

THE PLUCKING SERIES



Moonlight
PLUCKING

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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Moonlight Plucking

The Plucking Series

By Reana Malori

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Moonlight Plucking

Summary

Hyacinth had given up on love. Happiness was overrated. If she was destined to be alone for the rest of her life, so be it. Struggling to pay off her student debt and desperate for cash, she takes on a second job at night.

It should be simple, right?

Then why is she so drawn to the restaurant owner? She knows it's a bad look to get involved with the boss, but he's the one who won't stop treating her different. He's the one who won't stop staring at her. Let's not even get into his reaction when her lying ex-boyfriend sent her a bouquet of her favorite flower. Her boss did not seem to like that one bit.

She has a feeling things are about to get very messy.

Chapter 1

Low music played from Hyacinth's phone as her alarm woke her for another day. Rolling over in bed, her eyes cracked open to look at the semi-darkness of her room. Another day, another dollar. Well, not quite a dollar, but it was pretty damn close. Living in beautiful Santa Barbara had its perks, but it also came with some crazy challenges. One being how expensive it was to live in the area.

Hyacinth glanced over at her phone, noticing the time. She groaned before flipping her bed cover to the side so she could free her legs. When she climbed out of bed to shower, she smelled the distinctive scent of bacon frying. "Yummy. Thanks Brie."

Her roommate Brie was a free spirit with lots of money from her parents and could be spoiled as shit sometimes. But one benefit of having her as a roommate was that Brie could cook her ass off. Maybe it was all those days hanging out with the cooks and maids while her parents traveled the globe.

Unfortunately, cooking was one thing Hyacinth never quite mastered. If the apocalypse began tomorrow, she would have no problem living on canned beans and corn for the rest of her life.

Torn between food and shower, she chose the shower. It would take thirty minutes to get to her Plucking Ladies

Garden Club meeting, and she didn't want to be late. A smile came over her face as she thought about the ladies in the club. Since she found them a year ago, they'd been her saving grace. It was a mixed group of women. Young and old. From all types of backgrounds and situations. Black. White. Asian. Latina. Those ladies had taught her more about keeping her small garden green, colorful, and flourishing than she ever could have done on her own.

Not that she had a huge garden like some of them did. But Hyacinth was proud of her little slice of heaven, and that's all that mattered.

Finished with her shower and other morning care, the temptation to grab some of that good smelling bacon took over. As she exited her room and walked down to the kitchen, she promised herself she would only grab a slice... okay, maybe two, then she would get dressed and head out.

"Brie, that bacon smells so good. You know the way to my heart." Turning into the kitchen, she froze. Her body went stiff. Her mind started going through different scenarios. Stranger danger. Run. Hide. Knife. Police. "What the fuck?"

"Oh, hey. You must be Flower?"

"Who the fuck is Flower, and why are you in my kitchen?" If Hyacinth had taken a moment to think about the situation, she may not have been so confrontational. There was a strange man in her kitchen, after all. At his look of confusion, her anger riled up, but at least she was smart enough to take a step back.

“Aren’t you Flower?” Looking over his shoulder, he lifted one arm and motioned upstairs. “Brie’s still sleeping. She told me her roommate’s name was Flower. Aren’t you the roommate?”

Well, fuck. “No,” she snapped. “My name is not Flower.”

“HmMMM, well, you certainly look like a beautiful rose.” His eyes traveled up and down her body. With a dawning realization, Hyacinth remembered she was dressed in only panties and a bra.

“Motherfucker,” she cursed before turning around and running back up the stairs. Once back in her room, she threw on a robe and stormed over to her roommate’s door. Not caring if Brie was asleep, Hyacinth banged on the door. “Open up, Brie. Get your ass out of bed.”

It wasn’t that Brie couldn’t bring men home. They were both adults. As grown women, they had needs that had to be fulfilled. But they had an agreement. If they brought someone home, that person wasn’t allowed to roam their house without first being introduced to the other person who lived there. Hell, if either of them wanted a sneaky link who came to break them off a little something, it was no big deal. But the person sure as shit wasn’t supposed to be hanging out in their kitchen cooking breakfast the next morning.

Her fist banged on the door again. “If you don’t open up, I’m coming in. You have five seconds.”

As she waited for Brie, some of her anger disappeared. In all fairness, she was the one who walked

into the kitchen in her bra and panties. But why should she have to police how she dressed in her own home? She and Brie didn't have any issues seeing each other in various stages of undress. It would have been no big thing. Except for the strange man who had no qualms about staring her up and down.

Brie finally opened her bedroom door. "What, Hy? Damn, I was asleep. Do you know how long I was out last night?"

"Don't really care. Who is the strange man in our kitchen?"

Her eyes darted back to the empty bed before her head dropped. "Shit. That's Eddie. I told him to wake me up before he left."

"Well, he didn't leave. Apparently, he's making breakfast."

She smiled. "I thought I smelled bacon. So, were you nice?"

Hyacinth shook her head at the clueless question. "Are you serious? Brie, we had an agreement. Listen, you need to take care of your guest. I need to get dressed and go to my garden club meeting."

Her roommate leaned against the door as if she had no care in the world. "Why do you go to those meetings all the time? Aren't there a bunch of old women just hanging around with shears and funny looking hats talking about their rose bushes? That's just dumb. You should come out with me and just have a good time."

The urge to roll her eyes came over Hyacinth. “Nope. I’m good. I like my garden club, which I’m going to be late for if I keep standing here talking to you. Listen, Brie, just remember we had a deal. I don’t care who you bring home, but you have another person who lives here. I walked out there in my panties and bra. That man saw more of me than anyone has in the past two years.”

“Whose fault is that?” Brie mumbled.

“What was that?”

Her roommate shook her head. “Nothing. Okay, I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again. I’ll go grab him.”

Stepping away, Hyacinth nodded. “You’ve said that before, but this time I need you to stick with it. I’m going to get dressed and head out. I’ll be back this afternoon around two o’clock. Have fun while I’m gone.”

When she made it back to her own room, Hyacinth sat on the bed and took a deep breath. She and Brie had been roommates for almost two years. Living in Santa Barbara was expensive as hell and while she made decent money, it wasn’t enough for her to live comfortably on her own. Not with the high cost of rent combined with her student loan payments. A roommate had been the best way for her to put some money aside, pay down her student debt, and still have enough to spend on herself for the occasional night out.

But she was twenty-eight years old and living with a roommate had lost its luster. Not knowing if there was going to be a strange person roaming around the house. Or simply not being able to do what she wanted. Brie lived

here first, and Hyacinth moved in later, so it never truly felt like it was hers. The only personal items were in her room.

The thought had been percolating for a while now, but this morning solidified what she needed to do. It was time to find her own place and move out.

To do that, she needed to find another job.

She stood from her bed and quickly got dressed. The ladies of the garden club may have some ideas for her. Now that she'd decided, nothing was going to stop her. Her day job in marketing took a lot of her time, but she was sure there was something she could do at night. In college, she'd worked as a waitress at some of the high-end restaurants downtown. She could do it again.

Finally dressed and ready to go, she stepped out of her bedroom to leave. She could hear the sounds of Brie and 'what's his face' having sex as she walked down the hallway. Hyacinth knew she'd made the right decision. She had no desire to listen to anyone else get their freak-on, especially when she'd been using her battery-operated-boyfriend for the past two years.

It was time for a change in her life.

Chapter 2

It's funny how life happens. One moment, you're just walking down the street after a Garden Club meeting, intent on getting to the ice cream shop across the street. The next, you're reconsidering your entire life as a car comes speeding down the road, tries to blaze through a yellow light, and almost mows you down in the middle of the street.

Hyacinth jumped out of the way, but in the process, she fell into another person. Graceful, she was not. The person she fell into grabbed her arms, steadying her upright.

In the commotion, her purse went flying and her legs collapsed.

Yeah, not a good look at all.

"I'm so sorry. I do-don't know what happened," she squeaked out.

"Are you alright?"

At the sound of the voice, Hyacinth's entire body went still. Deep. Dark. Husky. With a hint of anger. She wasn't sure how she could know what his tone meant, but she did. Maybe it was the shiver that coursed through her body. As her eyes traveled up his body to her rescuer's face, she couldn't help but notice how firmly he held her. The crisp white shirt covered by a black suit. His beard was dark and trimmed, surrounding a beautiful set of lips. As her gaze

met his intense green eyes, she immediately jumped back. Had she been checking the man out right after she'd almost been killed?

“Can you understand me? Are you alright?”

“Yes, I'm fine.” Hyacinth pulled away from the man holding her upright and looked around for her bag. She walked over to pick it up from the ground and turned to face the man looking at her with a frown on his face. “Why are you looking at me like that? I said I was fine.”

“I'm wondering if you're in shock. It took you too long to answer me.”

They stood to the side of the crosswalk, so when the man put his hand on her back to steer her toward the sidewalk, she went.

“My name is Rhys. What's yours?”

Even though she was no medical professional, even Hyacinth knew she was probably in shock. “Did you get the license plate of that car?”

The man... Rhys... paused for a second time before answering. “No. It was too fast. I only had time to catch you as you fell into my arms.”

“Have a habit of helping damsels in distress?” Where that little flirting came from, she didn't know. But if you saw this man, you would want to flirt also. There was something scrumptious about him. Hyacinth stood five-feet nine-inches, and she loved a tall man. Not that she dated many men who fulfilled that need. Usually, her dates were her height, or an inch or two taller. She couldn't even wear

heals. And if she tried to rest her head on their chest, she ended up looking like a hunchback.

But Rhys had to be at least six-three or six-four.

Unknowingly, she licked her lips while looking at him. Hyacinth may not have realized what she did, but Rhys saw it. He wanted to smile at her, but held it in. He was trying to be a good guy here and not think with the head inside his pants. Because if he allowed himself free rein, the gorgeous woman would be on his bed and underneath his body before the night was over.

“Why don’t you come inside and take a seat? We’ll get you some water and something to eat. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m okay. Really, I’m fine.”

“I insist.” He reached out to grab the door for a restaurant named Mannetti’s. She had never been there before, but it was one of the hottest and most exclusive places to eat. There was no way her jeans and t-shirt were acceptable attire.

“I’m not sure...”

The door was open, and he was already ushering her inside. “It’ll be fine. They’re not open yet, so you can relax.”

“Then why are you opening the door? These people are gonna kick us out. I don’t want to get arrested on a Saturday. All I need is for my Garden Club to hear that I was locked up for trespassing. Not today.” Hyacinth was spiraling. Maybe the incident outside with the car had messed her up more than she thought.

Once inside, he walked her over to a table, pulled out the chair, and motioned for her to sit. “Bennie? Hey, can you grab Ms...” He glanced down at her. “You never told me your name.”

Caught up in her perusal of the fancy restaurant, she almost missed his words. “My what?”

“Your name, sweetheart. You never told me.”

“Oh, I’m Hyacinth. Hyacinth Moore.” Now why did she tell him her full name? This entire day was just one big cluster-fuck. First her roommate’s booty call hanging around their apartment, then almost getting hit by a car in broad daylight, and finally, this super sexy man trying to take care of her.

“Like the flower?”

Nodding in response, she couldn’t seem to look away.

“Beautiful name. Like its owner.” Rhys glanced up at the man standing a few feet away. “Bennie, would you please grab Ms. Hyacinth some water? Have you eaten?”

He must have been speaking to her, because his gaze was back on her face.

“No. I was too busy with the discussion at the Garden Club about new ways to keep my mulch hydrated, since more water restrictions are forcing us to cut back.”

A slight smile came over his face. “Okay, well, hydrating your garden is very important.”

Her eyes snapped to him. Was he flirting?

Rhys looked back at Bennie. “And have Chef make her a roast beef *au jus*.”

“Yes, sir.”

While they spoke, Hyacinth was trying to understand what was happening. “Who are you? Why are you telling that guy what to do and having the chef make me...”

“Rhys Mannetti at your service.”

“Oh shit. I mean, oh damn. Mannetti? As in the name of this restaurant? That Mannetti?”

“Yes. Well, my father is the original Mannetti. This isn’t our first location, but it’s mine.”

A little stuck on what to say next, Hyacinth stayed silent. As the waiter, Bennie, walked back in with a glass of water and a basket of bread, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ma’am,” he said, bowing slightly after he placed the items on the table. “Chef will have your meal ready in five minutes.”

“Thank you, Bennie. I don’t want anyone to go to any trouble for me. I’m alright.”

As the waiter went to speak, Rhys interrupted. “Drink your water, Hyacinth.”

When she glanced at him, she saw him sitting in of the table chairs. His long legs splayed, one hand on the table, and the other on one thigh.

“I’m thinking we need to get you to the hospital to get checked out.”

