



Mistletoe

MI**BSTER**

THE VERY MERRY MOB
CASSIE MINT

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Mistletoe Mobster

OceanofPDF.com

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One

Leah



T*wo weeks ago*

It's always quiet in the bookshop after hours. The street outside is still loud with the roar of passing cars and bursts of drunken laughter from the nearest bar, but in here, it gets nice and sleepy.

Maybe it's antisocial of me, but this is my favorite part of a shift: dimming the welcome lights in the doorway and flipping the lock, then turning back to the maze of bookshelves. My own private wonderland.

What should I watch with dinner tonight? There's that new drama on Netflix, or I could listen to a podcast—

A thud rattles the door, and I leap back with a shriek. A shape moves behind the glass.

My heart pounds in my throat. "...H-hello?"

I'm not opening that door. Not for a million bucks. Not while I'm all alone in this shadowy bookstore, and I've never

thrown a punch in my freaking life, and the laughter from the bar down the street sounds extra harsh tonight. I creep closer to the front door, my hands clammy where they grip my sweater sleeves, and peer through the frosted glass window into the gloom.

A shadow moves across the door—a pale face, staring back with wild eyes.

“Gah!” I stagger back again, horrified, and dash toward the phone on the store counter. I’ve never been much of a runner, but you’d better believe I’m hustling now. I’m ready to vault clean over the new releases table.

“Please.” A man’s voice drifts through the door, deep and rough around the edges. He thumps the door again, but gentler this time. “I’m hurt. Let me in.”

Right. That’s got to be serial killer 101: make your hapless victim feel sorry for you so she opens the door willingly, then kill her gruesomely on the floor of her own bookshop. I don’t think so. We don’t have that Crime Fiction section for nothin’.

“I’m calling 911,” I yell, and it’s part warning, part an offer of help. “I’ll tell them to send an ambulance.”

“Fuck. Don’t do that.” The man lets out a string of curses, low and angry, and drops his forehead against the door. It rattles again, and I wince, creeping closer with the phone in my palm.

Why haven’t I called yet? If this man dies on my doorstep, it’s on me. I can see the headlines now: *Local bookshop*

haunted by doorstep ghost. Business has been hard enough lately, but with a body count? Forget it.

And yet...

It makes no sense, but something about the stranger outside stills my thumb. It's like his voice was familiar somehow, or his being here gives me *deja vu*. Like we've met before, or his coming here was always going to happen.

Spooky.

"Buddy, if you want medical help, that's how it comes."

"Not your buddy," the man snarls, then cuts off with a groan. Crap, he really sounds like he's in pain. "Got my own doctor. Let me come in and call."

I pull a face he can't see.

Does the mystery man sound trustworthy? Nope, not at all. All I know is I don't want to let a stranger in the store—but I don't want to send away a hurt person, either. Choices, choices.

What would Aunt Karen do?

My fingers tremble against the lock. "If you try any funny business, I'll scream so loud it bursts your eardrums. And—and I'll bash your head in with a hardback. Got it?"

A huffed laugh blurs into another groan. "Got it. Come on, open up."

I must have lost my damn mind, because I do it: I flip the lock and swing the door open.

Huh.

The man on the stoop is tall and broad shouldered, dressed all in black with snowflakes settling on the lapels of his coat. His clothes are tailored and well made, and his dark hair and stubble are fancy—hey, maybe he could've offered me a million bucks after all, he looks that slick.

The stranger slumps against the door frame, eyes glittering as they stare into mine. The cold's whistling in past him, cutting straight through my clothes.

“Um.” I clear my throat, nerves squirming in my belly, and wave an arm at the store. “Come in.”

I still have the phone, squeezed tight in my fist until the plastic creaks. I could still call 911. It's not too late.

Because what kind of person doesn't want you to call an ambulance? No one you want in your bookshop after hours, that's for sure.

Damn it, Leah.

I've made a dumbass move, but it's too late to take it back. Just need to see this through, and hopefully I'll finish the night with a caramel hot chocolate and not in a shallow grave.

Don't need to make it easy for him, though.

“Leave that open,” I say when the man goes to close the door behind him. “And, um. Keep your distance.”

The words feel so rude as I force them out, but his mouth quirks with something like approval. “Smart girl.” Then he

takes a step, and all the humor drains from his face, leaving nothing but ashen skin and stark lines. His body is so tense, *my* muscles are aching in sympathy.

Can't fake pain like that.

"There's a chair over here." I lead the stranger on a slow, agonized procession through the shelves to the kids' area where I read aloud to them every Saturday, and point at the bright orange velvet armchair on its polka dot rug. When he lowers himself down with a hiss, I shove the phone into his hand. He took way too long to cross the bookshop, and his breathing is ragged.

Wow. I really hope he doesn't die here. What do you even do with a dead body? Aunt Karen would know. Heck, she's probably made a few.

I nod at the phone. "Call your doctor. You're dripping blood through my store."

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Two

Leah



I'd love to be a Florence Nightingale figure. A person with an iron stomach and unflappable sense of calm, who bandages wounds without a single twitch. But when the stranger leans back in the armchair, peeling his coat open and showing a dark shirt soaked with blood, my tongue is suddenly way too big in my mouth.

“You gonna throw up?” He watches me closely as the phone rings, the handset propped between his shoulder and ear. Apart from his ashen skin and shallow breathing, you'd never know he's hurt. “I can take it from here. Bring that kit over and go.”

Ass. He thinks just 'cause I let him in, he's free to boss me around? Well, Aunt Karen left me in charge, and I don't take that responsibility lightly. The first aid kit rattles in my hands and I force myself to walk forward. “I'm not leaving you in my store unattended.”

The man huffs. “I'm not going to steal your shitty notebooks. Relax.”

I hate this guy.

“They are not *shitty*.” I ordered them from a glossy catalog last month. Took me ages to pick out my favorites, and they’ve sold like hot cakes ever since.

My knees hit the polka dot rug, and the man’s eyebrows bounce up his forehead. Heat crawls over my cheeks, and I know how it looks, but I’m kneeling for first aid reasons. That’s all. “They’re hand-tooled Italian leather. Now let me see.”

A faint coppery scent fills the air when he shifts, peeling his coat open wider—the wound’s just above his hip on one side, the blood turning his dark shirt the color of tar. The sticky fabric clings to his body like a second skin, and I breathe through my mouth as I fumble the first aid kit open.

“Hey.”

I glance up, but he’s not talking to me. He fires off rapid instructions in Italian to the person on the phone, his stormy gray eyes never leaving my face, and my stomach swoops under the force of his gaze.

Definitely mob.

I frown at the stranger. He smirks.

Then he hangs up, and the motion of tossing the phone to the rug makes him stiffen again, cursing under his breath. Sweat beads his forehead, and his lips look way too pale.

Oh, hell no. This mobster is not dying in the kids’ reading area. Such bad vibes.

Rocking back on my heels, I slap my thighs. There are goosebumps beneath my black tights, but I blame the cold. “I have vodka upstairs.”

That helps with pain, right? And with cleaning a wound? That’s what they use in the movies, anyway. I may have lived my whole life before now through books and other stories, but at least I’ve learned a thing or two.

But the man rolls his eyes. “Don’t insult me with shitty booze.”

Well, then. I tilt my head, voice hard. “Maybe you should wait out on the sidewalk after all.”

Because if there’s one guarantee, it’s that this stranger is nothing but trouble. He’s already dripped blood through my store and stained my vintage velvet armchair, and the frosty air from the street outside keeps gusting through the open door. Every now and then, a flurry of snowflakes whirls through the shop and makes me shiver.

A burst of laughter echoes from the bar a few doors down. I swallow hard against a surge of foreboding.

What am I doing?

Seriously, how did I get here?

Maybe he can sense my plummeting mood, because the man sighs softly and leans forward an inch. A hand spreads over his chest, and I try not to notice how strong and masculine it is, with those long fingers and squared knuckles and that expensive watch.

A signet ring glints on one finger. Is he married? He's still watching me with those gray eyes. "Forgive me, bella."

He shouldn't call me that if he's married... but then I'm sure plenty of criminals step out on their wives. Their moral code is not a top priority.

Doesn't matter. Lethal wound. Focus.

"I'm not trained or anything." Band-aids and rolls of gauze and antiseptic wipes slither everywhere as I dig through the first aid kit. "I mean, I did a day course last March, but I don't *really* know what I'm doing." I hated every second of that course, too. They showed us this slideshow of gross household injuries and I nearly threw up. "Your doctor's coming soon, right?"

"Yes." The man unbuttons his shirt with stiff movements then peels it open wide, and I fight the urge to wolf whistle. He is *fine*. Sculpted and trim with dark hair dusting his chest, and his stomach muscles may be tensed from the pain, but they're giving me all kinds of inappropriate thoughts.

He hisses between his teeth as the fabric clings to the wound before giving way. Blood oozes from the cut, thick and gloopy. Gross.

"Just slow the bleeding. He'll do the rest."

Ugh.

Okay. Okay.

My face twists into a grimace as I press a cotton pad against the bloody gash in the man's side. Heat washes over

my knuckles, and he grunts, abs twitching, then spreads a warm palm over mine and drags me firmer against his skin. “Press harder, bella. It’s deep.”

It’s a stab wound is what it is. Nothing else it could be. “Did you deserve it?” I ask, voice strangled.

I mean, most people don’t just get stabbed for no reason—and this guy oozes danger with his dark, expensive clothes, the glint in his eyes, and the way his powerful body sprawls in my armchair like a panther.

His smile has sharp edges. I can feel this man’s pulse thudding under his skin. “Depends who you ask, I suppose.”

I snort, because the thought of me asking around after this stranger is ludicrous. My survival instincts may be rusty, but they *do* exist, thank you. “I think I know better than to ask anyone anything.”

His eyes glitter. “I knew I liked you.”

Oof. I’ve always known there was a screw loose in my head; whenever I read a romance book or watch an adventure movie, I always crush on the villain. But how have I found myself alone in the store with a stranger after dark, pressing down on his lethal wound with butterflies in my belly? I should be scared, right? Or at least counting down the seconds until he’s gone.

Instead I’m... *enjoying* myself, the nagging concern for his wound aside. I keep gnawing on my bottom lip, wondering

how I can get him to say more in that deep, rough voice. He smells good, too. Like a citrus aftershave.

Okay, I've been quiet too long. It's getting weird. "While I have you here, shall I tell you about our winter special offers?"

The man tips his head back and lets out a rich laugh, and even though it must hurt his wound, we're both delighted when he looks at me again.

This is so surreal. I love it.

"I know you're not a notebook fan," I go on, gathering steam, "but I bet I can find the book for you. Is Crime your genre?"

The stranger rolls his eyes. "Too obvious."

"Historical fiction?"

He feigns a yawn. I chuckle, then remember to press hard against his wound. He grunts again.

"Sorry. Romance?"

My face heats as he reaches out and curls a lock of my brown hair around his knuckle, rubbing the strands with his thumb, and... crap. I've forgotten how to breathe.

"If you like."

