonna have to eat the whole thing, start to finish, and you'd better do it in under ten seconds." She shoves the mustard-drenched hot dog at me and wiggles it up and down. "Come on, Kit-Kat. Get to it. We all know you love to scarf down food."

She cackles and her friends join in. My jaw works but I don't answer. Saying anything right now will only make it worse. Sara Lynn knows I hate hot dogs ever since Grandfather loudly informed me that they will make me *even chubbier and nobody likes a chubby girl* and now the sight of a hot dog repulses me. But Sara Lynn shoves it in my face with a wicked grin while her friends, Laurie and Bronwyn, watch and laugh.

Sara Lynn says, "Come on, it's just food. It's not like I'm asking you to eat bugs. Although—" She bends down and scoops up some bleacher dirt and sprinkles it on top. A little piece of discarded, ancient popcorn adheres to the mustard. "There we go, now it's got a little seasoning. Get chewing, Kit-Kat."

I hate that nickname. It's a dig against my weight, which isn't my fault, I'm only thirteen and it's not like I eat too much junk or whatever. Grandfather won't let me. Tears well up in my eyes, and I blink rapidly to try to stop them from rolling down because crying right now will only make this worse but I'm trapped and cornered and hurt, and I don't know what to do. Sara Lynn's not going to let me leave until I eat all that gross food. Even if I do it, she'll just call me fat and her friends will cackle, and I'll hate myself just as much as I hate them.

Except a voice cuts over the crowd. A guy's voice, low and loud. "What are you doing?"

Everyone looks over as he walks toward us.

Bradford Arc. Or just *Ford* now. He's big, pushing six feet, with broad shoulders and muscular arms. He's a star on the lacrosse team or else he'd be out there on the football field right now playing quarterback or something. Ford's one of the

most popular boys at school, and I've never been this close to him before, let alone ever heard him talk, but Sara Lynn and her two little witch cronies know him. They hang out in the same social circles, and I used to be so jealous that she's popular but if this is how the popular kids act then it's better that I'm a loser.

With Ford here, suddenly I'm mortified. Now I can't stop the tears even if I despise myself for crying in front of him, but at least Sara Lynn isn't paying attention to me anymore.

"We're just having some fun with my little cousin," Sara Lynn says and strokes her hair with her free hand. "It's not a big deal."

"Seriously, Sar? You're bullying a little kid?"

Sara Lynn rolls her eyes. "Whatever, it's not bullying. She's just my stupid little cousin. And she's thirteen, so relax, she's not, like, a baby anymore." She looks at me and her lips curl in distaste. "Wow, seriously, Kat? You're fake crying right now to get attention? That's so pathetic."

Sara Lynn's friends laugh nervously but Ford's staring at them like he wants to break both their perfect little noses and force their parents to let them get even more plastic surgery.

"Leave the girl alone," he says and his voice is almost lost in the roar of the crowd above. "This is pretty sad, Sar. Even for you."

"You're *such* a dork, Ford." Sara Lynn tosses the hot dog on the ground and walks over to him. "What are you doing after this? Are you going to Tommy's house? I hear his parents aren't home and Dean got a keg."

"I might."

Sara Lynn puts a finger on his chest. She smiles seductively, or at least I think that's what she's doing. I've never actually *seen* someone try to be seductive before and it grosses me out that Sara Lynn's acting this way.

Ford stares at her for a long moment and I think he's going to do something like kiss her or touch her hips or something like that, like what boys do to girls in movies. Sara Lynn's pretty in

a way I'll never be: tall, skinny, long blonde hair, big blue eyes. She looks like a member of our family, like an illustrious Stockton, while I look like *the mistaken bastard mix of a junkie daughter and some gutter-rutting stranger*, according to my grandfather.

Instead, Ford grabs her wrist tightly and twists it sharply to the left.

Sara Lynn yelps with pain and surprise. Nobody moves—her friends are too horrified to say anything, and a sudden pulse of excitement runs down into my core as my hands fly to my mouth. My tears are all forgotten as I stare at Ford bending Sara Lynn's wrist to the side, her teeth clenched down in a terrified and pained grimace. She tries to struggle, tries to hit him, but he's twice her size and not smiling at all, only staring at her with a grim expression, as he wrenches her wrist up behind her back and holds her there like she's a child.

"How does it feel to be pushed around by someone bigger?" he says and leans closer, his lips practically kissing her throat. "I can tell you that it feels good to do the pushing. Should I break your wrist? I wonder if I'd like that. I think I'd really *love* to hear you fucking *scream*, Sar. God, that'd be hot."

"Ford," Sara Lynn groans. "Get the fuck off me, please. Don't do this."

"Would you stop if your cousin begged? Would you let her go?"

No, I want to say, *she wouldn't stop*, but I keep my mouth shut. Something tells me this is bigger than I realize. This is Adult. This is Grown-Up Stuff, and I definitely don't understand the dynamics at play here.

"Yes," Sara Lynn gasps. "Please! Let me go! I'd totally stop!"

"Are you going to cry now for some attention, you pathetic loser? You're small, Sar. You're fucking tiny. I could snap your delicate little wrist and I'd love it. I want to watch you roll around on the ground and fucking *sob* your pretty little face off. Nothing would be sexier than to watch you squirm in pain. Don't forget it."

After another beat, he lets her go and shoves her away. She staggers, holding her wrist, and groans as Laurie and Bronwyn run to her side.

“You could’ve really hurt her,” Laurie says fiercely as she runs a hand through her long, dark hair. “What’s wrong with you, Ford?”

“Fuck off, Laurie. All three of you, fuck off, or else I’ll decide I haven’t had enough and take it out on all of you later at Tommy’s.”

Laurie hesitates, looking uncertain, and Bronwyn finally pulls Sara Lynn away.

“Asshole,” Sara Lynn mumbles with tears streaming down her face as they pass and head out from under the bleachers.

Ford watches them go.

I stand there trembling. I’m not crying anymore. I’m too scared to cry. My legs shake so badly I need to sit down but I can’t move. Ford is like a giant and whatever just happened was bad, it was really bad, boys aren’t supposed to hurt girls like that, but Ford did it and he seemed to really enjoy it. That’s not right and I don’t get why he would do something like that for someone like me.

“Uh,” I finally say. Ford’s busy staring off at them and he starts when I speak like he forgot I was there. “Thanks.”

He narrows his eyes. “Sara Lynn’s really your cousin?”

“Yeah. She’s not usually—” I stop myself because that’s not true. “Yeah. She’s my cousin. And seriously, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I didn’t do it for you. For all I fucking care, Sara can throw you off a cliff next time. Good luck with that.”

Ford turns and walks away, his hands shoved in his pockets, his shoulders hunched forward.

I stand there stunned, not sure what to think, caught between happy that Sara Lynn got what she deserved and horrified at Ford’s sudden and sadistic violence.

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