She shook her head. "I appreciate the worry, but everything's okay. Actually, I'm a little embarrassed about the whole thing. I'd just left a meeting with some friends."

"The Garden Club?"

A smile came over her lips. If she'd been watching him, she would have noticed Rhys sit up and pay closer attention. He thought she was one of the most beautiful women he'd seen in a very long time. His restaurant had taken up so much of his time, dating had been placed on the back-burner. Not that he didn't have women lined up and ready for him to break them off a piece of dick, but those encounters had lost their flavor a long time ago. It had been months since he had a woman in his bed. Maybe that's why he was responding so strongly to Hyacinth.

Odd name, but it suited her. As he stared across the table, he couldn't help but notice the hint of pink coloring in her cheeks. Her brown eyes were big, expressive. He could most definitely see himself enjoying some quiet time with her.

The sandwich came out of the kitchen a few minutes later. Same waiter, but this time he averted his eyes. Good, Rhys thought to himself.

He had noticed that the young man's eyes had been lingering on Hyacinth a bit too long. For some reason, that bothered him.

"Eat up. I need to check on a few things."

Picking up the sandwich, she went to take a bite, then paused. "Thank you for the sandwich."

“Anytime. I don’t want anything left on your plate.” Although he smiled, Hyacinth had a feeling he was very serious.

“Mr. Mannetti?”

“Yes, Bennie.”

“A message just came through from Pearl. She won’t be in tonight. Her son fell and broke his arm, so they’re on the way to the hospital.”

“Okay, do we have anyone who can fill in?”

“Sue was going to call the back-up to see if she could make it in on such short notice.”

Hyacinth was listening to the entire conversation and while she knew it was unexpected, she spoke up. “Um, Rhys?” He glanced at her with a questioning look. “If you need a bit of extra help tonight, I can step in and lend a hand. It’s the least I can do after you saved me today.”

Little did she know, her offer to help would turn her world upside down.

Chapter 3

Talk about going from the frying pan into the fire. Well, Hyacinth wanted to find a second job. Not only did Rhys take her up on the offer, but she was going to start that night. The pay was excellent, and he agreed to work around her day job hours. They would only need her in the evenings, which was perfect for her. Calculating the money she could make, a smile lit up her face. Not only would she be able to pay down more student debt, but moving into her own place was a real possibility.

Since her car was parked just up the road, she finished her roast beef au jus sandwich, which made her stomach super happy, and went home to rest, shower, and change before returning to the restaurant for her five o'clock start.

Thank goodness her roommate and her new guy weren't around, because Hyacinth wasn't sure she was ready to speak with Brie.

Just as she was about to lie down for a nap, her phone chirped with a message.

Unknown: Hey, baby.

Unknown: I've been missing you.

Unknown: Did you get my flowers last month?

Unknown: It was our anniversary.

Unknown: But I know you wouldn't forget.

Unknown: I still love you. Those other women never meant anything to me.

Unknown: One day, you're going to forgive me.

Hyacinth sucked her teeth at his text messages. No the fuck she would not forgive him—ever—nor would she respond to his lame ass text messages. The entire reason she had to move in with Brie was because her ex-boyfriend, Kenny, had cheated on her with the woman who lived across the hall from them.

She and Kenny had been together for over two years. Had lived together for more than a year. He had met her parents. They had built a life together, or at least she thought they had. Until the day she came home from work early because of a severe headache. It was the middle of the day and Kenny shouldn't have been home, but his car was parked in front of their place. At first, she was happy to see that he was home. Her man could take care of her for a day while she rested in the dark, trying to recover. But that thought went out the fucking window when she walked through the door. The scent of sex was in the air and she heard loud moans coming from her bedroom. Naïve fool that she was, the first thought in her head was that he was having alone time. But those moans and weren't from a male. Only a female could make a sound like that.

Stones formed in her stomach and bile rushed up to her throat. But she needed to see it. Needed Kenny to know that she'd seen him. When she opened the door to her bedroom, it was in her face like a sledgehammer. Her boyfriend of two years, the man she thought would be her

husband, was sliding his slimy, no-good dick inside another woman.

She must have made a sound because the woman looked toward the door and saw Hyacinth standing there. Kenny caught on quickly because he glanced over his shoulder and saw her as well. Then he slid out of the woman and stood in front of her looking all kinds of stupid. Bare assed and his wet dick hanging free. Wait...

Anger and rage were all she could feel. Hyacinth wanted to hurt the woman scrambling to put on her clothes. Then she recognized her. It was their neighbor. A woman with a whole damn husband and two kids.

“How long?” the question felt as if it were torn from her throat, but she needed to know. When he paused and looked at the woman, Hyacinth asked again. “How long have you been fucking another woman in my bed?”

“Baby, it’s not what it looks like. It was just a one-time thing. She doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“What the fuck, Kenny? You’re a fucking liar,” the other woman screamed at him. “You told me you were leaving her because she couldn’t give you what you needed.”

“Shut up!”

“No, I won’t shut up. Hyacinth, I’ve been with Kenny for almost nine months. We been fucking in your house that whole time. He’s been lying to you. And, clearly, he’s been lying to me too. I can’t believe I cheated on my husband with your sorry ass.”

The laughter that bubbled up out of Hyacinth must have had a maniacal sound to it, because they both turned to her with a look of shock and fear.

“Hyacinth? Baby?” Kenny moved to come closer, but stopped when she turned to face him. At least he had the decency to put on some shorts.

“No. You don’t get to call me baby. Fuck you and the bitch you rode in on.” If she had the strength to do so, she’d cry and wail and ask why this happened to her. But in the end, why did it matter? It wasn’t her fault he cheated. That was all on him and the woman who spread her legs for a man who denied her at the first opportunity. She ignored him standing there as she pulled out two suitcases.

“Hyacinth, what are you doing? Baby, we can talk about this?”

Not bothering to answer him, she threw clothes, shoes, and toiletries into her bags. Grabbing some pictures of family and friends, plus a favorite photo of her and her parents smiling together at her college graduation, Hyacinth prepared to leave.

“Where do you think you’re going? I’m the only person you got out here.”

Suitcases packed, she grabbed them up and began rolling them through the apartment. That headache she had was gone at this point. Pushed away by the utter heartbreak she was experiencing. Then again, if it was so easy for him to cheat on her for nine fucking months, he wasn’t worth her time.

Kenny stood at the door to prevent her from leaving. “Come on, girl. Just stay. We can talk about this.”

Hyacinth was an easy-going person. It was never her intent to be the loudest, boldest, baddest person in the room. Her friends always said she was the most relaxed person they knew, and she would agree. Not much got her angry, but for those who had seen her in this state, they knew to back the hell up. Clearly, Kenny still needed to learn that lesson.

Her eyes were full of fire and brimstone as he stood in front of the door, trying to stop her from exiting. She did not know where the other woman was at, because Hyacinth had completely blocked her presence from her mind.

“I’ll be going to the doctor immediately to get checked out. If you gave me anything, I will find you and I will fucking kill you. What you have done with that woman was a threat to my life. You were raw dogging her on the regular. Who knows what other parts of you were shared with other women?” She took a deep breath before briefly closing her eyes. “Actually, don’t answer that because if I have to call my father to come handle you, trust and believe, he will not be alone. You played me. You won this round. But you can best believe I will not be coming back for a repeat. When I come back for the rest of my shit, don’t be here. I don’t care where you are, but if I see you again, we’re gonna have problems.” Hyacinth hoisted her boho bag over her shoulder and motioned with one hand. “Now, get the fuck out of my way.”

Ever since, he'd tried to reach out and apologize several times. She would block his number and he would get a new one. That he was trying again to reach out meant nothing. Those flowers he sent her went into the trash the moment they arrived. She wanted nothing from hi. The more he tried, the angrier she became. If he would just leave her the hell alone, the happier she would be.

Hyacinth removed every text message and blocked the number he called from. He was no longer worth her time or energy.

Now she was wide awake and annoyed. No sense in trying to take a nap now. The time on her phone reflected just after two o'clock. She had to be back at the restaurant by five o'clock that evening. Maybe she'd do a bit of research on her new boss. She grabbed her laptop and went straight to the internet search page. *Rhys Mannetti*.

Military veteran.

Never been married.

No children.

The middle child of three boys.

There were a few pictures of him with women, but most were of him by himself.

A picture of him with a man named Maxwell Bishop at some hoity toity hotel in Washington, DC, came up first. The guy Maxwell looked like fine wine and on his arm was a beautiful, brown-skinned woman.

Another photo had him smiling with a man named Tristan Lucarelli at an event in Providence, Rhode Island.

Both men belonged on a magazine cover, as did Rhys. And when you put them all together, they looked like danger personified.

But to Hyacinth, Rhys was the one who kept catching her eye. His green eyes seemed to jump out of the page at her. But no matter how much she wanted to continue to stare at his handsome face on her computer, she needed to get dressed. When she looked down on her phone, she saw that there was less than two hours before she had to return to the restaurant. Hyacinth was surprised by how much time she spent staring at Rhys's photos.

This was not the time to get caught up in thinking about another man. After her break-up with Kenny, it took her a long time to get back to herself again. Rhys may be fine as hell, but he also was the restaurant owner, her boss, and surely not interested in her.

Right?

Chapter 4

Rhys found himself waiting for Hyacinth to arrive. If his brothers could see him now, they'd never let him hear the end of it. For him to be this caught up with a woman after only meeting her once was unheard of. He rubbed a hand down his face as he sat behind his desk in an office at the back of the restaurant. This was unlike him. But even as that thought entered his head, he knew there was something about Hyacinth that called to him.

Number one, she was part of a damn Garden Club?

Wasn't that kind of shit for little old ladies who walked around with thick gloves and big hats with sheer mesh that covered their faces?

But for Hyacinth, it fit. Even her name was cute. She was named after an exquisite, vibrant flower. Laughing at himself, he still couldn't believe he'd looked it up. For the fifth time that afternoon, he glanced at the time. Still more than thirty minutes before she would have to return.

Rhys knew he was on thin ice. She was his employee, even for a short time. That he hired her on the spot, without reference—or an interview—should have been a warning sign. It was irresponsible. A rookie move.

And even knowing that, he would do it again.

A knock sounded on his door. Good. He needed to get out of his head and stop thinking about the beautiful Hyacinth. Looking up, he called out. "Come in."

As the door opened, he almost groaned.

“Hi Mr. Mannetti. I’m a bit early today, but I wanted to take a few minutes to learn the lay of the land.”

Fuck my life, he thought. It was as if he’d conjured her up.

As she stood there in his door, Rhys could do nothing but stare at her. Why did he have to hire her to work for him? Temptation was a bitch, and he knew he was about to go through hell. Then again, if she were so eager to work, then he’d make sure to get his money’s worth.

He was man enough to keep his desires in check. Now that she was here and technically one of his employees, he’d created this situation, so he had to deal with it.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Glad you came back. Let’s go get started.”

They exited his office before she could say another word. He wanted to put some space between them. Needed to do it. There was never a situation where he’d crossed the line with an employee. He wasn’t going to let it happen now. No matter how sexy she looked in her black skirt and white blouse that stretched over her curvy form.

Fuck. His dick was thickening in his pants, which was not a good look.

Arriving at the front of the restaurant, Rhys walked Hyacinth through the reservation book, how he wanted things to flow, and what her responsibilities were for the night.

“No patron should wait over fifteen minutes before they’re seated or treated with a free drink at the bar. It doesn’t happen often, but I want everyone who arrives for dinner to know that we care about them. That they’re presence here is welcome and their experience is important.”

“Do you ever have a client who leaves unhappy? Maybe their wait time is too long?”

Impressed with her question, Rhys nodded. “Once or twice. But that’s why I try to be here most nights. If something goes wrong, I can have a conversation with the person. Try to smooth things over. Even if they still leave, I’ve given them an opportunity to save face.”

They stood close together at the bar as he explained this to her. As she looked up at him, he was tempted to reach down and press a thumb to her bottom lip. So soft, plump, and juicy looking. He wondered what it would be like to kiss her.

“What type of marketing do you do? Since that’s my sweet spot, maybe there’s something else I can help you with?”

His head tilted to the side. “Do you plan to be here for more than just a few days?”

“That depends. I have a lot of student loans,” she laughed. “And I really need to find a new place to live. To do that, I need to make more money.”

“Hmph. Well, we’ll see,” he said noncommittally. “Let’s see how things work out with you filling in for Pearl. She’s

going to be out for the next two weeks because of her son's broken arm, so your help is appreciated. If you do well tonight, then we'll work something out." His eyes lifted to glance at the group of staff standing by the kitchen entrance laughing. When he looked back at her, his mouth was pursed, and his eyebrows had dipped. "I'll be back."