Please god, let him not be married. "Okay, I give up. What do you normally read?"

"Threats, mostly." A smirk flashes across his face, here then gone. "But a man can change. Which is *your* favorite genre, bella?"

I start to answer, but across the store, the bookshop door slams shut. Footsteps thump along the carpet in quick strides, and a man appears between the shelves in an open black coat. He's gripping a leather medical bag in one hand and he looks pissed as hell.

With tanned skin and wavy dark blond hair, thick framed glasses and a square jaw, the man staring down at me is clearly very handsome.

Even more worrying, then, that I only have eyes for the sharp-tongued jerk bleeding all over Aunt Karen's armchair. "Um." I shuffle closer to the wounded stranger. "Is that your doctor?"

He's still holding a lock of my hair, and he tugs gently on the strands. "Yes, that's Raul. Don't worry about him, bella. He's a pussy cat."

He doesn't *look* like a pussy cat. He looks like an angry mountain lion in glasses.

I turn to the man stroking my lock of hair. We're closer than I realized, my body wedged between his spread thighs. "And *you* are?"

"Nico Falasca," the newcomer answers for him, striding closer and dropping his medical bag with a thump. "Since he's feeling so free with names." The two men exchange loaded looks, and my heart sinks.

Okay, I definitely know too much. Will they kill me for this? For helping?

Will anyone tell Aunt Karen what happened to me? Will anyone else even care?

I always figured my life would be quiet and cozy and kind of dull. Not that it would end with a watery grave.

“I’m Leah,” I say, in case it humanizes me or whatever.
“And, uh. I’m very good at keeping secrets, I swear.”

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Three

Nico



“Don’t even think about it.” Raul’s hands are much rougher than the pretty bookshop owner’s, manhandling me into a better position on the display table. The wood is cool against my bare back, and pain lances down my side as I stretch out.

The neat stacks of hardbacks that were here before must have taken Leah a long time, but she cleared them with a single barked order from the doctor, piling them neatly on the store counter. Didn’t complain about my getting blood all over another piece of furniture, either.

She’s scrubbing at the stains on the armchair now with a bowl of hot soapy water and a cloth, pretending not to watch us through the curtain of her hair.

Her soft, silky hair.

Fuck.

She smelled so good when I had her close. Like brown sugar and spice. Would she smell like that everywhere if I peeled off her bottle green shorts and Doc Martens? Her

slouchy white sweater that I already stained with blood? Is she soft and creamy all over?

“I mean it,” Raul mutters, reaching into his bag below the table, then placing a whiskey bottle by my elbow with a thump. “Don’t get attached. You know how that story ends.”

Yeah, yeah. Are all doctors miserable as sin? I glare at mine as he tosses his coat over a nearby display stand then rolls his shirtsleeves to the elbow. Raul’s knees crack as he crouches, rummaging in his medical bag, and I unscrew the whiskey bottle and prop myself up to take a long swig.

It burns all the way down, scorching a trail through my chest. I take another and another, because one thing’s for sure: this is gonna hurt.

When I tip my head back with a groan, the ceiling is blurry. Better.

“This won’t be fun,” Raul promises, pulling out a fresh needle and surgical thread and a small bottle of clear alcohol.

Well, what else is new? I gulp down another swig.

“In the movies, they bite down on a strip of leather.” Leah’s voice makes me jump, and I glance up to find her by my shoulder. She chews her bottom lip—plush and pink; would look perfect wrapped around my cock—then slowly, like I’m a wild animal that might lash out, reaches out and cards her fingers through my hair.

Jesus Christ. I buck into her hand, the scratch of her nails sending shivers down my spine.

“You’ll want to stay back,” Raul says stiffly, and I know he wants her gone so he can have an empty space to work. It’s clear from the rigid set of his shoulders and the way he keeps glancing at his bag—at the *other* tools he keeps in there.

If he lays a finger on her, I’ll shatter both his kneecaps. Drunk or not, I’ll do it. *No one* touches Leah.

“This is going to hurt him, even with the whiskey,” Raul tells her, unscrewing the clear alcohol. “Nico might thrash. Go on home and I’ll take it from here.”

“I *am* home.” Fuck, she looks cute when she’s angry. Leah’s cheeks are bright pink, and she’s squaring up to the doctor even though she’s pint-sized. He could squash her like a bug.

Don’t like that thought. I hook a finger through her belt loop and tug her closer, my head fuzzy. “You live here, baby?”

If Raul rolls his eyes any harder, they’ll get stuck pointing at the back of his skull.

Leah ignores him, still scratching my scalp. Feels like heaven on earth—worth the stab wound, that’s for sure. “Yeah. There’s an apartment above the bookshop. I live up there.”

“Alone?”

Raul shakes his head as he threads the needle, but I’m just checking. For security reasons.

“Yep. Since my Aunt Karen left, it’s just me.” When Leah leans down, the ends of her hair tickling my bare chest, I breathe in a chestful of brown sugar and spice. So good.

Her voice is soft in my ear. Husky and private. “And that’s not a wedding ring on your hand, is it, Nico Falasca?”

“Nope,” I agree happily, swigging the whiskey one more time before laying flat with a thump. “No ring, baby. I’m all yours.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Raul begins, but we both freeze when Leah’s hands land on my belt buckle. She’s not—is she—? In front of *Raul*?

“Bite down on this.” I relax against the table again as Leah pulls my belt from its loops. The leather whispers against fabric, my hips lifting an inch to help her out, and I can’t meet Raul’s eye. I know what we both thought for a second there.

He’ll never see her that way. I decide on the spot: he’ll never get a single goddamn glimpse of her like that.

Leah is *mine*.

The leather creaks as I bite down, sinking my teeth into the belt. That does help, actually.

“Ready?” Raul asks, peeling the cotton pad off my wound.

Glancing around, I catch Leah’s wrist and put her hand back in my hair. Then I screw my eyes shut and nod.

Fingernails scratch at my scalp.

Ready.

* * *

“You know you can’t keep her.”

The street blurs past the tinted car windows, snowflakes pattering against the glass. I'm still woozy from the whiskey, cracking the nearest window to gulp down fresh air, but my head's clearer now. Getting a stab wound stitched up is sobering like that.

“Keep who?”

I wanna play dumb, but Raul's not buying it. His knee keeps jiggling, and he's staring at me with his arms folded over his chest. That magazine-worthy hair is all rucked up from running his hands through it, and there's a smudge on the right lens of his glasses.

Our doctor has had a long night. Yeah, that's on me.

“If Santo finds out you gave our names like that, that you linked us with a stabbing, he'll wipe her out.”

Cars rumble past on the street, engines purring. “Then he'd better not find out.”

I say it lightly, but I know Raul hears my unspoken words. If he gets Leah hurt, I'll kill him without a second thought, loyalty be damned.

“For fuck's sake, Nico.” Raul pinches the bridge of his nose, the way he always does when he has a migraine coming on. I'd feel bad if he didn't keep threatening Leah. “What am I supposed to tell Santo?”

“Tell him some asshole got me by the docks, and you came and stitched me up in a bookshop. Tell him to send a clean up crew over there. And... tell him the owner was out.”

“Nico.”

“She won’t say anything.” I know it surer than I know my own name. “Leah won’t cause us any trouble. Trust me on this.”

Her touch was so soft in my hair. Did she really ask if I’m married, or did I dream that part?

The car slows for a red light, and I tip my head back against the leather seat, trying to remember every detail of the bookshop owner. She was a fiery little thing, all soft curves and pink cheeks. A quick thinker, too.

Thanks to her my belt’s rolled up, studded with teeth marks and stuffed in Raul’s medical bag. Maybe some other asshole can chew on it soon.

“You know if he finds out we lied...”

“I’ll take the fall.”

Raul gusts out a sigh, and I know I’ve won when he takes off his glasses, polishing the lenses on his shirt. His question is an afterthought. “Was it the Bulgarians again?”

I pause, because I forgot about this. In the haze of meeting Leah, I left out a key detail.

“No. It wasn’t them this time.” My throat is dry as I turn to stare out of the window, my head pounding from the whiskey. I’ve got a bad feeling, and it’s not just the freshly stitched wound.

“It wasn’t the Serpicos, either. This was something new.”

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Four

Leah



P*resent day*

Nico Falasca thinks he's so sneaky, but I *see* him ducking inside that bus stop over the way. For the last two weeks, he's been hanging around my bookshop like a stupidly handsome ghoul, spying on me from different spots on the street.

First it was the bar three doors down, his coat collar turned up against the wind as he leaned against the brick outer wall, cigarettes glowing like fireflies between the teeth of the smokers all around him.

Then it was the neighbor's fire escape. Then an open topped bus trundling past. One afternoon, he even sat chatting in the barbershop over the road, watching me through the window as the old fella trimmed his hair, bold as anything.

Honestly. Don't they learn how to lurk properly in the mob? Pretty sure Nico's not supposed to grin at me this much, shrugging like he meant to get caught.

I don't mind him hanging around. Not really. Not now that I've accepted he's not here to kill me or shut me up—that if anything, Nico Falasca seems... protective.

A few nights ago, I forgot to lock the front door before checking on all the shelves. He crept up and did it on my behalf, the *thunk* echoing around the empty bookshop. I stood there waiting in the darkness, but he didn't come in.

Sure wish he'd talk to me. What's the point in lurking if he keeps his distance forever?

"Is there blood in this?" A harried voice floats across the store, and I stiffen behind the counter. Crap. I thought I got it all—I scrubbed all night at the stains until my hands were raw, and I swear the next evening when I came home from my barre class, the store smelled like extra strong bleach. A gift from Nico, I figured.

I even sewed a new cover for the reading armchair. Emerald green velvet, good as new.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I force a polite smile. "Blood?"

A redheaded woman with a severe bob and a bored teenage son holds up a new release from the Crime fiction table. "Yes, is there violence in this book?"

I squint across the room at the title: *The Butcher of Oslo*. The letters are steel gray, etched over the image of a snowy white street criss-crossed with crimson footprints. "Um." I

fiddle with my cardigan. “Yes. But we have plenty of books without violence in our other sections...”

She’s already turned away, hissing something at her son. Cool. That’s cool.

If Aunt Karen were here, she’d whisper something hilarious and awful in my ear. She’d *love* Nico, too. Her next video call can’t come soon enough.

Does Nico have family? Are they also in the mob?

Will I ever meet them—you know, and live to tell the tale?

Can’t imagine the mafia settling down to Thanksgiving dinner. Nor do I think Raul was my biggest fan, but in my defense, he was way too casual about threatening to kill me. Nico thought I didn’t notice, but I did.

It’s messed up that I want to see my mobster again so badly. Even Aunt Karen has better survival instincts than this.

* * *

The afternoon goes slow. Thursdays always do—they’re sleepy days, when the traffic outside is muffled like the cars are wrapped in cotton wool, and even the ticking store clock seems lethargic. It’s cloudy out today, with fluffy white snowflakes dancing on the breeze.

Is Nico cold out there in that bus stop?

No. Doesn’t matter.

He’s a grown-ass mobster; he can take care of himself.