Hyacinth could tell he wanted to say more, but simply shrugged her shoulders as he walked off. And watching him was a treat. Yes, she knew he was off-limits, but that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy the view. Her eyes took in the surrounding space. The restaurant looked like it could hold upwards of a hundred patrons. The perfect place to be seen, but it wasn't so small no one could ever get in. When they were looking at the reservations for that night, Hyacinth noticed they were fully booked.

He'd told her that there was always one or two tables held back for unexpected VIP patrons that showed up or called for a last-minute reservation. When that happened, she needed to contact Rhys at once.

A loud voice came from behind her, so she turned around to see who was yelling.

Rhys?

Maybe her eyes were deceiving her. That couldn't be the same man who had been courteous and patient as he explained what she would be doing. There was no way the person holding another man face-down on the table was the man who saved her life earlier today. As she looked closer, she knew her mind wasn't playing tricks on her.

Rhys used one hand to hold the man in place. His face was contorted in anger as two other men who looked equally as dangerous stood on either side.

What the fuck was happening?

“You steal from me? From my business? From the people you’ve worked with for years? You broke my trust. Now, I should break your fucking neck.”

At her gasp, Rhys looked up. She took a step back at the anger reflected in his eyes. Should she run? Was this like a Jekyll and Hyde situation? One minute he was nice and helpful, the next he was busting open the heads of his staff. Hyacinth looked around at the other staff members to see how they were responding to the situation. She noticed some of them had stepped back. Others had a look of disgust on their face. But they weren’t looking at Rhys. No, they were looking at the employee. Whatever his name was. The guy who had been accused of theft.

Glancing back up, she caught Rhys’s gaze and simply stared at him. This wasn’t her problem. Growing up in Las Vegas, she knew the world wasn’t always roses and rainbows. Over her life, she had seen a lot of shit happen and it had stopped shocking her a long time ago.

Her parents, lovely as they were, had some very shady friends. Maybe that’s why she was drawn to Rhys. There was something dark inside of him that she couldn’t help but relate to.

Rhys continued to stare at Hyacinth for another second before he nodded his head at one guy standing to the side. “I want him removed from these premises.” He

turned back to the guy who was whimpering and apologizing for making a mistake. His pleas for forgiveness and promises to never do it again seemed to fall on deaf ears. “You will never work in this city again. Hell, I’ll make sure you never work in the restaurant business again. You should have known better than to fuck with my business, Peter.” With a flick of his wrist, Rhys released the man and threw him to the side. “Take care of the trash,” he said to his goons. Bodyguards? Security?

Either way, they looked scary as shit.

Not moving from her spot, Hyacinth continued to listen to everything happening on the other side of the room. Without acknowledging her, Rhys turned to the staff. “I’m a fair boss. I pay you well. When you’ve come to me for help, I never turned any of you away. If you give me an honest day’s work, I will give you an honest day’s pay. My family’s restaurants have a reputation to uphold. No one will be allowed to tarnish that. Not only did Peter steal from our patrons by copying their credit card information, but he also stole money directly from each of you by taking tips and other cash payments that came through over the past two days. That, I cannot allow. Some of you may wonder why this was so public. The only answer I can give is that I wanted you to see that the trash removed.”

He glanced over his shoulder to see Hyacinth still standing there. She didn’t seem afraid. Reserved was probably a better word to describe the look on her face.

“Boss, we know. Because he’d been here so long, he said you would believe him over us. He-he said that if

anyone spoke up, we'd be fired."

Rhys dropped his head, briefly closing his eyes before looking at the crew again. "New rule. No one makes decisions about this team or this restaurant without you hearing it explicitly from me. Peter did not speak for me. None of your jobs are in jeopardy. If anyone, and I do mean anyone, approaches any of you and tries to imply something that I said, or something I would do, then you come to me. Understand?"

A chorus of 'yes, sirs' came from the group before they dispersed.

Turning to his two guys who were standing over the old restaurant manager, Peter, Rhys spoke a few silent words as he motioned to the man; who was still crying. After that was done and they hauled the man out, Hyacinth waited with bated breath as he came back towards her.

Now that she'd seen a different side to Rhys, her attraction to him was even stronger. That was even more reason for her to keep her distance. Maintain a professional relationship only and then move on once her job was done.

Her eyes traveled up and down his body as he strolled over in her direction. "Hyacinth..." he began, but she interrupted him.

"Clearly, he fucked around and found out. Don't worry about me, Mr. Mannetti. I heard what you said to your employees. If they take care of you, you'll take care of them. Thieves have no place here. I get it. I understand. Now, since you're down another employee," she paused for emphasis, "for the long-term, maybe we can talk about how

I can help with some other things around here. For a fee, of course.”

His green gaze stared at her for a few moments, making her uncomfortable. Had she said too much? In the end, it didn't matter, because what she said was the truth. And she was going to look at this as an opportunity. The only remaining question was, would she be able to survive working with Rhys without falling for her boss?

Chapter 5

The man was a fucking tyrant.

After two-weeks of working with Rhys, Hyacinth was ready to walk out. Now a full month into working at Mannetti's, things have settled into a bit of a rhythm. There were still some questions she had about him, but he'd shown her he was kind to his employees, and he listened to her opinions. For now, that was enough.

After that first day, all signs of the nice guy who saved her from being hit by a random car and offered her sweet part-time job had disappeared. Every order was barked out in a near yell. He never said please and thank you. He expected perfection from every single member of his team and would accept nothing less.

Plus, Hyacinth was tired. She worked full-time at her day job every weekday. Then she rushed to Mannetti's each night to begin work by six o'clock. They didn't close until eleven at night. While it wasn't her responsibility to help the clean-up crew, she usually stayed at least an extra thirty to forty-five minutes to clean up her area and do what she could. She didn't need to work on Mondays or Sundays, but here she was.

Walking through the front door, she saw one of the other employees standing at the front. Mateo was a young man trying to break into restaurant management. He had worked for Rhys for going on five years now. He explained that he was going to school in the evening and wanted to

be at home to tuck his kids into bed at night as often as possible, which is why he didn't work the late shift. When he told Hyacinth that Rhys never gave him grief about his schedule and always made sure he was off by six each night, her respect for Rhys increased even more.

She smiled at Mateo as she walked up to him. "Hey, Mateo. How's it going?"

"Hey, Hyacinth. I thought you were off tonight. Wasn't the boss going to give Missy a shot at hosting tonight?"

"I was bored. Figured I would come help. Plus, I could give Missy a few pointers that I've picked up on. That way, you don't have to stay beyond six. I know you need to get home to your little ones."

"You're a lifesaver. I don't know what we did before you joined. Just know that everyone notices how much you help around here, even when you don't have to."

A blush came over her cheeks at his kind words. Of course, her hard work was praised before, but she recognized that everyone at Mannetti's worked extra hard. Not because they had to, but because they were happy. Even if their boss was overly demanding and mean as a fucking snake sometimes. Then again, he smiled at his employees. Greeted them when they came in and as they were heading out. But with her, he would snarl half the time, snapping orders, and slamming doors whenever she came too close. Did he no longer want her working here but didn't know how to tell her not to come back?

No, she didn't think that would be an issue for him. If he wanted to fire her, he would do it in a heartbeat.

Hopefully, her departure would be less of a scene than Peter's.

"Thank you, Mateo," she said with a smile. "I do it because I'm here to help the team. We're all in this together. Now that I'm here, you can wrap up and head home."

Fifteen minutes later, there was a lull in the activity at the front reception area. Rhys walked in the front door, a woman on his arm.

Brunette. Slim. Tall. Gorgeous.

Of course.

This is exactly why Hyacinth knew it was best that she kept her thoughts about her boss to herself. Not only was he a jerk to her when she was just trying to be a good employee, but whatever interest she had in him didn't seem to be reciprocated.

"Cin? Why are you here today? I thought you were off today." His face went from neutral to shocked to annoyed, all in less than two seconds.

Lips tilted in a friendly smile, Hyacinth greeted her boss. "Hello, Mr. Mannetti. And guest," she added. She noticed his eyebrow lift at that, but ignored him. "Yes, today is my normal day off, but I wanted to lend a hand to Mateo and Missy, who should be here in the next thirty minutes. Is that a problem... sir?"

Rhys wanted to wring her neck. Did she have no clue how much control he had to exert just to be in her

presence? How did she not understand that her calling him 'sir' was a turn on and got his dick hard?

"Of course not."

"Rhys? Why are we here?" Both Rhys and Hyacinth looked at his date, Lisa. Her voice was like nails on a chalkboard, and he wasn't sure why he'd even asked her out tonight. They'd hooked up a few times before in the past, but her sense of entitlement and demands that he treat her like a Queen at every turn had pissed him off. Then again, he knew exactly why he called her. To get his mind off the woman standing in front of him.

Not only did he wait for her to show up every day so he could see her face, smell her perfume, and hear her laugh as she talked with the team. But at night when he went to sleep, she filled his dreams. When he woke up, she was the first person who entered his mind. It had only been a month since he met her, yet she was taking over his every thought.

It had gotten so bad, he began showing his less than sunny disposition to her regularly. Maybe if she cursed his ass out and quit on the spot because he was being an asshole, he could maybe forget about her and how much he desired her. Why was he trying to force her to quit? Because he sure as shit would never fire her.

Hyacinth probably thought he didn't want her around him. That was the furthest thing from the truth. If she tried to leave, he'd probably lose his mind. Now that she'd crashed into his life, there was no version of his future where she wasn't with him.

He wasn't ready to tell her that just yet. Maybe she would be ready for that discussion at a later time. It had only been a month, so he needed to be patient. Take his time. Rhys wasn't so good at waiting for things to happen to him. His usual style was to go after what he wanted, when he wanted it.

But if he was going to get her to see him as a man she could be with, he knew his attitude would need to change. After the situation with Peter on her first day, he thought she'd run the other way. That she didn't take off in the other direction and never return, told him more about her than she realized.

Plus, as long as she worked here with him, he could feel as though he was helping her situation the best way he could.

When Hyacinth told him she needed money to pay off her student loan and move to a new place, he wanted to offer help. Although he knew she would never ask him, he would pay off her student loans with one swipe of his pen. Hell, he had an apartment that was basically sitting empty that he would allow her to use, for as long as she needed. No rent payment required.

But he also knew she would never accept such a gift. One thing he learned about Cin after being around her so much these past few weeks is that she was a prideful woman. Nothing was wrong with that, of course. Unless he wanted her to depend on him. To just ask him for something. Anything.

“Rhys? I thought we were going out to dinner. This is your job. Can we go to dinner in New York tonight?”

His eyes turned to Lisa, then to Hyacinth, who was watching the encounter, before shifting to Lisa again. “No, we’re not going to dinner in New York. My chef is top-notch and we’re a 3-star Michelin rated restaurant. What else do you want?”

The woman pouted, poking her bottom lip out like a child. Hyacinth wanted to roll her eyes but refrained. More patrons entered the front and came up to the podium.

Everything in her wanted to avoid looking at Rhys and his date, but even as she tried to not look at him, she could hear them.

“I’m not doing this with you. We can eat here, or I can have my driver take you home. You pick.”

When the floor manager came up to grab the guests, she showed him where to seat them and he guided the couple to their table. By the time she looked up, Rhys and Lisa were no longer in the front area. She turned to watch as they walked to his office, but she didn’t see them. She noted the disappointment that coursed through her at the thought of what Rhys and his date would be doing. Just then, Rhys surprised her by walking back through the front door.

“Mr. Mannetti. Did your date have a change of mind?”

“Don’t start that shit with me tonight, Cin.”

She stopped him as he made his way to the back.

“Why do you call me that?”

“What?” he asked, turning around.

“Cin. Everyone else calls me Hyacinth. Even my roommate calls me Hy.”

“Does it bother you?” In only a few steps, he was standing in front of her. “It takes too long to say Hyacinth. I like Cin better.” He looked her up and down. “It suits you.”

“As long as you spell it with a C and not an S, I’m all good.”

His gaze got hotter the longer they stood there. Another couple broke the moment when they entered the restaurant.

“I’ll be in my office.”

“Sure, but what about dinner? You came here to eat. I can have something delivered to your office.” Just because his vapid date didn’t appreciate the amazing food at this place, she knew he did. This restaurant was his life. His family’s legacy. He spent so much time here at the restaurant that she was surprised that he even had time to date at all.

“Taking care of me, Cin?”

Her mouth went dry, and her nipples hardened. She wanted to do much more than feed him. Well, she’d like to feed him something else, but now was not the time to say it. “Just making sure we feed the Boss.”

He was silent as the couple stood behind him, waiting to be taken care of. “You want to make sure I eat, huh?”

“Yes,” the word escaped her mouth in a soft breath.

“Sure, Cin. Have some food delivered to me in my office. I’d appreciate that.”