For hours, I serve customers in a dreamy haze, taking breaks when the shop is quiet to neaten up the shelves and dust the display tables. The radio plays nothing but holiday tunes, and my jaw cracks every time I yawn.

Nico and Raul were exciting, I'll give them that. The hours they spent in my bookshop were the most alive I've felt in months.

"Excuse me." A man's deep voice pulls me out of my daydream, and I glance over from where I'm sorting the letter Ps back into alphabetical order. A customer stands in the center of the store, hands spread in a goofy plea. He's wearing a smart gray coat and a red tartan scarf, and on the spot, I decide he's probably a dentist. He has that vibe. "Any chance you know what five year old girls are reading these days?"

Hell yeah I do, and I'm already grinning, pushing away from the shelf. "Depends on the little girl. Is she into horses or ballet? Ice skating or softball?"

The man flushes pink. "Uh. Yes."

Figured.

I snort, leading the poor guy over to the kids' section, and already I'm more awake. This is my favorite part of running a bookshop: chatting with customers and finding them the perfect read, like some literary matchmaker. I'm so wrapped up in serving the maybe-dentist that I don't notice the tinkling bell of someone entering the shop. By the time footsteps prowl around the shelves, I'm kneeling on the polka dot rug and pulling glossy kids' books off the shelves.

“This one’s super cute, it’s about a mouse who opens a bakery—”

I cut off, glancing up at the newcomer. Nico leans against the bookshelves, watching me work with strong arms folded over his chest and a sour expression.

Guess he’s not thrilled to find me kneeling at the feet of another man. But the shelves are near the floor, and what else am I supposed to do? Bend over?

“One moment, sir,” I tell the mobster, widening my eyes.

Nico glowers. Seeing him up close again with that powerful body and stormy gaze makes me flush hot all over. Were his cheekbones always that sharp? The barber did a great job with his scruff.

“Oh, I don’t know,” the dentist laughs weakly from my other side, “I’m clueless about these things. This could take a while.”

Oh dear.

That was not a wise statement.

Slowly, so slowly, the mobster turns his gaze on the other man. I wince, squeezing the book in my hand, and silently pray that my bookshop won’t see any more blood stains this month. At what point do I become an accessory to Nico’s crimes?

Soft and deadly, the mobster says: “Choose your book.”

The dentist splutters, but I let out a relieved sigh.

Two minutes later, I'm waving goodbye to the harried man as he makes a beeline for the door, a brown paper bag of books tucked under one arm. Nico waits for him to leave, then strolls around the bookshop counter, invading my personal space like he owns it.

Jerk.

I really shouldn't like it this much.

But sure enough, my breath catches as he cages me in against the counter, gripping the wood on either side of my ribs, and as he towers over me, my head swims. I bite back a smile. "Why were you kneeling for him, bella?"

He's dressed all in black again today, his clothes tailored and speckled with snowflakes. Is the black a fashion statement, or is it to hide the inevitable blood splatters?

"For sexual reasons, obviously."

I grin as Nico glares, squeezing the wood counter behind me until it creaks. Definitely shouldn't provoke the mobster like this, but I can't help myself—and I know in my bones that he'd never hurt me.

Spank me, maybe. Boss me around, sure.

But hurt me? Nope, where I'm concerned, Nico Falasca is all bark but no bite. Just like I'm blustering about *sexual reasons* but I've never touched a man like that in my whole life.

"You are trying to make me jealous," Nico grinds out.

“Trying and succeeding.”

In fairness, he makes it very easy. The mobster is wound tight, a muscle leaping in his jaw, and with his warmth so near my front, the faint scent of his citrus aftershave in the air, he’s not the only one struggling to keep his cool.

There are only a few inches between us. I could spread my palm over his hard stomach; could feel the ridged muscles through his open coat, the fabric of his shirt warm under my touch. Could slide my hand lower—

“You need to be more careful.” Nico speaks softly, scanning the bookshop over my shoulder, and oh yeah: the rest of the world still exists. There’s a teenage couple giggling in the travel section, and an old man keeps peeking over at us from the new releases, scandalized at my behavior. Oops. “Don’t tuck yourself away with strangers. They may not be who they seem.”

My scoff is breathless. It’s hard to think when he’s this near, caging me in, his gaze dropping to my mouth before it shoots back to my eyes. The mobster is taller than me. Bigger, stronger, harsher. More *everything*.

“I hardly think that dentist was any kind of threat—”

“You don’t know.” Without warning, Nico grabs my wrist, holding my arm between us with two fingers on my pulse point. He watches me, eyebrows lowered, as my heart thrums faster. “The people who hurt me may have seen me take shelter here. They may come for you.”

I swallow hard, tongue heavy. “Why would they do that?”

“To hurt me even worse,” Nico says, like it’s the simplest thing in the world.

Um. What?

The radio splutters on the edge of the counter, a Christmas song crackling as it hits the second verse. The cheeriness is jarring. The shop door tinkles again, the old man shuffling out into the cold, and a wintry breeze gusts through the open doorway.

I did not sign on for this: threats and blood and feeling the hairs rise on the back of my neck. I snatch my arm back, but not before Nico feels my pulse spike in fear. He nods, all grim satisfaction now that his message has been received.

“You will regret helping me that night, bella.”

Well, hell. Maybe I already do.

Except... no. I don’t and I never will, because the alternative is too awful to think about: Nico Falasca left out on the frosty sidewalk outside my bookshop with a stab wound in his side, in terrible pain and unable to call for help.

The mobster jolts as I place both palms on his waist. The open sides of his coat brush against my forearms, and he’s so vibrant, so solid, so *alive*. Surprise flits across his handsome face and makes him seem vulnerable, if only for a split second.

My thumbs rub against his shirt. “I won’t regret it.”

Nico lets out a slow breath.

“And you won’t let anyone hurt me.”

He pauses, then nods. So that’s settled, right? Rightly or wrongly, I trust this strange man, and there’s one more thing left to handle between us.

I jerk my head toward the cardboard box of holiday decorations on the counter, tangled string lights and tinsel exploding through the open top.

“Look there.”

Nico frowns at the box of decorations, and I see it: the exact moment he spots the sprig of mistletoe snarled in the tinsel. One eyebrow lifts, and the corner of his mouth twitches.

“How festive.”

His body is warm and sculpted under my hands. Has his wound healed well? If I pressed my front against his, would it hurt? “I’m deciding where to hang it. Any ideas?”

“Behind the counter,” Nico says immediately, plucking the mistletoe from the box. He spins the sprig between his thumb and forefinger, seemingly fascinated by the white berries and dark leaves. “Or better yet: upstairs in your apartment. Somewhere only I can find you, Leah.”

It’s the first time he’s used my name today. I bite my lip, giddy feelings bouncing around my chest like firecrackers, and when he holds the mistletoe over my head, one eyebrow raised, I just about die on the spot.

The sounds of the bookshop fade away as Nico lowers his head. There’s no radio, no whispering teenagers, no rumble of

traffic outside. There's only the hitch of my breath and the rustle of our clothes. My gasp as his mouth meets mine.

...God.

Nico Falasca kisses like a very bad man.

I was not prepared, because there's nothing polite or gentle about it, nothing to ease me in—he's all heat and nipping teeth and the scratch of his stubble against my cheeks, strong hands roaming up and down my sides like he owns me, the sprig of mistletoe tossed on the counter and forgotten. Nico feasts on me, hungry and harsh, and all I can do is sway in his powerful arms, some part of my brain desperately wondering how I got here.

Never mind that I'm at work, or that we've only met once before. Never mind that kissing this man is a really, really bad idea.

I'm lost, whimpering and breathless. When Nico's tongue rubs against mine, I melt like a snowflake hitting hot water.

His dark chuckle floats through my brain and I fight my way back to reality, tearing my mouth away and slumping against the counter. Jeez. So much for dignity.

My chest heaves beneath my sweater dress, and I feel like I just ran twenty blocks. What is there to say after that? Oh, yeah.

“Raul's gonna be so pissed off.”

Nico smirks, but he doesn't look flustered at all, the big jerk. He tucks my hair behind my ear, his touch lingering. He's

standing a lot closer than before.

Can he feel how I'm burning up? Does he sense how slick I am between my legs, aching and needy? How badly I want him already?

The knowing glint in his eyes says yes, he knows exactly how riled up I am, and he's smug as hell about it.

"So you'll stay behind the bookshop counter," Nico says, like we never paused our earlier conversation for a sprig of mistletoe. "You won't wander off behind the shelves with strange men."

"And you'll keep spying on me like a weirdo," I return, cranky and embarrassed by the change of subject. Did our kiss really not affect him? Not at *all*? Was it just a festive game? "Until you get bored or I call the cops, I guess."

Nico tilts his head. "You won't call the cops."

It's not a threat the way he says it. Nothing like Raul's veiled promises of violence that night, the doctor glancing longingly at his medical bag. He's simply stating a fact and daring me to contradict him.

I fold my arms. "And you won't get bored." My words are more confident than I feel.

The shop is quiet behind us. Deserted at last, with only the bookshelves and window display to witness my jangled nerves.

Nico gives one final gentle tug on my hair before strolling toward the exit. "Take care, Leah. I'll be watching."

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Five

Nico



When Santo tells us all to meet in his study for a drink, that sounds like fun—but it’s never fun. It’s always business with Santo De Rossi.

Business with the finest Italian brandy in the world, but still. You’d be an idiot coming to the compound hoping for a good time.

“Raul. Update.”

I stifle a yawn down at my end of the table. Usually, I’d be up nearer the boss, but I’ve been relegated down this end with the meatheads. Punishment for letting myself get stabbed, I guess.

It’s not unreasonable. Walking along the docks whistling was a rookie error, but it’s extra hard to concentrate down here with Gianni’s cologne stinging my nose.

“The Bulgarians are laying low...”

Raul always sounds so goddamn serious when he gives his reports, like he’s reading the eulogy at a funeral. Snore.

Though I guess I should be grateful, since two weeks have passed and Santo still has no clue about my bookshop beauty.

Leah's safe. Sweet and sexy.

Mine.

The doctor leans back in his chair as he speaks and I squint along the table, fighting to concentrate.

It's so warm in here with the fire. Stuffy, baking us in Gianni's cologne. Will it draw attention if I get up and crack a window?

"...following up on a lead, but it's not much to go on..."

Oh, come on. Can't I just have been stabbed by a random piece of shit? Some desperate asshole with nothing to lose, out prowling for shits and giggles down by the water? I've guarded Leah for weeks now, and there hasn't been a single peep.

Why has everything gotta be a goddamn conspiracy?

"Nico." The boss's voice is low and measured. He never has to raise his voice, Santo. He speaks with the absolute certainty that we'll listen.

I straighten in my seat. "Yes, boss."

"I hear you've been wandering off lately." Seated at the head of the table, Santo swirls his drink, watching the liquid catch the light. With his dark hair and sharp jaw, his open shirt collar and the shadows under his eyes, a stranger might

mistake him for any one of us. Overworked and hardened by life.

Not for long, though. Not once Santo's piercing blue eyes land on you. Then you're rooted to the spot, a bead of sweat trickling down your spine.

"Care to share?" The boss's mouth quirks in a half smile, but there's no humor there.

I fight a full body shiver and blurt, "I'm not stepping out," like a prize idiot.

No shit. Only a fool would go behind Santo De Rossi's back, spreading our secrets around the town. Even suggesting it is a death wish. A few seats down from the boss, Raul closes his eyes, like he can't stand to watch this car crash a second longer.

"I never said you were." That velvet voice could give a grown man nightmares. I force a grin like this is all a hilarious joke, like the boss isn't staring at me without blinking. "But where have you been?"

My mouth is so dry.

Can't tell him about Leah. Won't do it. I'd rather end the night at the bottom of the river than sell out my girl. And you'd think I'd have seen this coming, you'd think I'd have an answer queued and ready, but I've been all tangled up in thoughts of Leah and now I'm paying the price.

My back is damp beneath my shirt, my stitches hot and itchy in my side. When I clear my throat, it's way too loud, but

Raul speaks before I can force out a lie.

“He met a girl.”

...Molten rage.

It courses through me; fills me up and cooks my skin. How fucking *dare* he. Any harm that comes to Leah, I’ll repay to the doctor ten times over—I don’t care how many times he’s saved my life.

“She’s nothing,” I say quickly, the lie bitter on my tongue. Leah’s *everything*, but Santo De Rossi doesn’t need to know that. The less he knows about her, the better, because god forbid that Santo might think I’m too distracted. “A piece of skirt, that’s all. I’ll stop seeing her, boss.”

Santo leans back, stroking his jaw, still watching me. Always watching. Studying me like he sees inside my skull, all my most private thoughts splayed out for him to read. The fire dances in the grate beside the table, casting golden light across the room, lighting up the bottom half of the De Rossi family oil paintings.

Right now, they’re a bunch of over-intimidating legs. Not a helpful observation. And I’m all ready to push my chair back, to fall into a defensive stance, but Santo clicks his tongue.

This time when his mouth twitches, there’s a flash of warmth. A rare sight for our ice cold leader. “Check in more often, Nico. No more secrets, but keep your girl. I’d hate for you to sulk around the compound with a broken heart.”

Low chuckles echo around the room and I huff a pained laugh of my own. As if I'd ever go to the boss for comfort. To get drunk, maybe, but to mope about Leah? Never.

She's too good for any of this. I don't even want her name spoken in this house.

"Gianni." Santo's moved on, his gaze tracking further along the table. "Talk to me about diamonds."

As the conversation moves along, I'm not the only one sinking an inch down in my seat, tension bleeding from my frame. Up near the boss, Raul plucks his glasses off his nose and polishes them with a scrap of cloth from his pocket, frowning at his hands as he works. His stupid Hollywood-looking mouth is all pouty, like *he* has a right to be mad.

I'll kick his ass for this. Near miss or not, he risked Leah.

Hey, Raul's a doctor. He can fix his own scrapes.

* * *

Leah's street quietens down at night, especially once the bar closes its doors. The occasional cab trundles past, splashing through shallow puddles, and lamplight bounces off the wet sidewalk.

The snow's melted again. Hope Leah wasn't too excited about that. If I could boss the weather around for her, I would.

Over the last few weeks, I've chosen my favorite guarding spots. Some nights I like to keep watch from her neighbor's fire escape; some nights I pick my way over the roof. Tonight,

with fear still coppery on my tongue, I wedge myself right in her shadowy bookshop stoop, a meat shield against the world.

“I knew it.”

Raul’s voice is no surprise, but it’s definitely not welcome. His footsteps smack against the sidewalk, and he’s agitated when he reaches me, cheeks flushed like he’s been slapped.

Hey, the night’s still young.

The doctor came out without a scarf, his collar open to the wind. He’ll catch a chill waltzing around like that.

“Go home, Raul. Or better yet, go and finish selling me out to Santo. Asshole.” I know I sound petty, but I can’t help grumbling, pressing my back harder against Leah’s door. If he wants me to stop protecting her, he’ll have to peel me off the painted wood.

Can’t believe he told the boss about Leah. Doesn’t he realize she’s more important than any of us?

One day this prick will fall for a woman of his own and have his whole world turned upside down—and I will laugh.

“I knew you had a screw loose, Nico, but this is bullshit. If Santo finds you here—”

“The boss gave his blessing.” My smile is unpleasant. “Didn’t you hear? You should really listen when he talks, Raul. You might miss something important.”

“He gave his blessing for you to keep screwing some random woman that you don’t care about.” Raul jerks his chin

up at the silent windows high above us, dark and slanted with moonlight. Leah's apartment. "That's not what this is, and don't try to tell me I'm wrong. I'm not fucking blind."

I lean closer, peering at his glasses. It's childish, but I can't help myself. "You sure about that?"

Raul's curses echo down the empty street, and I grin, settling back in Leah's stoop.

No one's getting through me tonight. I already spent way too long away from here—hours and hours at the compound, when anyone could've got to her. Unacceptable.

"It's been weeks." Raul's only saying what I've been thinking lately, but I'll never admit that. "If they were going to come for her, they'd already have tried it."

"We don't even know who they are."

If there is a *they*. If my stabbing really was the opening gambit to some grand conspiracy. If this isn't just Santo getting paranoid as he approaches midlife.

A drop of rainwater drips down the back of my neck, sliding under my collar. I suppress a shudder.

"If you don't like it, Raul, learn to mind your fucking business—"

A muffled thump drifts down from Leah's apartment, followed by the tinkle of breaking glass.

"Nico!"

I'm already kicking the bookshop door open, splintering the wooden frame. The dark shelves whip past in a blur, and I snarl as I take a wrong turn, sprinting into the travel section instead of to the back of the shop.

After tonight, Leah and I will have words. If she wants to set up her store like a goddamn maze, I need a map or something. A trail of red string on the carpet.

“Shit!” There's a crash behind me, and a landslide of books hits the floor. I dart past Raul wading through a sea of hardbacks and lunge for the door to Leah's apartment in the back wall.

Unlocked.

Did she leave it like that?

Footsteps move overhead, the ceiling creaking.

Go, go, go. My chest is ready to burst as I take the stairs four at a time, wrenching myself up with the handrail. I don't bother trying to sneak; don't have a plan.

I need to get to Leah.

And I've known fear before. Plenty of times in my life, I've tasted that special sourness on my tongue. I've felt my heart thump and squeeze inside my chest, and the panicked ringing in my ears is all too familiar.

But when I burst into Leah's apartment and find my girl kicking and flailing on the living room rug, a bald man crouched over her with gloved hands wrapped around her throat...

My brain goes blank.

There are no thoughts. No voice of reason in my head. Nothing beyond raw, animal instinct and the need to tear this fucker limb from limb. His surprised grunt as I wrench him off my girl—that ends with a crunch of bone. I splatter his nose across his face, beating him until each ragged breath gurgles in his throat. I pound him into mincemeat on the rug until his body is limp and my knuckles sing with pain, and it's only Raul shaking my collar that brings me back to earth.

“Nico! Nico, don't kill him, you prick. The boss will want to question him.”

The doctor's voice sounds like it's coming from far away, but finally, it filters through the thick cloud of rage in my brain. I blink sweat and blood from my eyes and glance over at Leah.

Oh.

Shit.

My girl is huddled by a chintzy armchair, clutching her throat and staring at me in horror. I shake out my stiff hand, feeling sick.

It's worse when I look down at her attacker again. Worse, because now I see him through her eyes—see the brutality of what I've done—and because I want nothing more than to keep going.

See what I mean? Leah's too good for any of this.

“Check him over,” I rasp, swiping my upper lip on my sleeve. My coat is tacky with specks of the other man’s blood. “His pockets, I mean. Don’t you dare give him first aid.”

“Obviously.” Raul crouches by the unconscious man, pulling a pair of latex gloves from his inner coat pocket. He wriggles them on, snapping them against his wrists, then begins feeling along the man’s limbs, checking his pockets with a wrinkled nose.

“H-he... I got up to get a glass of water, and he...”

Leah’s rocking slightly, still clutching her throat. Her long, brown hair has exploded from its braid, and her red sleep shirt has twisted around her body, sliding off one shoulder.

I move to shrug off my coat, then think better of it. Don’t want to get any blood on Leah, so I fetch her a padded blue winter coat from her front door hook instead, my movements robotic.

“Put this on.” Can’t look at her. Can’t see that horror in her pretty green eyes. “You’re shivering.”

The apartment is quiet except for the rustle of her coat and the shaky scratch of her zipper. “Thank you.”

I aim my question at the wall. “Did he hurt you? Besides your throat, did he hurt you?”

Don’t care about Santo’s questions. If this man hurt Leah worse than we already know, I’ll put him in the ground.

“N-no.”

Thank god. My shoulders drop an inch, and I let loose an exhausted sigh. Never would have forgiven myself.

“But your knuckles...”

My fingers ache like hell when I straighten them out, inspecting my ruined hand with a blank expression. Over by the attacker, Raul hums and pulls out a small stack of crumpled polaroids from the man’s front pocket.

I walk over, gut tight.

“Old school.” Crouching by the doctor’s side, I’m glad for the distraction. The first photo is of Leah’s bookshop—no surprises there. The second is a shot of my girl stepping out of her front door, probably taken from inside the bus stop shelter.

I’ll change her name. Get her in some witness protection program. Or hell, I’ll go begging Santo for help, cap in hand.

Whatever it takes to keep her safe.

“You’re here. Figures.” Raul drops a photo of me on the man’s chest, disinterested. Then there’s one of Diego, Santo’s brutal right-hand man, followed by a photo of the doctor himself, peering through his glasses at a restaurant menu.

Raul freezes, the last photo crinkling in his suddenly tight grip. I frown, leaning closer. “Who is it?”

The doctor doesn’t speak. Not sure he can right now. He tilts the photo to show me the next face on this hit man’s To Do list, and the pieces thunk together in my aching brain.

Raul's monk-like existence, never showing the slightest interest in either men or women.

His caution around Santo, tip-toeing around our icy boss like there's something unspoken on the line.

His habit of calling at the compound, checking in way more than we're commanded to, sometimes sleeping there for weeks at a time—and the tension rolling off him now in crackling waves.

“The boss's little sister, huh? You're brave.”

Raul's hand twitches, the photo of Allegra De Rossi crumpling in his fist. He sniffs and puts it down slowly, with far more care than any of the others.

Well, this is too rich. “You're asking for a one-way trip in the trunk of a car, doc.”

“You think I don't know that?” Raul pinches the bridge of his nose. Migraine alert. “I need to get her out of the city.”

I roll my eyes. “Hypocrite.”

As if Santo would go for that. As if *Allegra* would either. She's a spitfire, raised and hardened in our world, more likely to kill a hit man than to fall victim.

Not like my Leah. Sweet, innocent, too-good-for-this-bullshit Leah.

My bones ache as I push to my feet. I hold out a hand to the huddled young woman, trying not to wince at the fear still pinching her face.