As he walked away, she turned to watch. His long stride, his dominant aura, his ‘don’t give a fuck attitude’ could be gleaned from the way he strolled across the room. No one could say they didn’t know he was the man in charge. Shaking her head, Hyacinth knew there was no use going down this road. It was unwise and a danger to her heart to get caught up with a man like Rhys Mannetti.

The man was a tyrant, but he also was walking sin and temptation all rolled into one. If only she could stay strong enough to resist the pull.

Turning back to the front, she faced the waiting couple and plastered a smile on her face. “Good evening. May I help you?”

Chapter 6

“Fuck!” There was a sinking feeling in her stomach when she walked out to her car after work a few days later. Two of her tires were flat. Tears pricked the back of her eyes. It’s not that she couldn’t pay to get two new tires, but it was the entire situation. How did this happen? Nothing had been wrong with her car before now. Yes, it was old and needed routine maintenance to keep it running, but it was a decent car that had been reliable for the past six years.

Grabbing her phone, she went to call a tow truck, adding up the additional costs in her head when she heard a voice behind her.

“What are you doing standing out here? Don’t you realize how dangerous that is? Cin, you have to be smarter than this.”

Just what she needed. Hyacinth didn’t want to deal with Rhys right now. “I’m just enjoying the scenery.”

“Don’t be a brat. Now, answer my question.”

When she looked up, he was only inches away from her. His firm jaw, dark beard, and green eyes captured her attention. Why did he have to be so fine? Better yet, why did he have to be her boss?

She lifted one hand and motioned towards her car. “My tires are flat.”

His eyes shifted to where she pointed. He walked over to the car and squatted to get a closer look. One large touched around rear flat tired. Then he moved and repeated the motion with the other flat tire. Before long, he'd checked the entire car. When he came back to her side, his jaw was clenched, and his brow furrowed.

“Do you have any enemies, Cin?”

Shock flowed through her. “Enemies? No. Why would you ask me that?”

“Because someone slashed two of your tires. They’re not flat due to wear and tear. And your other two tires are completely fine. Someone did this on purpose. Who?”

His tone grated on her nerves. Yes, he was a take charge type of person, but she was the victim here. Why the hell was he so annoyed with her?

“Rhys... I mean, Mr. Mannetti.”

“Stop that Mr. Mannetti shit. No one calls me that. Well, no one who matters. We were beyond that ‘Mister’ business from the first day we met.”

Hyacinth bit her bottom lip as she looked at her car. “Rhys,” she acquiesced. “I don’t have any enemies. Not any real ones that would do something like this. Unless you mean the girl that teased me in junior high because I was tall, a bit chunky, and wore braces. Yeah, I punched her in the nose one day when she pulled my hair in gym class.”

He shook his head at her. “Now is not the time to play with me.” Glancing around, he looked as if he were trying to see deep into the darkness surrounding them.

This was downtown Santa Barbara. Full of celebrities, well-to-do professionals, and free-spirited people who loved the beach, surfing, and watching the sun set on the horizon. It was so cliché, but in this case the statement was true. Things like this didn't happen around here.

Looking at her car, she had to admit that things like this did happen. The proof was staring her in the face.

“Let's go. Leave your car. I'll have it towed to the garage of a friend. It'll be safe there.” Pulling out his phone, he pressed a button. “Hey, Charlie. One of my employees has a car issue here at the restaurant. It's a black, 4-door sedan. It's sitting in the back employee lot. Two flat tires. Slashed.” He motioned toward his car idling at the back door. His driver waited for Rhys to enter the vehicle and he would take him wherever he needed. “Okay, thanks. Yeah, and while you have it, give it a full workup. Fix whatever needs fixing. On me.” He hung up the phone and turned to see Hyacinth still standing in the same spot. “Come on, Cin. Let's go.”

“Why did you do that? You didn't need to have my car towed. I can handle it myself.”

The deep sigh he released should have clued Cin in to how he was feeling. His patience was razor thin and if she were paying attention, she would have stopped pushing him.

“Get in the fucking car, Cin. It's been a long day. I'm tired. You need to get home so you can get to your other job tomorrow. And your car needs to get fixed. What about this is hard to understand? So, now that we've gone through the

entire situation from top to bottom, can you get in the fucking car so I can take you home?”

The urge to tell Rhys to go fuck himself was strong in Hyacinth. Not the smartest thing to do, so she chose the other option. And walked her ass over to the car and waited for Carlos to open the door for her.

“Thank you, Carlos.”

“My pleasure, Ms. Hyacinth. Sorry you’re having car trouble.”

She nodded at him before turning to stare at Rhys, who was standing a few feet away from the car. His head thrown back with his eyes closed. She noticed his chest moving up and down from the deep breaths he took.

Glancing at Carlos, her lips lifted in a smile. “Well, our boss has been kind enough to offer to have it fixed for me.”

“He’s a good man, Mr. Mannetti.”

A good man? Maybe.

Someone who was used to getting whatever they want? Absolutely.

“Hmmm. Yeah, I guess he is,” she responded before climbing inside.

A few minutes later, Rhys climbed into the vehicle. “Ready to go?”

She nodded. “Yes.” As she glanced over at him, she couldn’t help but see the strain on his face. With everything happening right now, she could be nicer to the man. “Thank you for the ride home.”

His head leaned back on the soft cushion of the seat. “You don’t have to thank me. I take care of my people.” A pause. Then, “Cin?”

“Yes,” she stared at him, waiting for him to continue. When he finally looked at her, she could feel herself getting lost in his gaze.

“You don’t have to fight me every step of the way. I’m only here to help you.” He smiled and her insides melted. Damn, why was he so fucking fine? “You know, the way we met still surprises me. If not for some random person speeding down the street, we never would have crossed paths. When I think about that, I know it would have been a damn shame.”

A shame indeed, she thought before chuckling.

Rhys raised one arm and placed it on the back of the seat. His fingertips were just inches away from her. “I’m glad I was the one who saved you.”

Hyacinth nodded. “Me too.” Might as well tell the truth. No use in lying about how she felt. Meeting him had been a lucky break for her. Her attraction to him was a by-product that she didn’t need or want, but here they were.

“Do you enjoy working at Mannetti’s?”

Somewhat surprised by his question, she frowned at first. At the waiting look on his face, she nodded before angling her body toward him. “I do. The people are great. And while I have super long days, the money I’m making is helping me, so that’s a positive.”

“How about I ask it another way,” he said, still staring at her with that intense look in his eyes. “Do you enjoy working with me?”

Well, damn. That was not what she was expecting.

Although a month wasn't all that long, she felt she knew him better than most employees. She spent time with him while planning staff changes and assignments. He sought her out for her ideas he had about the menu, even having her do tastings with him for any new items he was considering.

Of course, on the first day of their acquaintance, he'd saved her life, offered her a job, and she'd seen him physically assault an ex-employee. Although that guy had been a thief, so that didn't really count.

He pissed her off every other day with his demands and his need for everything to be perfect. But what business owner wanted to have their shit looking sloppy, which would cause customers not to return?

Okay, but half the time he ignored her and hid inside his office and the other half, he stared at her as if he wanted her out of his sight. Fine, maybe she could admit that the last one may hurt her feelings just a little.

Everyone else was friendly and kind to her. They laughed and talked and told jokes. All the while, Rhys would hover in the background, looking surly and pissed that they were having fun without him.

“Cin? Are you going to answer me?”

“Does it matter if I enjoy working with the boss? You sign my paycheck. What do you think I’m going to say?” With that non-answer, Hyacinth turned back to the window to look at the scene passing by. But quickly realized she never gave him her address. “How do you know where I live?”

“You filled out an employment application with all your information listed. I accessed the HR system and sent the information to Carlos’s phone.” He smiled. “Did you think I was stalking you?”

“Considering my car has two flat tires and you just so happen to come to my rescue? And now, you’re driving me home? I mean, if the shoe fits.” As soon as the words escaped her mouth, she knew he didn’t deserve that. Maybe he didn’t have the friendliest personality, but he’d done nothing that would make her think he wasn’t truly just here to help her. Rhys had been really nice to her. Giving her a job after their less than ideal meeting. Accommodating her schedule. Paying her much more than she knew the job was worth. Hyacinth knew she was trying to keep some distance between the two of them. It was important to keep their interactions friendly but professional. Even so, she could cut back on the snark. “I’m sorry,” she bit out.

“Look at me, Cin.” When she hesitated, he said it louder. “Hyacinth! I asked you to look at me.”

Slowly shifting her body so that she could look into his eyes, she was shocked at what she saw. Anger. Frustration. Hurt.

“If you don’t trust me, why are you in my vehicle? If you want us to stop, I can call you a cab and you can get home another way. Maybe this was a mistake. I thought... Actually, it doesn’t matter what I thought. If you feel that my presence tonight at my own fucking restaurant, and my offer to help one of my employees get home safe was too much of a coincidence, then I don’t want to make you any more uncomfortable.” His hand reached out to click the intercom between the back of the car and Carlos, but she stopped him.

“No. Don’t. It’s fine. I’m sorry for what I said. Maybe I’m more worried about what happened to my car than I’m letting on. You didn’t deserve any of that.”

“Next time you want to accuse me of having nefarious reasons for helping you, keep those thoughts to yourself.”

She wanted to argue. Tell him to keep his high-handed orders to himself. But she knew he was right. Just as she was about to apologize again, the car slowed down.

“Looks like you’re here. I’ll send Carlos to pick you up in the morning. What time will you be ready?”

“Ready for what?”

He threw her a look that seemed to question her intelligence. “For work, Cin. Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

“Yes. But why would Carlos pick me up?”

He took a deep breath before looking at her. “Someone slashed your tires. That concerns me. And after the way you behaved tonight, it seems like you’re worried

as well. At least until your car is fixed, I'll make sure you have a ride to and from work, and to the restaurant for your evening shifts."

She didn't know what to say. "Why would you do something like this for me?"

Rhys looked into her eyes and his features softened slightly. "Accept the gift, Cin. Can you do that for me without arguing?"

He also wondered why he would do this for her. Anyone else would have been dropped off and he would have left and not looked back. But Cin, with a C and not an S, made him want to do things he never would have done in the past.

What was happening to him?

Chapter 7

When Hyacinth walked into Mannetti's the next night, she was committed to her new attitude. No snark. No nasty comments. She would play nice. And most importantly, she would try her damndest not to let her dreams from last night reflect on her face when she spoke with Rhys.

Just thinking about how she woke up in a cold sweat, her core pulsing from the dream orgasm made her pause. The phantom memory of how big she imagined Rhys's cock to be, caused a shiver to flow through her. Her imagination had gone wild. And the scenes were still so vivid, even hours later. The slide of his body against hers. How he looked down at her as she moaned underneath him. His soft lips kissing her body in all the places that mattered. And when he placed his mouth on her bare mound...

"Cin!"

She jumped at the loud voice calling her name. Jarred from the sensual memory, she turned to the voice and slammed right back into the memory. Rhys stood in front of her. His white shirtsleeves were pulled up, showing his forearms. Black slacks and shoes covered the bottom half. How could such a simple outfit look so sexy? It wasn't fair.

"What?" she said, ignoring how close he was to her. Quickly moving to the side, she walked around him and went to place her items down behind the bar. There was a storage area in the back for employees to place their items, but she never did. Usually when she came into work at

night, things were already hopping, and she had to get started right away. Joe, the bartender, let her store her items with him so that she could get to them quickly if needed.

“Why were you so distracted?”

“I wasn’t.” Liar! “It’s just been a long day.”

Rhys looked at her with a raised brow. He stared at her longer than necessary. Hyacinth knew he didn’t believe a word she said, but that was his problem.

She grabbed a container from her bag. On the way from her day job, she had asked Carlos to stop by her house. In her guilt last night from snapping at Rhys, she had baked him some cookies. Cliché? Yes. But it was the only thing she could manage to do in such a short time. It was her mother’s recipe for *Almond Joy Cookies*, and it made her feel good to do this for him. “Here, I made these for you.”

He reached out to grab the container, a look of shock on his face. “Why? What are they?”

Suddenly shy about the gesture, she busied herself with preparing for the dinner rush. There was a slight lull in the activity, but she knew it would pick up soon. “It’s nothing. Just something me and my mom would make when I was younger. It’s no big deal. I just wanted to thank you for helping me last night, and for having Carlos drive me to and from work today.”

His continued silence unnerved her. As she looked over at him, she noticed he stared at the cookies with a

look of awe. “Rhys? You okay?” Maybe giving him a gift had broken him, she thought with a smile.

She watched him swallow twice before his gaze lifted to her face. “No one... no one’s ever...” he paused and inhaled deeply. “Thank you. I don’t usually get... things. Thank you.” He glanced around quickly, seeming to avoid her gaze. “I, uh, need to get back to... stuff. I’ll see you later.”