“Come on, bella. You’ll be safer at the compound than here.” I ignore Raul’s harsh snort, and plaster a reassuring smile over my face. “Our boss won’t hurt you. Not when I explain everything.”

Not when I make whatever trades necessary to ensure Leah’s safety. Not once I sign away whatever’s left of my soul.

Leah doesn’t move, and I’m so fucking hollow. Tumbling into an abyss. I risk a step closer, and at least she doesn’t scramble back, but god. Her face is so pale.

“Let’s go, baby. You can see the holiday decorations at the De Rossi mansion. The boss doesn’t scrimp on a Christmas tree, you’ll see.”

Leah looks dazed as she stands, wobbling on her bare feet. She blinks toward the shadowy doorway to her bedroom. “I should change...”

“Just put on shoes.” The faster we get her to safety, the better, and Raul clearly isn’t worth shit now that he’s seen that photo of Allegra. He’s staring down at the hit man with a hard jaw and empty eyes, and I wouldn’t be surprised to learn tomorrow that the good doctor snapped the man’s neck. “I’ll take care of everything else, okay?”

“The shop...”

Leah’s trembling. That’s not just cold.

“I’ll take care of it. Shoes, baby.”

It’s a small victory when she stumbles toward the bedroom, but man do I need it.

What a night.

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Six

Leah



Nico calls up a car, muttering instructions into his phone while I huddle beside him on the sidewalk. Behind us, the front door to my bookshop hangs crooked on its hinges, the frame splintered where someone kicked it in.

“Don’t worry about that.” I don’t realize Nico’s hung up the phone until he takes my chin, turning my gaze away from the ruined door. The shop was a wreck inside, too. What will Aunt Karen say? “I’ll fix it all, I promise.”

Gray eyes bore into mine, willing me to trust him.

I do. God, of course I do.

And he must have been worried about that, because Nico’s shoulders relax an inch when I step closer, winding my arms around his waist. He puffs out a warm breath against my hair, then crushes me close against his chest. Cradles me like something precious.

“You’ll keep an eye out for bad guys, right?” My words are muffled in his coat, my voice hoarse from getting choked

out by that hit man. Nico's already fussed over my throat about a dozen times, making Raul check it again and again.

He scoffs. "I *am* a bad guy, bella. But I'll protect you, yes."

Mm. It didn't truly sink in before tonight: the fact that Nico's in the mob. That he's dangerous; maybe violent sometimes. That he breaks laws and has probably killed people. The image of that battered attacker flashes before my eyes, his face swollen and bruised, broken teeth scattered across my rug.

Gross. I'm so not cut out for this.

"Your teeth are chattering."

I press the frozen tip of my nose against Nico's throat below his stubble. "Sorry. It's cold out."

And I'm freaking out, but hey. No need to go on about it.

The stars glitter high above us in the night sky. Snowflakes whirl on the breeze, but they melt away to slush the second they meet the sidewalk.

"No white Christmas," I mumble.

Nico grunts. "Not yet. There's still time."

The way he says it, it's like he's going to march up to the clouds and beat the snowfall out of them. Well, he's got three weeks to do it.

"My Aunt Karen hates snow. Hates everything that's not a hot summer's day. She's on this year-long cruise at the

moment, chasing the warm weather around the globe.”

Nico rubs his chin on my head, his stubble rasping against my hair. “Is that why you’re all alone?”

Well yeah, it was. But I’m not alone now, am I? Not anymore.

“She left me the bookshop, actually. It’s technically hers; I’m just looking after it. Keeping everything ticking over, you know.”

Why am I telling him this? Confessing my life story to this surprisingly sweet mobster on a dark city street. This must be so boring to him, and yet Nico presses a kiss to the top of my head.

“You’re doing such a good job, baby.”

Tonight’s wreckage aside, I guess that’s true—but now everything I’ve worked for is at risk. Freaking mobsters.

Leaning back a few inches, I ask him outright. “Is your boss gonna kill me?”

Nico’s face shutters. “No.”

“But if he decides to shut me up—”

“He won’t. Not if I give him what he wants.”

Lord save me from these roundabout answers. “And what’s that?”

Nico sighs, and he looks a decade older than that afternoon with the mistletoe. “Leverage.”

Huh? I'm kind of lost, but I don't get a chance to ask again before a black, fancy car pulls alongside us in the street, windows tinted and engine purring. Snowflakes hiss softly as they land on the warm metal.

Nico pulls open a rear door. Toasty air spills out, washing over my bare legs. "In you get, bella. Trust me on this, okay?"

...Okay.

I will.

* * *

It's a silent ride through the city. The partition is up, the driver a distant shadow, and the only sound in the car is the gentle whir of the heaters. Nico drums his fingers on his knee, staring resolutely out of his own window.

He hasn't looked my way once since we slid in here. Perfect.

"I know you're being all manly and mysterious, but we don't have to ride in silence."

Nico grimaces. He rubs his uninjured hand over his jaw, the stubble rasping. Still looking out his window.

"Nico," I say flatly.

He flicks a speck of lint off his knee. "You want the radio on?"

"*Nico.*"

My seat belt clicks undone, and I slide across the leather seats, the material sticking to the backs of my thighs. Really

should have put on jeans or something.

For a big, scary mobster, Nico sure does look relieved when I scramble into his lap. He frowns down at me, gaze intent, like he's trying to commit my features to memory.

"Why are you being weird?" Better cut to the chase, because if tonight has taught me anything, it's that none of us can be sure we have time to mess around.

Stormy eyes roll. "I'm not being weird. I'm thinking."

"You're brooding," I point out. "That's different." Spreading my palms over his chest, I feel the steady thump of his heartbeat through his navy shirt. Nico stuffed his blood-spattered coat in the trunk, sliding in here in only his rolled shirtsleeves.

The leather creaks under my knees as I settle more firmly against him, straddling his thighs.

Thump. Thump. Yeah, that heartbeat's picking up speed; Nico's not the only one who can pull that trick. So if he still likes me, why is he acting like a stranger all of a sudden?

"Have you changed your mind? Do you want to take me back home?"

He blinks, handsome features sharpening. "Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Because you'd rather stare out the window than look at me, you big goof."

“I thought...” Nico’s face darkens, and he talks over my shoulder, gaze sliding away from mine. “I thought you’d want some space, after everything you saw back there.”

Ah. Yeah.

The bloodbath in my living room; the unbridled rage as Nico beat my attacker to a pulp.

That was a lot, it’s true.

He lets me grab his wrist, not hiding his knuckles from my inspection. The skin is torn and bloody, the joints swollen and bruised, and though every other part of the mobster is still, his fingers shake like they’ve got a mind of their own, nerves dancing from the pain.

“Ouch.”

Nico snorts, a flash of humor in his eyes. “Yes. Ouch.”

That’s him: my Nico. I grin at him, relieved, and wriggle against his hard thighs to get comfier. And up until this moment, I’ve been focused on working out what’s wrong, but now that I know we’re okay...

It’s a very nice lap. Strong and steady and warm beneath my bare thighs, exactly like I’ve been dreaming it would be.

Game time.

There’s no script for this situation. No list of instructions for seducing your rescuer in the back of a moving car. I’m winging it, flying blind, and Nico watches with open fascination as I raise his injured hand to my lips.

I drop a feather-light kiss on each of his knuckles, holding his gaze the whole time.

His chest heaves; my breaths come shallow. And with each brush of my lips, my body wakes up a little more, nerves crackling and heat pooling in my belly. What's that myth about brushes with death being a huge turn on? That would explain why I've been wound tight since the very first night I met this man. Flustered and too hot under my clothes.

“Thank you, bella.” The mobster sounds strained. His throat bobs, and his free hand shifts to rest on my thigh as I skate my lips over his last knuckle. “Raul never kisses it better.”

Ha. Maybe it's no myth after all.

“I'm not scared of you, Nico.” Doubt flickers in his eyes, but it's replaced with crackling heat when I grab his other hand and draw it under the hem of my sleep shirt. It's a baggy red men's t-shirt, faded and stretched, the lettering worn, but I swear nothing has ever felt sexier as Nico pushes it up my thighs.

My hands tremble as I yank my coat zipper down, shrugging my arms out of the sleeves and letting it fall behind me into the bottom of the car. Then I'm balanced on the mobster's lap, knees sinking into the leather seats beside his hips, and all I'm wearing is this scrap of old fabric and a battered pair of old sneakers.

“Whose shirt is this?” Nico asks pleasantly, and he is such a bullshitter.

“It’s from a thrift store, Falasca. Stand down.”

The mobster grins, sharp and dangerous, and a thrill skitters down my spine. Seriously, what is wrong with me?

“Good. I already beat one man unconscious today.”

Yeah, he did—to save my life. My teeth dig into my bottom lip, and I’m already rocking my hips forward, urging his fingers to get where I want him to go. “There’s no need to be jealous.”

Seriously. Now that I’ve tasted *this*, how could I ever settle for less?

Nico hums, mouth quirking up when his fingertips skate between my legs. I gasp, gripping his shoulders for balance as he says, “No underwear, bella.”

Nope, and it’s just as well, because they’d be soaked through. Nico slicks his fingers through my wetness, the traitorous evidence of how far gone I am, then swirls light circles over my clit.

Oh my *god*. Teeth clenched, I tip my head back to the ceiling, because he’s barely touched me and already my whole body is on fire. That injured hand lands on my thigh, gripping possessively. Kneading and squeezing.

“Shit.” I’m rocking against his hand, whining like I’m out of my mind. Hey, maybe I am. “Nico, touch me. Touch my pussy.”

The mobster is calm as he slides two fingers down to my entrance, and that composure doesn’t break until he pushes

inside me, the tight fit making my head swim. Surprise flits over his face.

“Fuck,” he mutters, and I huff a laugh, thighs burning as I rise and fall over his hand. My body is adjusting to the stretch, muscles aching and nerves tingling. Feels so freaking good, and I can’t help picking up speed. Can’t help pushing down harder onto his fingers, especially when his thumb swipes my clit.

“Yeah. See, there’s *really* no need to be jealous.”

His groan echoes around the quiet car, and Nico tips forward, hand twisting beneath me. I expect him to rest his forehead on my shoulder, but instead he *bites* me, gentle but possessive. Holds my shoulder between his teeth.

Such an animal. And my heart thunders behind my ribs; I’m breathing in short gasps, slickness spreading over my inner thighs.

I’m too hot. Too sensitive. Too desperate to do anything except moan, stomach muscles twitching as I ride the mobster’s hand. Can’t even feel the ache in my throat anymore—can only feel pleasure, rising hot in my body like a wave.

“*Nico.*”

“I’ve got you, baby.” He’s let go of my shoulder to speak, turning his head to lick my bruised neck. “You’re so pretty, letting loose like this. So desperate for me to make you come. Isn’t that right?”

My heartbeat's thumping in my ears. "Uh-huh. Please, I want to come."

Nico hums and licks me again. "You sound so good when you beg."

This time, as I rise up over his lap, Nico crooks his fingers inside me and rubs at a spot on my inner wall. With his thumb on my clit and his hot breath on my neck, it's—I feel—*fuck*.

"That's it."

The city lights blur through the car windows. My mouth drops open on a silent scream. I'm flying apart, exploding into a million tiny pieces, and when I float back to earth, Nico's watching me with a half smile. He draws his hand out from under my sleep shirt, tugging the fabric back into place.

"You're a work of art, bella." He brushes a gentle kiss over the corner of my mouth. "And whatever happens—you were worth it."

Seven

Nico



Usually, when I bring an outsider to Santo's place, it's strictly business. Maybe a local lawmaker wants to cut a deal; maybe an industry big shot has a mutually beneficial arrangement in mind. Maybe some asshole just needs a good scare. Whatever it is, I'm vigilant but bored. I don't get *nervous*.

I'm nervous now. It's not even my damn mansion, yet I'm self-conscious as the car swoops around the circular driveway, the big house lit up by golden lights in the bushes.

It's not like I chose the manicured hedge maze and fountains in the grounds, or all those stuffy old oil paintings inside—Leah will get that, right?

Two men in dark suits linger by the entrance at the top of stone steps. They're familiar, but I can't remember their names. Nobody important.

"Santo's not so bad." Can't seem to stop running my mouth, giving my girl a never ending pep talk. I started about

half a mile back and haven't stopped for breath. "He only kills people who really deserve it."

Leah snorts, but she's pale as she climbs out of the car behind me. Her eyes go wide, and she tugs down the back of her sleep shirt as she stares up at the mansion, the breeze fluttering the fabric against her thighs.

"Um. I really don't want to flash this guy, Nico."

No, I do not want that either. In fact, go ahead and file that under Nico Falasca's Worst Nightmares.

I turn and fish her coat out of the car. "Tie this around your waist."

Better. Okay.

Our footsteps echo against polished tiles as I lead Leah through the grand hallways. She winces every time her sneakers squeak against the floor and I grab her hand, wrapping her fingers in mine.

"He'll love you," I lie. Santo De Rossi is not exactly warm and fuzzy, even with us in his inner circle. Maybe he's different with his baby sister, but if so it's only behind closed doors.

Leah slides me a look.

"Okay, well he'll tolerate you. But *I* love you."

She brightens at that. And have I really not told her yet? Guess I thought it was obvious. Nico Falasca doesn't lose his mind over some lightweight crush, that's for sure.

It's a long, intimidating walk to Santo's quarters, past statues on plinths in alcoves and the musty *tock, tock* of a grandfather clock. This route is designed to show off the De Rossi wealth and power, to make visitors feel about three inches tall, but I don't want that for Leah. She's tiny enough already.

So I distract her with murmured promises, brushing her dark hair over her shoulder. "You like hearing that I love you, baby? Well try this on for size: I'm gonna make you my wife. I'm gonna marry you and put little Nicos in your belly."

Leah wheezes a laugh, shaking her head, and I'm not fucking joking but hey—whatever helps.

"You want a diamond ring, bella? Or are you less traditional?"

"A diamond ring would look so weird in the bookshop," Leah muses, "but maybe I don't care."

I squeeze her hand. "Atta girl."

We cross a lobby with a grand staircase, and I'm so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I nearly forget the Christmas tree in the center of the floor. Leah pulls me to a halt, grinning at the sight of string lights and the scent of balsam fir.

"Hey, look." The branches have tiny red velvet bows scattered on them. "You weren't kidding—the mob boss really does like Christmas."

“This is one of the smaller trees, too.” I lean close, talking in a stage whisper. “Whatever you do, don’t tell Santo’s enemies that he loves mulled wine and old carols.”

Leah’s laugh bounces around the lobby, but we both freeze when a cold voice draws from the landing above us: “No, that would be... unwise.”

“Boss,” I rasp, my heart suddenly thumping faster. Oh, god. He heard that. Was it a mistake bringing Leah here?

Far above, Santo De Rossi rests one hand on the polished balustrade, watching us with a cool expression. It’s late, but he’s still dressed in tailored suit pants and a crisp white shirt, a gray embroidered waistcoat hugging his sides. Those glacial eyes take in Leah’s sleep shirt and old sneakers, then linger on her hand clutched in mine. Did I seriously think I could ever hide this from him?

“This is Leah. She’s the, uh—”

“Piece of skirt?” Santo tilts his head.

Out of the corner of my eye, Leah raises one eyebrow. I tighten my grip on her hand.

“Bookshop owner,” I say instead, way too late. “She saved my life that night when I got jumped, and she was attacked tonight by someone with pictures of all of us. Raul, me, Diego and Allegra. Contract killer, unaffiliated. Raul’s got him.”

Maybe if I keep talking, Santo won’t ask any more questions—and I’ll never have to face Leah about that piece of skirt thing.

“No photo of me?” Santo asks lightly, still staring at my girl with a laser focus.

“No, just your inner circle. And Leah, so I guess they think she’s one of us. Someone’s trying to send you a message, boss.”

Whoever it is, they’ve signed their own death warrant, because Santo De Rossi does not take well to attempts at intimidation. The last idiot who tried to make our boss dance to some other man’s tune got cubed inside his favorite fancy car.

Guess there *is* a grand conspiracy. Christ, I hate when Raul’s right.

Santo is quiet for a long moment, contemplating, and with each second that passes, I can breathe a little freer. I know our boss, and if he meant Leah harm, he’d have done something already. Besides, he’s not even looking at her anymore. He’s gazing into the Christmas lights on the tree, expression distant.

I steal a glance at my girl, because even though I’ve known Santo all my life, I’m not blind—I *know* that he’s a handsome motherfucker, and power can be a hell of a draw. Plenty of girls around here make heart-eyes at the mob boss all the time, much good it does them.

Does Santo even have human urges that way? I’ve only ever seen him hungry for priceless artworks or power, never for sins of the flesh.

Though as we wait, a faint scent drifts into the lobby from the direction of the kitchens: the sugar-sweet smell of baking cookies. Not very intimidating, but a sweet tooth is Santo's only weakness.

"You're still here." The boss shakes his head and blinks down at us, resurfacing from whatever mental game of 4D chess he was playing this time. "What do you want, Nico? Keep the girl if you want, but don't get distracted. This is no time to be sloppy."

Here we go.

I clear my throat. "Her name is Leah, and I want to hide her here for a while. It's not safe for her back home while she's a target."

Dark eyebrows bounce up Santo's forehead, because how often do I make demands of the boss? Maybe never. "I can see that you are... attached, Nico. But I don't have time to babysit an outsider. It seems we are at war."

"I'm right here," Leah says loudly, and I grimace as she goes on: "And I don't need babysitting. I run a successful business and I saved Nico's life, and I can entertain myself, thank you very much. Jerk," she adds under her breath.

Silence.

Thick, painful silence.

"She didn't mean that," I start to say, but Santo holds up one hand.

“Yes, she did.” The mob boss watches my girl for a long moment, and my stomach doesn’t unknot until cool humor flickers in his eyes. “Keep her around, then. She suits you.”

I go to usher Leah from the lobby before he can change his mind, but Santo’s voice makes my shoulders stiffen.

“Oh, and Nico? She’s important to you, then?”

There it is. He won’t let her stay otherwise—and if I agree, Santo will have more power over me than ever.

Leverage. Everything is goddamn leverage in our world, even back when we played games and got scabbed knees together as little boys. What Santo’s really asking is: what will I do for him in return for her protection?

Anything. I’ll do anything.

“Yes,” I rasp, my voice loud in the lobby. String lights pulse on the tree, and I lead her to the doorway, my chest tight. “Leah is very important.”

Eight

Leah



“**W**hat happened back there?”

Nico’s quiet as he leads me through the De Rossi mansion, and I’ve had about as much awkward silence as I can stomach. There are so many polished stairways and chandeliers; so many grand rooms and fancy paintings. Super efficient staff beetle everywhere, even this late at night, and none of them catch my eye. It’s unsettling.

“Nico, what happened back there? What did you two agree on?”

Because I’m not an idiot, you know. Even I could tell there were two conversations happening back in that lobby, one out loud and one unspoken.

What trade did Nico make? Why is he so quiet and grim now?

“It’s nothing, bella. Santo was just checking that you’re worth it.”

Worth *what*?

“This is it,” Nico says before I can ask, pushing a heavy door open. We’re somewhere near the top of the mansion, what feels like miles and miles from the entrance. There’s less power-move decor up here, and the halls are lighter, their paintings calm. “These are my rooms whenever I crash at the compound.”

Crashing somewhere implies a night on the sofa with a crick in your neck, but when I follow Nico into the suite, my mouth drops open. There’s a four-poster bed and a blue silk chaise lounge; French windows leading to a stone balcony overlooking the grounds. A dish of grapes on the coffee table makes my stomach rumble, and Nico squeezes my hand one more time before letting go.

“Make yourself comfortable. It could be a few weeks before it’s safe for you to leave again, but until then you can ring for anything you need. There are always staff around.”

He nods at a bell on the nightstand. An honest-to-god tiny bell.

What the hell.

“I’ll have clothes sent over from your place. Or would you rather all new stuff?”

Nico strolls to the closet, muttering under his breath, and throws the wooden doors open, his shoulder blades shifting under his tailored navy shirt. The mobster’s body is lean yet so powerful, barely leashed by his clothes, and I flash back to the image of my battered attacker for the millionth time. Blood stains and broken bones.

Goosebumps prickle over my bare limbs. I nearly *died* tonight.

And this man saved me—then paid some mysterious price for his trouble.

Fitting my fingers over the bruises already staining my throat, I swallow hard, wincing at the pain. My eyes burn, but I blink those tears away.

“Nico.” He’s rummaging through a chest of drawers, I guess looking for something I could wear. “Nico, please tell me what happened back there.”

His hands slow, but he keeps digging. Doesn’t turn back to me as he says, “Santo needed something in return for letting you stay.”

“That leverage you mentioned earlier?”

“Exactly.”

My mouth twists, and I kick off my sneakers one by one. Earlier, I was way too spun out to remember socks, and my bare toes curl against the rug. I tug my coat sleeves from around my waist too, tossing the puffy jacket onto the chaise lounge. “So he’ll hurt me if you don’t keep in line—that’s what you’re saying.”

Nico’s sigh is dredged from three floors below. “Nothing that crude. It’s complicated, bella, but the more ties we have to Santo, the more secrets and pressure points he knows, the tighter we’re snarled in his web. So when we need him,

nothing comes for free, see? He'll help me, but first he needs an admission. Something he could use against me in a pinch."

"Me."

The drawer thunks closed. "Yes. You. It's the ultimate insurance, because now that your happiness is on the line, he knows I'll do anything. As far as Santo is concerned, I'm a puppet handing over another string."

That sounds awful. How can I possibly be worth *this*?

Nico strides to the glass doors, throwing them open so that cold, fragrant night air rolls in from the De Rossi grounds. His gray eyes are shadowed, his stubble dark on his jaw, and the navy shirt is open at the collar, the first hint of chest hair peeking through the gap. So freaking handsome.