“Wait,” she called out. “Did you need me?”

If only she knew just how much Rhys needed her. Wanted her. Hyacinth had no idea how loaded that one question could be.

“It can wait. I’ve held you up long enough.” With that, he walked away from her and returned to his office. The one place where he could have some quiet time to think without her presence surrounding him.

Confused by his rapid departure, Hyacinth got ready for the evening rush. She glanced over her shoulder to look toward the back office where Rhys worked. There were times he would come out and greet special VIP guests, but mostly, he stayed hidden away. But she couldn’t get it out of her head that his reaction to the cookies was odd. At the front door opening, she tried to get Rhys from her mind and focused on getting to work.

Rhys was sitting in his office, staring at the container.

“Why did she do this? I didn’t even know she knew how to bake.” The lid came off easily and the smell that escaped made his mouth water. He pulled one of the

coconut and chocolate desserts and lifted it to his mouth for a bite. The flavor exploded on his tongue, and he gobbled up the rest. “Well, that’s tasty,” he mumbled after gobbling down two more. He wasn’t a chef, but food was in his blood. This wasn’t a fancy dessert, but he could see adding this to their dessert menu.

For a moment, he wondered what Cin would think about him adding her childhood treat to his restaurant’s offerings. He shook his head at the thought. She probably wouldn’t care. The woman was sugar and spice and everything nice. Then she’d realize she was being cordial to him, and her entire demeanor would change.

Rhys wasn’t a stupid man by any means. He knew she was attracted to him. There were times he’d catch her staring at him with a look on her face that he could easily interpret. But he also could tell that she was fighting her feelings. It made sense. He was her boss and even though she only worked for him part-time, tongues would wag. Even now, he was thinking of a way to put aside his work and go out front to see what she was doing. Make sure that things were running smoothly.

This wasn’t like him at all. His work was his life. In the past, he’d had his fair share of women, but they served a temporary purpose. He didn’t care if they were tired after a long day. They didn’t make him sweet treats late at night as a thank you for a nice gesture. Even if they had, he probably wouldn’t have eaten them. Suspicious by nature, he didn’t usually accept things from other people. There was always a catch, and he didn’t like to be caught off-guard by the ask that would come later.

But with his Hyacinth, he knew she was different.

It wasn't just her beauty that captured his attention, it was something about her. She was kind to everyone. All his employees loved her. He always heard laughter when she was in the building. His team went out of their way to do things for her. She'd already made some minor changes around the place to enhance the marketing of his business. They were already making money hand-over-fist, but with the changes she suggested, his staff could work fewer hours, have less stress, and their nightly tips were higher.

Rhys couldn't help the smile that came over his face. In less than a month, she'd cast a spell over the whole place.

Plus, thanks to her Plucking Ladies Garden Club, the restaurant was regularly filled with the fragrance of fresh flowers. When she first told him about the club, he pictured a bunch of older ladies talking about their cats. He'd quickly come to find out that the group of women were so much more than that. And now he was benefiting from her connections, making his restaurant even nicer. Although he noticed that she never had her namesake flower delivered. There was definitely a story there, but he hadn't been able to figure it out.

He sighed. His eyes traveled to the clock on the wall, noticing that almost thirty minutes had passed. Yet, he hadn't done one lick of work. His mind had been on Hyacinth the entire time, and those damn cookies she made for him. Standing from his chair, he rolled his sleeves down and re-buttoned the cuffs. As he grabbed his suit

jacket and made his way out of his office, he tried to convince himself that he was only going out there so he could check on the patrons and make sure everyone was happy.

That his inside voice couldn't stop laughing at the blatant lie meant nothing.

If he just so happened to spend most of his time near Hyacinth, so be it. Who was gonna check him for it? Nobody, that's who. It was his restaurant, so he could do whatever the fuck he wanted.

Tables were filled with laughing customers. Drinks were flowing at the bar with every seat taken. The wait staff were weaving through the tables and things flowed like a well-choreographed dance. Yes, his staff was good, but he knew things were even better because of the small tweaks made over the past few weeks.

He made his way toward the front of the restaurant to check on Hyacinth. The door opened and a man holding a flower arrangement came inside. From his vantage point, he had a clear view of Hyacinth's face. When he saw the look of shock, then anger, his steps sped up. What about this delivery had her so pissed off? They got flowers all the time, especially from the ladies in her garden club.

"Flower delivery for Ms. Hyacinth Moore."

"I don't want them."

"Um... ma'am? Are you Ms. Moore? I'm just here to make a delivery. If you don't want them, you can do whatever you want."

Cin huffed and nodded. “Fine. Leave them there,” she motioned to a small table that sat in the front waiting area.

“Sign here please.”

The look she gave the delivery person almost made Rhys wince in pain.

“Fine,” she snapped. Quickly signing the clipboard, the frown never left her face as the young man left.

Rhys noticed that the flowers looked familiar, but they weren’t ones that he’d had in the restaurant before. Then it hit him. They were Hyacinth’s. Her namesake flower. The one bloom she had never brought in or had delivered.

Without thinking about the consequences to himself or how it would look to the staff, he walked up behind her. His hands wrapped around her waist and pulled her back to him. “Who sent you flowers, Cin?”

Because even though he hadn’t staked his claim publicly, he sure as fuck wasn’t going to stand back and let someone else send his woman flowers. Especially when she reacted this way. In fact, it pissed him off even more.

“Rhys?” He heard the surprise in her tone. “What are you doing?”

His hands tightened around her waist. Nothing could have prevented the moan he released as the soft flesh of her backside pressed against him. “I want the name of the person who sent you flowers. Why did it make you upset? Because if I have to give them a lesson on who the fuck you

are to me, I will. Now, tell me, Cin. Who sent you the
fucking flowers?”

Chapter 8

Hyacinth had convinced Rhys to stop acting like a caveman right in the middle of her shift. Especially when the entire restaurant could see them. She had convinced him to wait until after they closed. That she would tell him everything.

His head motioned towards the flowers sitting on the table. “What do you want me to do with those?”

She released a loud huff. Just the thought of Kenny sending her flowers to her workplace made her skin crawl. That meant he knew where she worked. These empty gestures of his were pissing her off. And with him using her favorite flower to try and get her back, only made her hate him more.

“Throw them away. I don’t want them.”

He was now standing inches away from her. His gaze was intense as he looked at her face. She knew he was trying to gauge her emotions and how she was feeling about things. But she couldn’t do this right now. If she started discussing the situation with Kenny and how much he had hurt her, and that he couldn’t seem to leave her the fuck alone, it would put her in a foul mood. Since she still had a few hours before they closed, that wasn’t something she could do right now.

She took a step back to put more space between them. “I’ll tell you everything later. I just need to focus on

work right now. Can you throw them out or give them away? I don't care what you do with them, but I don't want to see them."

Staring at her for a few more moments, he eventually nodded. One hand raised, catching the attention of one of his busboys. "Hey, can you take those flowers and walk them next door to the furniture store? Let them know we got an extra flower delivery and we're giving to them as a gift."

"Yes, sir." The young man quickly picked up the vase and walked to the door. "Sir, there looks to be a card. Do you want it?"

Rhys nodded before reaching out his hand. He placed the small envelope in his pants pocket. If Hyacinth was so upset by the flowers showing up, he sure as hell wasn't going to ask her to deal with a personal note.

"This isn't over, Cin."

"I know." She shook her body as if ridding herself of bad vibes. It would be kind of cute if he wasn't so fucking angry.

"I want answers tonight. If any other deliveries come, I want to be informed right away."

She rolled her eyes at him, but he didn't give a shit.

"Yes, sir."

"You know, I like that word coming from your lips."

When she smiled in his direction, his entire body relaxed.

“Don’t get used to it,” she responded.

One long finger touched the bottom of her chin, tilting her head up to him. “I can wait.”

“Rhys. Please. Don’t make this uncomfortable. People are watching.”

He didn’t give a shit who saw them. If they didn’t like it, the door was waiting for them. “Do you care?”

“I worry about giving the wrong impression. We’re not a couple.”

“Not yet. But trust me, it’s coming.”

Releasing her, he stepped back. He walked over to the bar and ordered a whiskey. Then another. As he watched the activity in his restaurant, he tried to tamp down the rage flowing through him. It was important for him to always show a professional image. Santa Barbara wasn’t Providence, and it wasn’t Virginia. His past followed him for years, but he had come here to the west coast for a fresh start. His father had given him the helm of this Mannetti’s and asked him to build on the already strong brand.

But he was who he was. A hunter. A killer.

His gut was telling him that whoever sent those flowers to Hyacinth was trouble. Her reaction was abnormal.

For the rest of the night, Rhys stayed close by. He didn’t go into his office. He stayed by the bar all night observing the crowd of people inside his establishment. He

didn't know what or who he was looking for. But he would know when he found it.

When things started winding down and the last customers were walking out the door, Rhys knew it was time for him to get answers. After locking up his office, he walked back to the front. It took him less than five minutes to say goodbye to the staff before he approached Hyacinth.

“Time to go.”

She looked up at him with resignation. “You really want to do this right now? I mean, you've already made a scene in front of everyone. I don't want people to think the wrong thing about us.”

Rhys looked outside the large front window and saw Carlos pull up front. “No one cares if we leave together. We're not like that here. Plus, you owe me a conversation tonight. Let's go.” Yes, he was being harsh with her, but he didn't care. There was a driving need for him to sort out this situation.

She looked at him for a long second before nodding. “Okay. I'll tell you everything. Let's go.” Hyacinth grabbed her purse and stepped around to the front of the hostess station. A handful of employees said goodbye to them with smiles on their faces. A couple of others shook their head. But no one said a word. She couldn't worry about what people thought about her, because it wouldn't change the facts.

When she was growing up in Las Vegas, her parents lived on the west side of the city. They got quite a few looks out in public because her father was white, and her mother

was black. Some kids thought she was too light-skinned and accused her of thinking she was better than them. Other kids made fun of her tanned skin and kinky-curly hair.

Even now, she remembers her mother talking to her after she'd gotten suspended for fighting. Again.

“Hyacinth, no matter what people say about you, know that their hateful words are said only for a few reasons. Jealousy. Envy. Low self-confidence. You can’t worry about how someone else perceives you. Only worry about how you see yourself. No one has the right to disrespect you, no matter who they are. You hold your head high and remember that you are strong, powerful, and one day, you will leave all these people behind. If someone judges you, just remember that the wolf doesn’t concern itself with the sheep’s feelings. Now, tell me what happened again when that girl pushed you. I hope you whooped her ass.”

Thinking about her mother made her smile. Her family was unconventional, but her parents always showed her love. Her father ran the streets from a young age, getting into trouble, and was a local drug-dealer. Nothing big, but he had enough street connections to do well. When her parents met, they were at a house-party in North Las Vegas. Her father was apparently on a date with another woman. He denies it was a date and says it was just a hook-up. Hyacinth believed her mother’s version of events—it was a date. They both agreed that from the moment their

eyes met across the room, her father was after her mother like a hound dog. From what her mother and aunts told her, her father was down bad for her mom from jump.

After a bunch of shenanigans when they were dating, including jealous ex-girlfriends, a few close calls with the police, and some people not believing they should be together, they got married two years after meeting. Hyacinth showed up exactly ten months later. Married for twenty-nine years, her parents showed her what real love was like. That having the right partner, even when others didn't believe in your relationship, could make all the difference. Even after all these years, they were still very much in love. It was funny how sickeningly sweet they were. Her father would leave her mother little love notes around the house, they would go out on a date every month, and he treated her like a Queen.

While he left the streets behind and went back to school for plumbing and electrical, eventually opening his own successful business, he never forgot who he was. Hyacinth's mother also was no wallflower. Anyone who crossed her would soon find out just how much alike she and her husband actually were.

Carlos opened the door for them to climb into the car. Once settled, she turned to look at Rhys. "Are you ready for the entire story?"

"I don't want to have this conversation in the car. Tell me when we get to your home."

"But I didn't invite you into my home," she snarked. The smile on her face letting him know there was no real

bite behind her words.

He lifted one hand and cradled her face. “Invite me home with you, Cin. Let me into your private domain so we can... talk about what happened today.”

Her lungs simply stopped functioning and her breathing halted at his words. The touch of his hand on her face. His soft words. The needy tone of his voice. It almost made her forget the most important thing. “Wait. I have a roommate. I just don’t want...”

A slow smile came over his face. “That’s okay. Do you trust me?”

Without a fucking doubt. “Yes.”

“Come back to my place. Carlos can bring you back home later.”

As they both stared into each other’s eyes, there was a subtle acknowledgment that neither of them wanted her to avail Carlos of his services anymore that night.

Rhys wanted her in his bed, moaning his name, and begging for more.