"You know the real kicker, baby?" Nico's gathering steam, getting agitated as he rakes up his hair. "It's all unnecessary, but Santo's messed up. He can't see that Raul and Diego and me—he doesn't need to collect dirt on us. We're not gonna stage some coup; we're just plain loyal. Shit, I wouldn't be surprised if he has a mental file on his baby sister too. It's fucked up."

It really is.

Staring out at the gardens, my mobster looks so tired. "He'd never do it, you know. To others, maybe, but not to us. Santo thinks he's this unreachable ice man, but deep down, that fucker cares."

Remembering the cool way the mob boss stared down at us in the lobby, I purse my lips. If Nico says so.

“And you’re sure...”

Wow, my throat really hurts. It’s tight and aching, and I wince as I force the words out.

“You’re sure this is what you want? You’re sure *I’m* what you want?”

Finally, Nico stares at me properly, eyes hard. “What the fuck are you saying, Leah? Of course I’m sure. I’m not leaving you out there unprotected, alright? You’re *mine*.”

His.

My belly swoops, and I smooth down the front of my sleep shirt as the mobster prowls closer, throwing off his morbid mood like a heavy coat. He circles me like prey, and all my senses prickle to life.

“This other stuff is all bullshit, okay?” Nico tugs gently on a lock of my hair; he leans in and sniffs my neck, humming with satisfaction. He’s so freaking primal as he circles me, and it heats my blood. “Don’t get distracted with Santo and hit men, Leah. There’s always some drama playing out in this world; always something to fret over, but forget it. This is about us. Eyes on the prize.”

In my rumpled sleep shirt, with my bruised throat and mussed hair, I don’t feel like much of a prize.

Nico stops directly behind me, brushing my hair forward over one shoulder. He bends down and scrapes his teeth

against the back of my neck, warm breath misting over my skin. A harsh kiss follows, with a swipe of his tongue.

Jeez. I sway on my feet, woozy already.

“Nico...”

“Remember what I promised you, baby?” He kneads my stiff shoulders, thumbs digging into the tense muscle until I moan. “A ring on your finger and little Nicos in your belly. You think Santo De Rossi’s scheming means shit to me compared to that? He can collect his leverage all he likes. Me, I’m playing the long game.”

“With Santo?”

“With *you*.” Nico’s stubble rasps against the side of my neck as he kisses me there, strong hands sliding down to roam over my body. He traces my waist; my ribs; my soft stomach and the swell of my tits. He lingers there, squeezing and pinching until I moan again, breath coming in short pants. “This is what really matters. Hell, this is *all* that really matters. Don’t you see that?”

I sag against the hard planes of his chest. “Um. I guess so?”

“You *guess* so?” This time, Nico pinches my nipples so hard I gasp, a bolt of heat spearing through my lower belly. My knees are wobbly, and he’s taking most of my weight already. “You guess so? I don’t like that, bella. I don’t like that at all.”

“Sorry,” I wheeze, laughing as the mobster scoops me up, carrying me bridal style to the giant four poster bed. And I’m wearing a faded sleep shirt instead of a wedding gown, but it sure feels like a vow when Nico lays me down, gentle and reverent, the mattress firm against my back.

Standing beside the bed, Nico plucks his next shirt button undone, gazing down at me with those stormy gray eyes.

“Open your legs, baby. I’ll *make* you sure.”

Lips bitten and heart hammering, I slide my thighs an inch or two apart.

The mobster stares at me, expression flat.

I huff a laugh and slide my legs wider, but as I do, anxiety spikes in my chest, and I can’t help babbling: “I’ve—You—I’ve never done this before.”

Nico looks viciously pleased as he climbs on the bed by my legs, settling his shoulders between my knees. “I know.”

“But if I’m not good at it—”

Nico waves an airy hand, his ruined knuckles extra swollen in the lamplight. “Not gonna happen. But it doesn’t matter, does it? We’ve got our whole lives to find our rhythm.”

Well... yeah. I guess so.

And I’m running out of reasons to stall, which is so nuts, because I want this so badly my bones ache, and yet if I get it wrong... if I’m not what he’s expecting...

I want so badly to be worth it. Nico is already everything I've dreamed of.

Except the destruction of my bookshop, I guess—but hey. Everyone has flaws.

“You're already perfect.” Nico kisses the inside of my knee, inhaling the scent of my warm skin. He shifts closer, flipping my sleep shirt up my thighs. “Sweet and soft and so pretty when you blush. You gonna make those little noises for me again, baby? Fuck, you're already slick and shining. How long have you been aching for me?”

Forever. Whole ages of the earth.

“Since the first night I met you. Since I knelt beside you in my shop.”

Nico growls, nipping the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh. A broad fingertip traces along my seam. “I remember. We're gonna recreate that night sometime soon, bella. You on your pretty knees, fussing over my body, yanking at my belt. Sucking on my cock, nice and greedy. Kissing it better.”

Hang on. “I never sucked—”

“You would have.” He sounds so sure, rubbing his bristly stubble against my thigh and touching me firmer now. Delving between my folds. “If Raul hadn't come in, you would have.”

Ugh. Is he right about that? Nico had a freaking stab wound, but... maybe. I *did* want him already back then, and there was something special about the connection sparking between us. Something that felt like fate.

Either way, the thought of it has me arching on the bed, cheeks hot and fingers scrabbling against the sheets. He's only got one fingertip on me, skating through my wetness and circling my clit, but it's enough to steal the breath from my lungs.

Never been this flushed and desperate. Never *needed* so badly in my life. And Nico's right—all the drama and danger and power plays with Santo De Rossi, it's all faded away to a low hum. Nothing matters in this moment except Nico's teeth nipping my leg, his thumb swiping over my clit as he pushes one finger inside me. The delicious stretch and burn; the way my hips rock up, automatic.

“Yeah, that's it.” The mobster's deep voice is ragged. “Show me you like it, baby. Show me you want me too.” A flick of his wrist, and that finger pumps deeper.

Uh, of course I want him too. Is that really in doubt? I want to ask but Nico's taking me apart with his hands, his tongue sliding between my folds. His breath is hot on my aching flesh, his teeth sharp wherever they nip, and he may not be gentle but he *is* perfect.

He's mine, too. This goes both ways, and I want to reassure him—and stake a claim.

Nico grunts, surprised, when I grab a fistful of his hair. I push him harder against my pussy, hips rising to ride his face. “You're mine, Nico Falasca. No one else's. Even your mob boss will play second fiddle, and don't you forget it.”

The words take even me by surprise, they're so vehement, but Nico snarls his approval and plunges his tongue inside my pussy. Licks me from the inside out.

I groan, head grinding back against the mattress as I squeeze my own tits, and I'm lost. Nothing but a bundle of heat and instincts and sparking nerves, my body arching and falling in a wave. I shove my sleep shirt up to my neck, plucking and twisting my nipples, and I'm squeezing his head with my knees, making such low, desperate noises—

Nico sucks on my clit, fingers crooking inside me.

I go up in flames.

It's an inferno roaring through me, scorching my insides, and all I can do is gasp and shudder as Nico keeps licking. My thigh muscles twitch and my stomach clenches and god. *God.*

Is it always like this?

No time to ask, because as soon as my moans subside, Nico rises above me, expression stark, and yanks at his belt. He doesn't even bother to undress, just draws out his cock and strokes it once, rubbing his thumb over the head. It looks angry, flushed and red. So hard it must hurt.

“You gonna let me in there, baby?”

God yes. Can't speak yet but I nod, and even that tiny movement is clumsy.

Nico exhales sharply, then crawls over me, his body so broad and strong. He reaches between us to line up with my

entrance, the fabric of his shirt brushing against the bare skin of my body.

And I'm all gooey and loose-limbed, still floating down from my high, marveling at how good it feels to be pinned beneath him. It takes two tries to make my arms work, but I wind them around Nico's neck.

His shirt collar scrapes against my forearms. Next time, I'll get him naked, I swear.

"Do it." I lick a patch of bare skin on his neck. "Fuck me."

The mobster huffs and grips my thigh—then pushes inside.

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Nine

Nico



There should be angels singing or fireworks going off. Maybe heavenly trumpets blaring. Some kind of external sign, some proof out there in the world that Leah is *mine*, and she's this hot and slick, and this really is the best fucking thing I've felt in my whole life. I'm not imagining it.

“Jesus.” I've barely pushed all the way inside her, nice and slow so it doesn't hurt, before my ears are ringing. Am I gonna survive this? “God, bella. You feel like a dream.”

I'm already moving over her, thrusting deeper. Grunting like a beast. Pounding her down into the mattress, building up a steady rhythm, the four poster bed frame creaking.

“Jesus,” I say again, and I guess my brain's fried. Can't think properly, can't make smart comments or crack a joke. All I can do is fuck deeper and deeper into my girl, my hips rolling like I'm trying to burrow to the farthest corners inside her. Thank god I already made her come, because I've barely felt her around my length and I'm already ruined.

Leah whimpers and moans beneath me, biting her lip and twisting my hair. I duck down and kiss her, and that's rough too.

She's *mine*.

"You feel this?" I angle my hips, rubbing a sensitive spot inside her. Leah cries out and yanks on my hair. "This is the only cock you'll ever need. You're my girl now, you understand? This is it, baby. This is it for us."

I *need* her to get this. Need for us to be on the same page.

Can't live without her. Leah's the goddamn air in my lungs.

"Do you like your man's cock?"

She moans, grabbing two fistfuls of my shirt. Squeezing and releasing the fabric, lost to the sensations building between us.

"Leah."

"Uh-huh." When she nods, her green eyes are glazed. Ankles hook around my lower back. "I love it. Never want you to stop."

Well, I might need water breaks, but that sounds good to me. I'm ready to fuck her all night until her moans shake the walls. There's no other rational thing to do with the angel who's fallen into my lap; no better way to celebrate that she's all mine, with nothing Santo or anyone else can do about it.

Tension coils at the base of my spine and I grunt, thrusting harder. My teeth find her shoulder and bite down.

I draw it out as long as I can, my control fraying with every ragged breath; pound my girl into the bed until she's damp with sweat and flushed all over, her legs twitching where they hug my sides.

Under my shirt, my stitches pull. I don't care.

"Leah." I kiss her hard, then groan when she sucks on my tongue. "*Jesus Christ. Leah.*"

The room is hazy. The lamplight blurs. All I can hear is my own thundering heartbeat and our matching short breaths; the creaking bed and the smack of our bodies coming together. I cram my hand between us, only remembering how wrecked it is when my knuckles twinge with pain.

Don't care. Nothing else matters but this.

Beneath me, Leah gasps and stiffens when I rub her clit.

She stays that way, taut and shuddering, and I ride her through every wave of sensation, her channel clamping down on me and squeezing tight. On and on and on—my girl knows how to take her pleasure. There's no air in the room by the time she sags back against the bed, and when I bury myself as I deep as I can go, when I finally let go...

It *hurts*, it feels so good.

"Leah," I say, face pressed against her poor, bruised throat, my body wringing itself out until I can barely remember my name. I flood her, take her, *claim* her.