Hyacinth wanted to be underneath Rhys as she finally made her very vivid, nightly dreams come true.

Leaning over, Rhys pressed the button to speak with Carlos. “Change of plans. Head to the house.”

“Yes, sir,” came through in response. The car slowed and made a U-turn.

Rhys wanted to press closer and capture her soft lips in a kiss. Instead, he dropped his hand from her face. “We’ll

get to my place in about fifteen minutes.”

Chapter 9

“This place is amazing.” Hyacinth walked through the large entrance, with Rhys close behind her. His large, warm hand pressed against her lower back.

“Thanks. It was built in the 1950’s, but I had everything modernized. When I saw this place, I knew it was where I wanted to live. It’s big enough to fit all my family when they visit, but also not so big that I would get lost.”

Entering the sitting room off to the side, she sat down on the couch he directed her toward. “You live here all by yourself?”

“You already know I’m not married.” Rhys removed his suit jacket and threw it over the side of a long couch. “There aren’t any hidden kids running around here. I have a small staff that helps around the place, but other than that, I live here alone.” He filled a glass with whiskey. “Want a drink?”

She nodded. “Yes, please,” her tone was tentative and shaky as her eyes continued to flit and float around the room.

“You okay, Cin? Scared?”

“No.” Her response came out a bit too fast.

Rhys chuckled. “Okay. Are you nervous?”

She slanted her head to look at him. “Is there something I need to be nervous about?”

Two drinks in his hand, he walked over and sat down next to her. “Not that I’m aware of. Plus, we’re just here to talk, right?”

He took a gulp of his drink as she watched him. Her own glass raised to her lips, and she took a small sip as well. Never a fan of harsh liquor, she winced at the bitter taste.

He smirked. “Too much for you?”

“It’s fine,” she said before tilting the glass back again, taking a bigger gulp.

They had wasted enough time. “Now, tell me who sent the flowers.”

Hyacinth looked at him to gauge his mood. Rhys’s body leaned back on the couch, long legs splayed open, and shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His hair was messy and an extra button on his shirt was undone.

In short, he looked good enough to lick. At that thought, she pulled herself up short. This was so not the time to be thinking of her boss this way. Then again, he started this game of cat and mouse. She was here in his home. His very empty home. Having a drink. Making herself comfortable. And when he made that comment earlier about Carlos driving her home, she knew without a doubt that it wasn’t going to happen.

She was getting everything she wanted tonight.

In for a penny. In for a pound.

“Cin? I’m waiting.”

Damn, this motherfucker was bossy. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was the same way in bed. Would he tie her up and force her to endure all the things he did to her body? Was his dick big enough to match his swagger? Was his tongue talented enough to back up the words coming out of his mouth. Hyacinth could feel her core slickening at her thoughts. Focused back on the conversation at hand, she placed her glass on the table in front of them. She reached down to remove her shoes since she would be here for a while. No time like the present to get a bit more comfortable.

“He’s my ex-boyfriend.”

“How much of an ex?” Was that a growl in his voice?

She shifted so that her knees were bent and resting on the couch, her feet tucked underneath her. One elbow rested on the back cushion and her head was held up by her hand. “It’s been two years,” she sighed. “He’s an ex because I caught him sleeping with someone else in our home.”

Rhys was silently listening, but was getting angrier by the second.

“I came home early one day because I wasn’t feeling well. It was our neighbor. A married woman with kids. He was fucking her raw in our bed. I left him that same day and never looked back. Moved out of our home, found a room to rent, and moved on with my life.

“That’s it?”

She nodded. “That’s pretty much it. Well, I threatened him with my dad,” she laughed. “Isaac Moore don’t play about his kids. Kenny knew better than to do anything crazy or he’d have my dad and his friends to deal with.”

Rhys took another sip of whiskey. “So, what’s up with the flowers?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. About six months after we split, he started sending me flowers on dates that were only important to him, and some that were important to our relationship.”

“Like what?”

Not liking how this conversation was going, she looked at him. Like really looked at him. “Why do you care? I mean, yes, I’m your employee and I think we’re friends. Maybe,” she sighed, “we’re going to become something more after tonight. Who knows. But, I just need you to tell me the truth about what’s going on here.”

At first, it didn’t seem like he would answer, then he exhaled. “There’s something about you. You haven’t been in my orbit for a very long time, but all I think about is you. I wonder what you’re doing at your other job. I want to check on you several times a day. When you’re at the restaurant, I feel at peace because I can see you. Then that fucking thing happened with the tires on your car. All I wanted to do was keep you safe.”

Surprised was an understatement. Sure, she and Rhys had flirted with each other, but his gruff demeanor did not prepare her for this. While she was over here simping for

him, he was doing the same? A smile lit up her face. “I don’t think I realized.”

“I don’t know how. I’ve been driving myself crazy ever since you crash-landed in to my life. Even the staff has noticed that there’s something different about you. I’ve changed and I don’t think they know how to handle it.”

“Yeah,” she smiled. “Well, I was trying to keep things professional.” She wasn’t ready to admit to him just how nasty, freaky, and unprofessional her dreams were about him. He was the star and he spent 100% of the time naked and blowing her mind. That would be a conversation for another day.

“Fuck professional. If you don’t want me the same way, we can leave things here. I’ll call Carlos now and he can take you home. I will still make sure that you’re safe. Protected. This ex-boyfriend is going to be dealt with. The look on your face when those flowers arrived isn’t something I want to see again.” He lifted one hand and brushed his fingers against her hair. “But if you want this as much as I do, then we stop fighting it. We see where this can go between us. We don’t worry about what the employees are gonna say. But we also don’t hide what’s happening between us. I want everyone to know that you’re mine. That I’m yours.”

“What about that woman you came in with the other day?”

“What woman? No one else matters right now except you.”

With a quick move, Hyacinth picked up her glass and drank the remaining contents in one big gulp. “I came here tonight because I want the same thing. If we had gone to my place, we would have had to worry about my roommate. And I didn’t want her to hear us because I plan to enjoy every moment of tonight.”

“You speak as if this is the only time we’ll be together,” he said as he stood from the couch. One large hand reached out to her. “Let me show you upstairs. You can get a full tour next time.”

“Will there be a next time?” She placed her small hand in his and stood next to him. Would that mean she would have to leave her job at the restaurant? She hoped not. But this is where the lines blurred. Did she want to fuck the boss? Yeah, she really did.

“Oh, sweetheart, you can bet your ass there’s going to be a next time.”

As they entered his bedroom upstairs, she gasped at what she saw. A large king-sized bed sat in the middle of the room. There was a fireplace off to one side, a small loveseat against the other wall, and a large dresser with a tv mounted on the wall above it. The room was bigger than her entire apartment.

Rhys came up behind her. His hands grabbed her by the upper arms and pulled her body back against his. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted you here with me? Right in this spot?”

A shudder went through her body as she felt his hot breath travel over her ear, tickling her flesh. Hyacinth felt her nipples harden. Slickness pooled in her panties as she willed herself not to melt into a pile of goo on the floor. “No. How long have you wanted me?”

“Since you came into my life in the middle of the street in front of my restaurant. I tried to be good. I did everything in my power to resist you.”

His words moved something inside of her. No matter how much she never thought the words would pass her lips, she decided to share her secret. “I dream about you,” Hyacinth whimpered.

“Oh, baby.” His lips blazed a trail of soft kisses and quick nips from her ear to her neck to her shoulder. Each touch causing her to moan each time. Every brush of his fingers along her skin ignited the fire inside her body. She wanted more. Maybe she shouldn’t be in the situation with her boss, but none of that mattered right now. Tomorrow would take care of itself.

“I want you naked. I’m hanging on by a thread here. Tell me now if you don’t want this. If you have any doubts about what this will mean, I want to hear them now. Because once I’m balls deep inside you, there’s no going back.”

She tilted her head up, her gaze catching his. “No going back. I want it all. I want you.”

“Damn, baby. I’m falling for you,” he said before kissing her gently on the lips.

“It’s okay. I’ll catch you.” And there was no doubt in her mind that she would.

The question of if he would do the same remained, but she wasn’t ready to tackle that right now. Tonight, she wanted to indulge in the man standing next to her and get her back blown out for the first time in two years.

Chapter 10

Rhys reached up a hand and brushed the back of it against her cheek. Hyacinth leaned into his touch, her eyes conveying so much more than words could say. His heart somersaulted, beating furiously as it tried to break through his ribcage. He couldn't understand this overwhelming need for her, but as he looked into her eyes, something inside him melted. Now, with just the two of them in his bedroom, the look of lust and submission on her face was pulling him down. He wanted to claim her. His senses were overwhelmed by the touch of her soft skin, her scent, her beautiful face looking up at him with complete trust, and the soft whimpers escaping her lips.

He leaned down to kiss her, needing to taste her again. As their tongues mingled, he pulled her closer, wanting to drown in the sensation of having her body pressed against him. Rhys pulled back to get some air before speaking.

"I've been thinking about doing that all night."

"Oh, shit," she hissed as his lips clamped down on her plump breast. His mouth suctioned on her flesh so tightly, it sent a ripple of ecstasy through her body directly to her clit. The entire time he focused on her breasts, switching from one to the other.

His hands continued to remove her clothes, baring her naked skin to his gaze. His mouth watered at the sight in front of him. "I can't wait to taste you."

Her skirt and panties fell to the floor in a pile. She kicked off her shoes, causing them to fly across the room. Neither of them stopped to see where they landed.

Her hands gripped his shoulders to keep her balance. Hyacinth knew she should try to help Rhys remove his clothes, but he was overwhelming her senses. To see this man so focused on her pleasure, suckling her as if it were his only way to survive, caused her channel to slicken and clench with need.

Rhys briefly listed his head. "I need to taste you." Without waiting for her reply, he lifted her by the waist and placed her on the bed. Since he'd already removed her clothes, her naked body was his for the taking. "Damn, baby. You sure as fuck have a pretty pussy."

She watched a sly grin come over his face as he grabbed her around both thighs, pulling her body down to the edge of the bed. "Fuck. I'm going to enjoy this." His nose pressed against her mound. She could hear him inhale her scent. His moan was loud in the silence of the room. He whispered something, but for the life of her, she couldn't make out the words.

At the first swipe of his tongue, her body bowed. He lapped at her as if she were his favorite ice cream cone. "Oh, fuck. Rhys," she couldn't help but moan.

He didn't respond, but she wasn't expecting him to. His entire focus was on driving her out of her fucking mind. Lick. Slurp. Twirl.

Every touch of his lips and tongue caused her toes to curl, a moan to escape, and her hands to clench. She

wanted to stop him. It was too much. There was too much sensation. Her nerve endings snapped and crackled throughout her body. She could feel her body tightening with the need to release. She was afraid to let go, but had no other choice. Her moans became louder. His name became a chant on her lips.

“No. Stop.”

It felt so good.

“Wait. Yes.”

She needed more.

“Oh, fuck.”

One night would never be enough.

“Rhys. Oh my God.”

He was going to make her explode.

“Please. Please. Please.”

She was speaking unintelligible gibberish, but he knew exactly what she wanted. And Rhys was the man to give it to her. As he felt the woman beneath him quiver and shake as an orgasm rushed through her, he couldn't help but smile. He pulled her hardened clit in between his lips, pulling tight as he sucked the sensitive flesh. Yes, he knew what this would do to her. That's exactly what he was working toward.

Her total surrender.

Nothing else would be acceptable.

Using his lips and tongue, he took her to heaven, hell, and back again. His hands kneaded the soft flesh over her lower stomach. Moaning low in his throat, he knew the vibrations would only take her over the cliff that much quicker. Rhys felt her body freeze and tighten up around him as Hyacinth climaxed in a wave of liquid heat. Her essence flowed into his mouth, and he'd never tasted anything sweeter.

She was perfect for him.

He sucked up her essence, the proof of her pleasure, and removed his mouth from her pulsating mound. One finger pressed inside her quivering channel. She was still tantalizingly tight, but wet enough to accommodate him. Rhys knew he was quite thick. Some even said he was too big to fuck. For the right woman, he knew he would be the perfect size.

Not able to wait another minute longer, he quickly stripped off the rest of his clothes. Rising over her, he notched the head of his cock at her entrance. His eyes shifted to look at Hyacinth's face and noticed that her chest was heaving with exertion, her mouth was open, and her eyes were half-mast as she stared at him.

"Are you ready, sweetheart?"

"Yes. Please, Rhys. I need it."

He pushed gently inside, going slow so that he didn't hurt her as he stretched her wide. The tightness of her pussy made him hiss in pleasure with a bite of pain. "So fucking tight. Damn, baby. You're gonna make me never want to leave." His eyes never left her face. He wanted to

know what expressions she made as he slid inside her. “Fuck me, you’re made for me. You’re so goddamn perfect,” he groaned.

Once he was fully inside her, he stayed still for a few seconds. He wanted her to get used to his size. If he had to wait for her to be ready, he would do his best to do just that. This had to be good for her because he planned to be deep inside her all night. Leaving his bed wasn’t a choice for either of them. If they truly needed something, he would figure out another way to get it.

“Rhys, please. I need you to move,” she begged. Her eyes were wide open now, her hands resting on his ribcage, and her legs wrapped around his waist. This is how he wanted to see her every single night. This is where he belonged. In his woman’s arms.

He was no longer willing to wait to be with her the way he wanted. Why should he have to? He wanted her body to adjust so that he was the only one who fit. Pulling back slightly, he heard her hiss of pain. When he slammed back in, he smiled at her moan of pleasure. That’s the sound he wanted to hear. The moan of absolute submission. The unwavering knowledge that he was the one she made that sound for. Leaning down, he captured her lips in a sensual kiss as he pulled back and thrust again.

She whimpered into his mouth, and it made him hungry for more. By the end of the night, he wanted her screaming his name. Thrusting again, he sped up as he tried to reach depths inside of her body that no one else touched. Rhys wanted his dick to kiss her cervix. He

wanted her to mark his back with the telltale signs of their lovemaking. The scratches would serve as a memory of their first night together.

Hyacinth was giving him exactly what he wanted. What he'd hoped for. A woman who could match his passion. Someone who would never push him away, but would only pull him closer. He'd waited for her and now that she was here, he would do everything in his power to keep her by his side. If given the chance, he'd love her for a thousand years. With every push inside her body, she became wetter. The sound of their lovemaking was loud in the room. Oh fuck, that was the gushy stuff he wanted. She tightened around him, almost strangling his dick with every downstroke.

Their kiss was wet and sloppy. Hyacinth was drunk from the ecstasy coursing through her body. She felt broken apart and rebuilt every time he tapped that special place inside her. She wanted to scream out her pleasure, but had no desire to break their kiss. Even as she struggled for breath, she didn't want to sever their connection. When he lifted his head and began kissing the side of her neck, she could only grab him tighter.

She had a feeling he would be good in bed, but she had no idea he was a fucking sex God. As she felt another orgasm coming over her, she urged him to go faster.

"Faster. More. I'm going to come." When he stopped moving and pulled out, she almost screamed.

"Turnover, sweetheart," he demanded. Rhys wanted her on all fours. Some primal need inside him demanded

that he take her from behind. Maybe he just wanted to see her ass jiggle as he pounded inside her body. He didn't care why he needed her this way. He just did. Sliding back inside her body, he closed his eyes. "Yes. Just like that. Arch your back. Stick your ass up." He looked down at the woman beneath him and moaned. He slammed against her harder. "Spread your legs a bit more, Cin. Let me get deep."

Rhys needed to hear her scream his name. He couldn't stop fucking her hard as her whimpers and moans became louder. He could hear her chant his name, which is what he'd been waiting for. He wanted—needed to release inside her. Fuck what anyone else would have to say. He knew she was his. All the other shit going on in their lives would be handled. Making sure this woman was by his side was everything to him.

He felt his cock pulse with the need to cum. Hoisting her body up, he pulled her back against his chest, pumping into her with every ounce of energy he had. There would be so much more for them to experience tonight, but this first time, was all about staking his claim on his woman and giving her his seed. The tingling sensation coursing through his body made him hiss.

"Oh fuck, baby. I'm gonna come inside you so fucking deep. I want you to take every fucking drop."

One hand moved to massage the hardened nub between her legs, pushing her into another orgasm. His other hand gripped her face, turning her to him so he could capture her lips in a sensual kiss. As his release soared through him, their kiss intensified. He could feel her

channel tighten around him and knew she was coming with him. The kiss continued long after their bodies slowed.

“Wow,” she whispered.

“Oh, sweetheart. You haven’t seen anything yet. Now, lie down on your stomach, because I’m ready for round two.”

Chapter 11

She belongs to me.

How could she do this to us?

Hyacinth knew I loved her.

She knew we belonged together.

Watching her walk around with that dude, as if I wasn't right here, pissed me off.

Was she trying to make me jealous?

If so, I'd make her understand that I wasn't the jealous type.

Hyacinth would pay for walking around here like a fucking whore.

How could she?

I apologized.

Those women meant nothing to me.

She was the only one I wanted.

But now this other man was in the way.

I saw them leave together almost every night.

His car picked her up and drove her around town.

If it wasn't for him, she would have had no choice but to call me.

That shitty car of hers was a death trap.

*Slashing her tires was the easy part.
She should have called me. Not him!
I've waited two years to get her back.
I'm not willing to wait any longer.
She's had enough time to get over my little
indiscretion.
But cheating on me with another man.
That, I will never forgive.
Hyacinth will pay for hurting me this way.
Then I'll make her love me again.*

Walking into Mannetti's a few days later, Hyacinth couldn't hide the smile on her face. That morning, it had been hard to leave Rhys's bed and go into work. When she woke up and adjusted to her surroundings, she thought back to the things they'd done the night before.

No matter how many times they came together, he amazed her with how attentive he was to her body and her needs. He may be a tyrant at work, but he was a fucking God in the bedroom.

There was not one place on her body that Rhys hadn't touched or kissed. From toes to the top of her head, with special attention paid to her hidden treasure. A giggle came out as she remembered how he made sure he tapped into that resource and lapped at all the honey that flowed from her body. Just the thought of it made her stomach clench and her channel slick with need.

“Hey Hyacinth. What’s so funny?” Missy greeted her as she stood in the front reception area. The restaurant was always busy between the hours of five and eight, so she had suggested to Rhys to have more than one person covering the front. That way, when one was taking care of a customer, the other was available. It showed a more responsive and customer-focused approach. No one patron was more important than the other. It worked like a charm. In the past week, they not only had repeat customers, but reservations increased. While there was no concrete proof that the adjustments she suggested for the business were the reason for the change, Hyacinth felt that it definitely played a part.

Walking over to the young lady, Hyacinth smiled. “Oh, nothing.” Then she changed the subject. “How are you doing? I know you’re ready to move away from being a server. How do you think things are going here at the hostess desk?”

“It’s going great. Being a server pays good money and the tips really help make a difference. But, it’s good to know that I can become something more. I’m glad Mr. Mannetti is giving me a chance to prove myself.”

She looked at the young lady with a smile. Hyacinth remembered when she was fresh out of college. All excited about life and what was in store for her. Because she was the first one in her family to go to college, there was a lot of pressure on her to make it big. Or at least she thought there was. She later found out that her parents had always been proud of her, no matter what she did. They just wanted her to be happy.

Maybe if she'd focused on being happy rather than doing what she thought was expected of her all the time, she would be better off. Not that she wouldn't have gone to college right out of high school or moved to Santa Barbara. But maybe life was about more than what she'd made it out to be. As she looked at Missy, glowing with happiness at being given a chance to do more for her life and have a solid living, she wondered when she had become so unhappy with her own situation.

Her paychecks were spent on bills. Mainly rent and student loans. Sure, she had a bit of money in savings, but there was always the fear that one day she'd lose everything and have to start over. That was no way to live.

These past few days with Rhys was the first time, in a very long time, she'd done something just for herself. And damn, it was good.

She was enjoying herself and all the things they were doing together. Maybe living in the moment was something she needed to do more of because if it always had her feeling this amazing the next day, it had to be good for the soul.

She glanced over at Missy and noticed she was staring at her, waiting for a response. "Oh, yes. Missy, you're a hard worker. Someone the other employees depend on. Rh.. Um, Mr. Mannetti notices things like that. Of course, he would give you a chance to prove yourself. Just keep doing what you're doing."

"Thanks Hyacinth. That means a lot coming from you. I know Mr. Mannetti values your opinion and if you think

I'm doing well, then I believe he does also." Just then, the door opened to allow more patrons inside, and Missy turned on her smile.

Hyacinth took that moment to step away and walk to the back office, where she knew Rhys would be working. The man never stopped. From the time he arrived around lunchtime until closing, he worked in his office. Crunching numbers. Talking with vendors. Looking for partnerships. It was all about growing his business.

For a moment, Hyacinth wondered where she fit in. They'd taken their relationship to the next level only a few days ago. She needed to slow down and get a grip. He made no promises to her, and she shouldn't expect things to change right away. That didn't mean she wasn't hoping for something more.

As she approached his door, she heard him on the phone and slowed down so as not to interrupt.

"That's a questionable move. You can't start shifting your business to the west coast without talking to the heads of the families running this side of the country. My father can help, but you know he's been retired for a while. The council doesn't meet again for another two months." Rhys paused to listen to the person on the other side.

Hyacinth's eyes went wide. She wasn't naïve by any means, but could Rhys really be talking about what she thought? But he was only a restaurant owner. Right? She tuned in as he continued speaking.

"Tristan, you know I got you covered on this side. We've been friends for a long time and our business

together will always be strong. Have you called Max Bishop to get him on board? If we need to handle things and get some people out of the way, we're gonna need some power behind us. Max can give us that. He's not on the west coast, but that motherfucker knows everybody. Plus, his partner Nico... yeah, Nico Mitchell. I see you've heard of him. I'm surprised you two haven't crossed paths before... Well, be glad that you haven't. I like having you around," he paused and gave a small laugh. "Plus, you want to make sure that psycho is on your side. He has some family connections over here as well."

Now Hyacinth was feeling guilty for not showing herself. It wasn't like her to eavesdrop on private conversations. Now she'd heard a lot more than she wanted to. It made her look guilty, even if Rhys didn't know she had heard his conversation.

"Hey Hyacinth," Mateo greeted as he stepped from the employee lounge. You had to pass the lounge to get to Rhys's office, so his voice was a bit loud. She squeaked, jumping a few inches as she turned to face the young man watching her with a strange look on his face.

"Oh, shit."

"Are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you." He said before looking up over her head.

There was no need to look behind her, because she knew exactly what he was seeing. The only person it could be.

She took a deep breath before responding. "Yes. Yes, thanks Mateo. I'm okay. Was just waiting to have a

conversation with the boss,” she said, hooking one thumb over her shoulder. Plastering a large smile on her face, she tried to play it cool. Inside, she was a quivering mess, and not in a good way. As Mateo walked away, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

“Why are you sneaking around, Cin?”

After a moment, she turned to face him. Tilting her head back to look in his face, she couldn’t help but remember their time together last night. His naked form, his large hands, his soft lips, and his big dick. How could he be both scary and mouth-wateringly sexy at the same time?

“I wasn’t sneaking. Carlos just dropped me off and I wanted to come say hello. You know, just check in.”

He stared at her for an extra second before shifting and taking a step back. “Come in. We should talk.”

“Sure,” she said with false cheeriness. Logically, she knew there was nothing to fear. But the irrational part of her thought about all the mob movies she’d seen in the past. Was she about to sleep with the fishes? Would he make her disappear because she overheard his conversation? Maybe he’d force her to marry him so she couldn’t testify about what she’d heard. Then again, marrying him would be a good thing because she’d get to sleep with him every night. But what if he only wanted a marriage in name only. That’s what mob guys did, right? Then they went off and had a mistress on the side. A woman to do all the things they couldn’t do with their wives.

Could she accept that type of life? What was the alternative? Hyacinth glanced at Rhys as he stood behind her, an indecipherable look on his face. Was this it? Had she heard too much? She should have known something was up with him on that first day. And then she'd gone and fell for the fucker. Just her damn luck.

They always said most girls wanted a man just like their father. Well, she'd definitely done that. Only she had a feeling he was much worse than her father ever was. When he spoke, her knees weakened.

“So, how much of my conversation did you actually hear?”

Chapter 12

Rhys stepped into Hyacinth's space. He could tell she was nervous, but he needed to understand the real reason she was on edge. Was it because she'd overheard some of his conversation, or was it because of the change in their relationship?

He wouldn't accept her being afraid of him for any reason, so he needed to be smart about how he responded. No one had ever accused him of being a nice guy. Yes, Mannetti's was his family's legitimate business and something he loved to do. It felt good to have a place where he could build a legacy. His father had passed down the restaurants to him and his brother, while his other brother was practicing law in Providence. It never hurt to have a lawyer in the family. You never knew when that skill may come in handy.

But the legitimate business interests were separate from how the family had initially built its wealth. It wasn't something he would apologize for. Some would call it immoral and illegal. He would just call it the family business.

Tristan Lucarelli was a childhood friend for a reason. Their fathers had done business together when they were younger. Tristan's wife was the daughter of another associate of his father and Tristan's father. If his long-term friend called and said he needed help to expand his business on the west coast, then Rhys would help.