“Leah.” My whole body is buzzing when I finally collapse to one side.

I press a kiss to her shoulder: my miracle.

My future.

* * *

One week later

Leah clings to my hand like she might float away if she lets go. I know the feeling. Knotting our fingers together, I tow her through the chapel doorway, the blanket of stars above the De Rossi grounds replaced with the glow of hundreds of candles.

“In here. Quickly.”

“What’s the rush, Falasca?” She’s giggling and breathless, one hand holding the long, white skirt of her dress above the stone tiled floor. “Are you scared Santo will hear that you borrowed his priest without asking?”

Ha. “No, I’m scared *you* might change your mind.”

My tone is light, but my gut clenches at the words. The last week together has been a dream, the happiest I’ve ever been, and Santo’s been rolling his eyes non stop at the way I’ve been floating through our strategy meetings like a love struck teenager. I’ve never been surer about anything in my whole life than Leah, but maybe she doesn’t feel the same.

One week to a wedding—that’s rushed, even in the mob.

Does she really want this? My steps slow down.

“If you want to wait a while longer, we can go back to the house. You can change your mind, bella.”

But Leah snorts, and already I’m ten pounds lighter. “Shut up, Falasca. We’re getting married tonight. I spent ages on this hair, and there’s no way I’ll fit in this dress after the holidays.”

I drag my gaze down her body, hungry and appreciative. Oh yeah, she looks good draped in ivory silk. Like a goddess.

Leah tugs on my hand as we stroll up the aisle together. “Are *you* sure you don’t want to wait for Raul to come back? He could be your best man.”

I shake my head, because god knows how long the doctor will be away. He disappeared a week ago along with Allegra. No idea what’s going on there, but I’ll bet it’s messy, and who wants to wade into that?

Besides, I made other arrangements. The priest is waiting at the altar, stifling a yawn at the late hour, and Santo’s right hand man Diego stands beside him, ready to play witness. He rolled his eyes when I asked him for this favor earlier today, but the savage fucker is wearing a buttonhole. He’s slicked back his dark hair too, and trimmed his beard. Softie.

“Don’t we need two witnesses...” Leah trails off when a figure stands at the front pew, brushing down his embroidered blue waistcoat. Icy blue eyes glance back in our direction, tracking our progress. “Oh my god.”

“I did ask about borrowing the priest,” I confess as we near the front of the chapel. “Why push our luck?”

Santo smirks.

“Right,” Leah rasps. “Ha. Okay. Well, then maybe you could hold this for me, Mr De Rossi?”

Santo blinks down at the tablet pushed into his hands, a grainy video feed of Leah’s Aunt Karen playing on the screen. The older woman is squinting at the camera, decked out in a vivid purple kaftan, her image frozen in a grimace.

“Don’t worry about the feed,” Leah says brightly. “She’s used to it cutting out, but I figured we should at least try.”

The mob boss stares at the tablet, nonplussed. Diego claps him on the shoulder. “Good man.”

The priest clears his throat, and the old guy sounds kind of strangled.

“Not a word about this,” Santo warns the priest, low and deadly. We all move into position, Leah’s hand still clutched in mine, and Santo aims the tablet toward us, his nose wrinkling in distaste. “I could have you all killed,” he mutters into the stone quiet of the chapel.

“Mr De Rossi,” the priest blusters, a flush creeping above his collar, but Leah laughs, high and bright, and the whole chapel feels warmer.

She’ll fit in just fine, and more than that—she’ll make us all better.

Especially me.

“Dearly beloved...”

Green eyes sparkle up at mine, and I squeeze Leah's fingers. Her diamond ring is safe in Diego's pocket, and nerves squirm in my gut. This is it. As the priest drones on, I wink at my girl and jerk my head up at the ceiling.

She follows my gaze then breaks into a huge smile, because high above us where I hung it this morning, there it is.

A whole bushel of mistletoe.

* * *

Thanks for reading Mistletoe Mobster! I hope you liked it. :)

For Raul and Allegra's story, check out [Silent Knight](#). *The stern doctor broke my heart years ago. Now we're holed up in a safe house for the holidays.*

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

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Teaser: Silent Knight

One week ago

I'm hunched over on my sofa, bare feet propped on the coffee table, frowning at my half-done pedicure when Santo prowls into my suite. Glancing up from the nail polish brush, I raise an eyebrow at my older brother.

Dark hair like mine, and the sharp De Rossi cheekbones. Hollowed eyes and the signature family exhaustion.

“You never knock. It's my bedroom, Santo.”

He shrugs, surveying the furniture. “It's my mansion.”

There's something off about him tonight. Something cagey. My normally pristine brother looks ruffled, the shadows under his eyes darker than ever, and there's a crease in his dove gray embroidered waistcoat.

A crease.

Guess the sky is falling.

The grounds are dark through the balcony doors, and my suite glows with lamplight. These rooms are more familiar to me than any place in the world, and I know every inch. Every piece of antique furniture, restored by master craftsmen and gifted by Santo; every famous painting on the walls. Everyone

thinks that the mob boss displays his most impressive finds in the visitor areas in order to intimidate visitors.

I know better. He saves the best for me.

Swallowing hard, I sit back. Whatever has shaken my brother is not good news. Santo is a block of ice, hard and impenetrable, and yet tonight he looks lost in the center of my suite. He keeps gazing around, blinking hard as he drags his focus back to the present. That fearsome brain of his is working overtime, and I'm surprised there isn't steam coming out of his ears.

“What is it?” I'm already capping the nail polish with only three toes painted red. “Maybe I can help.”

Santo stares up at the ceiling. “Yes, you can.”

Oh, I don't like that. “On my terms,” I clarify. “I'll help on my terms.”

Because I'm not one of Santo's pawns to be pushed around his mental chessboard. I understand this business better than anyone, present company excluded, and I don't do grunt work. Life's too damn short—especially in our world.

“You need me to get info?”

Santo shakes his head, slow and thoughtful. He's still staring at the ceiling over my shoulder.

You know, when I was growing up with no one in the world except this man, he protected me. Kept me safe from the wolves at our door. And he taught me everything he knew,

even when I was a sulky, frightened teenage girl and he was a newly minted mob boss who surely had better things to do.

I owe Santo, no two ways about it. Doesn't mean I'll agree to his requests blind. Because I *know* my brother, know him inside out and back to front, know him in a way that not even his inner circle do. And just because he cares about me, in his own stilted way—that doesn't mean I'm immune to his machinations.

“Stop scheming and spit it out.”

Santo nods once, then looks me in the eye. “I'm sending you away for a few weeks.”

Um. What? Over the holidays?

“There's a hit out on you.”

Ah. My shoulders drop an inch, because at least my big brother is not simply sick of me. I hate that's where my mind goes, but I can't help it. I may bluster for the outside world, but there's a scared little girl deep inside me, and she is shrill as hell.

“Come on, there are always threats.” I smooth over my flash of panic with a confident tone. “If you overreact every time some asshole tries to kill me, your men will think you've gone soft.”

Besides, I can handle it. There are no less than six knives hidden around my suite, and always at least two on my person. No need to freak out.

“They stabbed Nico two weeks ago.”

I scoff, blowing my dark hair out of my face. “Well, it’s not like that’s hard. And he was barely hurt! It was a flesh wound.”

I already checked on Falasca. Such a baby.

“Raul said an inch to the left and Nico would be dead.” My ears go hot at the doctor’s name, but my features don’t flicker as Santo goes on: “There was a second incident tonight, and the attacker had your photo. Don’t brush this off, Allegra. I need you to be smart.”

Smart. Fine.

I can do that.

“First, these grounds are completely secure,” I begin, counting off my fingers, my foot bobbing with agitation against the coffee table. “If you’re really worried, I can stay home for a few days. Second, if you saw that photo then Nico clearly dealt with the attacker, and third, I’m *always* on someone’s hit list, as you well know. That’s the De Rossi guarantee.”

Santo understands that better than anyone, so why is he so freaking rattled?

A maid bustles past the open suite door and we both pause. My brother strolls over and closes the door with a *snick*.

That reminds me.

“You know, one day you’re going to burst in here without knocking and regret your life choices.” It’s easier to grumble,

shuffling over to make room on the sofa, rather than face the dread pooling in my stomach. Something's wrong.

The cushions sink as Santo sits beside me. Not touching—we are not a cuddly family—but close enough that I can feel his warmth. Draw some comfort.

“If that happens, I'll burn the mansion down,” Santo says pleasantly.

Ha. Liar.

“I'm a grown woman, asshole.”

“You're my baby sister.” Santo's grin is sharp. “That comes with privileges.”

“Like no dating life?”

“Like my concern.”

Bullshit. Such bullshit. Not that he cares about me, I mean, but that Santo would ever burn down his precious mansion. Too many priceless artworks. This volley is comforting, though.

“It's the holidays, Santo.” My plea goes unsaid. *Don't send me away. This is the only time of year we're a half-normal family.*

Santo clears his throat, and as he turns away, there's a flash of guilt in his pale eyes. “You'll be fine, Allegra. Raul will be with you.”

...Raul?

My whole body flushes hot, misery clamping around my throat. My heart slams against my rib cage, more bruised with each thump, and I can't do this. I can't.

"I'll go with Nico," I rasp, fighting a whole new battle now. Sure, I'll hide out in a safe house for a few weeks if Santo really wants me to, but not with the doctor. Anyone but him.

"Nico is distracted; his focus would be split. He brought a woman here tonight."

A woman? Since when? I blink hard, yanking my brain back on task, because we can gossip about Falasca's love life once we've safely ruled out Raul.

"Diego, then."

Santo sighs. Propping his elbows on his knees, he knits his fingers together, and when he stares straight ahead with his face in profile, he looks like one of the carved stone statues in the hallway alcoves. "I know that Raul bores you, Allegra—"

That has never been the problem.

"—But he is reliable. If something happens, he can give you medical treatment, and I trust that he won't hit on you."

No, he won't. I hide my flinch at those words.

Because if Raul Ossani would hit on me, if he would allow himself even a moment of weakness, this wouldn't be a conversation. I'd leap at the chance to go away with him alone.

But the doctor made it clear a long time ago: he will never touch me that way. Never. And I can't stomach weeks of being close to him, pining after a man I can't have, my body literally aching with how badly I crave him.

Seriously. Who wants that?

"I'll go alone."

"Allegra." Santo exhales and pushes to his feet. "Pack your things. You and Raul will leave in thirty minutes."

"But—"

"Do it." When Santo frowns down at me, my big brother is gone and the mob boss is back. Laying down the law. "This conversation is over. I need you gone while I deal with this threat, and I need to be sure you are safe. Your presence is distracting."

Ouch.

My eyes blur as I stare at my half-painted toes. The floorboards creak as Santo leaves the room, and I waste precious minutes relearning how to breathe.

Raul. Weeks alone with *Raul*.

My brother may be a famous criminal, but—surprise, surprise—he is also a huge asshole.

* * *

Check out [Silent Knight!](#)

XXX

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About the Author

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

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