Although Rhys's father, the elder Mannetti, wasn't actively involved in the original family business anymore, Rhys and his brother, Leonardo, were. Leo was Tristan's right-hand man in Providence. He had no interest in running the family, but he was damn good at what he did.

If Rhys ever needed him, he knew Leo would come running. And behind him would be their other brother, Marco. And coming in a close third would be their cousins Arturo and Angelo Sabatino, from Boston. They also had a restaurant that was doing well. Food was what their family was good at, so that's where they put their efforts.

Plus, having a business that could give cover for some of their shadier dealings was a smart move.

That Hyacinth heard part of his conversation was something that could be handled. He never would have gotten involved with her if he didn't think she could deal with who he was. Not that he would tell her this, at least not yet, but he'd looked into her family. He knew who her father was and the way she'd grown up. His family had quite a few dealings in Las Vegas. It was Sin City, after all. Any vice you had could be fed in that city. Drugs. Sex work. Crime. Underground fights. Her father had been small time compared to his family, but he was doing enough to be noticed by some of the smaller crews.

When her father had married and gone clean, he kept his connections tight. Everyone understood his reasons. He never turned his back on the people who helped him, but he fought to stay on the straight and narrow. Her father didn't know enough about the business to be a threat, so

while they let him go be a family man, they still watched him. When they needed some intel, her father was on the call list. And he always answered.

When Rhys had discovered this little tidbit of information about a week after Hyacinth entered his life, he initially questioned how they met. But after having his people scrub every area of her background, he realized it truly had been a fluke moment. She'd fallen into his life as if fate had a hand at pushing them together.

Of course, she did not know he knew so much about her family. He also knew about her ex-boyfriend, Kenny Richards. Now that fucker was as slippery as a snake. On paper, his family was low-class trash. He, on the other hand, had worked his way up to become a half-ass junior executive. After the tire incident, Rhys had his men out looking for the man. He just wanted to have a conversation with him. No one was going to kill him. Yet.

“Sweetheart, are you okay?” He leaned down and kissed Hyacinth on the forehead. “How long were you waiting outside my door? I didn’t hear you knock.”

Her wide gaze looked at him. They both waited for her to decide how she would respond. Would she run from him screaming or would she accept him as is? Believing that he was involved in something potentially illegal, would she be strong enough to stay by his side?

“Sweetheart?” he prompted her to respond.

“Oh! Um, I’ve only been here a little bit. I didn’t hear much. I’d only walked up right when Mateo called my name. Is everything okay?”

Rhys knew she was lying. From her earlier response, he knew she had been out there much longer than that. For her to claim otherwise... well, he'd just have to wait and see. Hyacinth was still the woman for him and even if she needed some time to come to grips with who he was, the other part of him, he knew she would get there. Until then, he would follow her lead. But he would also be more careful about his phone conversations here at the restaurant. Before Hyacinth, he had no reason to watch his words. None of his staff ever came back to his office. They waited for him to come out front. It wasn't something he'd asked for, but it was the respect they gave him. If they needed him urgently, they could call him on his office phone. Now that Hyacinth was with him, he liked that she felt comfortable coming to get him.

"How are you feeling?" Last night, he'd been a bit rough on her. He knew it was because he'd wanted her from day one. Knew that she was made for him. The animal inside him wanted to make sure Hyacinth knew exactly who she belonged to. No one else would get to tap into the gold between her legs and taste her essence. He would be the last man in her life and only he would sink inside her tight pussy as it welcomed him home. That overwhelming need for her had come out last night as he took her over and over again.

She smiled up at him. "I'm feeling fine."

"You're not too sore?" he asked, using one finger to tilt her head to the side. Bending his head, he brushed a kiss on her neck, just under her ear. His tongue slipped out, tasting her skin. When he pulled back, he looked into her

face, a smile lifting his lips. "I know I was rough on you, but I want to make sure you're okay. You were so good to me last night. My dick is begging to be let out so we can do it again. Right here. Right now. I want to tattoo my name on your beautiful, fat pussy so that every time you look at your body in the mirror, you know that you belong to me." Her beautiful light-brown skin flushed with a deep burgundy color. Was his baby blushing?

"Rhys," she whimpered in response to his words.

"Don't you want me to lift you on top of my desk and spread those sexy brown legs open, so I can give that pretty kitty a hello kiss? You came back here for a reason, baby. I think you want me to pull my dick out of my pants so I can slide right inside your tightness. You want me to come inside you? Was I all you could think about at work? Did you think about all the times you moaned my name last night? Were you thinking about how it felt when I filled you?"

His length hardened inside his pants. All he needed was one word from her and he would close and lock his office door and fuck her right now. He didn't care if other people heard them. The only thing that mattered was being inside his woman. Claiming her again and again. Fuck. He needed to get them out of here. If he had to watch her all night as she walked around his place, ass switching in front of other men, her enticing scent wafting in the air, he would lose his mind.

Once she fell asleep last night, he spent hours inhaling her scent. He couldn't get enough of her. He

wanted to be inside her 24x7 but knew that was irrational. Was that how Tristan felt when he met his wife, Camille? Maybe he'd give Max a call to see if this need to fuck and protect was part of falling in love. Max would probably tell him to fuck off, but he would eventually answer the question, because he was out of his mind in love with his wife, Kiana.

This feeling of wanting to be around a woman constantly, of wanting to wrap his arms around her, holding her close, was new to Rhys. He wasn't sure if he liked it, but he also knew he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

She finally found her tongue and answered him. "I don't want to do that here. You may be okay with letting everyone hear me scream your name, but I'm not. And stop talking like that. You're making me all wet and I still have to go back out there and work."

Rhys stepped back and smiled. "Good. Every time you take a step, I want the thought of me between your legs on your mind. I want your pussy weeping for me, calling out for me to come make her feel better. By the way, you're off this weekend."

That caught her off guard. As far as Hyacinth knew, she was scheduled to work on Saturday. "I'm scheduled to work on Saturday. I need the money, Rhys."

He shook his head. "I took you off the schedule. Baby, you know I can take care of anything you need. All you need to do is accept what I want to give you."

"Why?" she demanded.

At her loud tone, he tilted his head, giving her a hard look. There were some things he was okay with. Her snarky tone. Her sass. Her challenging him to make things better here at the restaurant for the employees. But something about her tone grated on him and that he would never allow.

“Because I fucking said so. That’s why. You’re off the schedule because I want us to spend some time together. I want to get to know you outside of the restaurant. We’ve spent more time together here at work than anywhere else, and that doesn’t work for me. There’s an art festival in town this weekend and I want us to go. Trust me, it’ll be fun.”

For a moment, even Rhys questioned who this stranger was. Art festivals? Spending an entire weekend getting to know his woman? But that thought quickly left his head. Hyacinth was worth it. And, if he were going to build something with her, he needed her to know there was more to him than owning a restaurant and bashing people’s heads in. As the look on her face shifted from indignation to joy, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Does that mean you’re taking the weekend off as well?”

He nodded. “It does. The next two days will be for just the two of us. Tonight, we’ll go to your apartment, grab enough clothes for you to stay with me, then we’ll head to my place, where you’ll be all mine.”

She smiled before taking a step closer to him. “I’d like that a lot.” Standing on her toes, she pressed her lips to his.

Deepening their connection, he wrapped one arm around her waist to pull her closer.

Rhys knew time was running out for him. It would take every ounce of energy and a healthy dose of charm to keep Hyacinth by his side. He would do whatever it took to convince her they belonged together, starting with this weekend.

Nothing would get in his way.

Chapter 13

Hyacinth woke to the feeling of Rhys sucking her clit into his mouth. He greeted the fleshy nub with a welcoming tongue and soft lips. “Oh, fuck. That feels so damn good.” She reached down to grab the thick strands of his hair. Her fingers grabbed tight and pulled him closer. Her legs widened as he pressed closer, his tongue delving inside her body to taste her cream. Rhys lifted her legs to open her even more before bending her knees over his shoulder. By now, he was familiar with every nook and crevice of her body, both inside and out. But there was something about her waking up to him pleasuring her this way that took things to a whole new level.

It wasn't a surprise to find him face down in between her legs this morning. When they returned to his house last night after closing the restaurant, he'd taken her twice before they got inside the bedroom. He took her again in the shower before they got into bed.

He must have been feeling generous last night, because he let her go to sleep without much fuss. Not to say that he didn't make sure she was naked and ready for him, just in case he needed her.

Which is why feeling him lick and suck her awake put a smile on her face. Her pussy was slick with her juices and ready for him to do whatever he wanted. Fuck, she loved this man. At that thought, she tensed. Her eyes opened in shock at the realization. Rhys must not have noticed, since

he kept doing magic with his mouth. A smile came over her face as she settled into the thought. Yeah, she loved Rhys Mannetti and finally admitting how she felt about him felt so good.

Rhys latched onto her clit and sucked with the full intention of helping her lose her mind. The moans he released vibrated against her, sending tingles along her spine, causing her toes to curl and her hips to jerk up. When she felt him insert two fingers inside her channel, she gasped. Her moans became louder. He curled his fingers, stroking against the spot that made her speak in tongues and call out to the heavens for mercy and grace. She couldn't stop her body from twisting and squirming. It was not enough and too much at the same time.

The man was insatiable, but she loved every fucking second of it. To be wanted so strongly was all she'd ever wished for. "Oh, Rhys," she yelled as her orgasm crashed over her. Chest heaving, she felt him move her legs from his shoulders and lift his face from her.

"You ready for me now?"

Hyacinth couldn't help but smile as she propped up on her elbows. "Always."

Rhys moved like a lion as he crawled on the bed, his dick hanging thick and heavy in front of him. He sat down on the bed with his back pressed against the headboard. "Come to me, baby. This morning, I want you to take what's yours. Ride daddy."

When he said shit like that, Hyacinth got hot and needy. She shifted her body and placed her legs on either

side of him as she lowered herself onto his thick shaft. His hands grabbed her ass, and she heard his low groan as her warmth encased him. Leaning forward, her lips found his. She didn't care about morning breath. Hell, the man had just eaten her pussy for breakfast. If that didn't mean he was a keeper, she didn't know what did. As soon as she was fully seated, he thrust up.

"I said take it, baby. Don't fuck around, Cin. I need you to fuck me. I want to feel you explode all over my dick. Now, give me what the fuck I want," he snapped before he used one hand to smack the fleshy part of her ass.

"Shit, Rhys." Hyacinth felt a gush of wetness glide down his thick member as he filled her slick channel.

"You liked that, huh? Because you're squeezing the fuck outta my dick. Want me to do it again?" He leaned forward and bit her bottom lip, dragging it into his mouth while using his tongue to lick against the flesh.

"Wait. Slow down," she tried to speak, but was overcome from all the sensations flowing through her. "You said this was my show. I don't want to come yet."

He released her lips. "Sweetheart, making you cream all over me is the goal. All weekend, my dick will be inside you. My cum will fill you so much, it'll drip down your leg. Your body will become addicted to my touch. You'll crave me just as much as I desire you. Now, no more bullshit. Give me what I need, baby."

Her hips rose, pulling a moan from the man beneath her. Twirling her hips, she held the tip in her body before slamming back down.

“Hyacinth,” he mumbled, eyes closed. “Fuck, sweetheart. Yeah, just like that.”

As she rode him, she got lost in her emotions. The feelings she had for him made everything better. She wanted to take it slowly, but there was no way she could stop. He was an addiction. There was nothing that would stop her from taking what he offered. Rhys said it was hers, that she could do with him what she wanted. She felt him grab her behind the neck, bringing her forehead to his.

“Open your eyes, sweetheart. Look at me,” he growled.

She hadn’t even realized her eyes had been closed. Hyacinth was drowning in ecstasy. The feeling was overwhelming, but she wouldn’t change for anything.

“Yeah, that’s it, Cin. Look at me while you fuck me. Take me deep inside you and never fucking let me go. Milk me. Make me give you all that I am. Fuck me the way you’ve always wanted.”

His words were turning her the fuck out. Who was she becoming when she was with him?

As she felt her body flying off the edge, she grabbed Rhys around the neck, pulling his lips to hers. “Come inside me, daddy.”

That must have released something inside of him, because he gripped her hips and began thrusting up. He controlled them from the bottom. The only thing Hyacinth could do was hold on for the ride. As she screamed out her

pleasure, she felt her body tighten around Rhys as he began pulsing inside her.

“Yes, baby. Take it. All of me. You fucking belong to me.”

Hyacinth smiled at his words, because she could do nothing but agree.

“So, what about the art festival?” she sat down next to Rhys while biting into an apple. They’d finally gotten out of bed an hour ago. Both showered and put on some hang around the house clothes. Hyacinth removed the sheets from the bed and put them in the wash. Although Rhys told her his cleaning team would take care of it, she didn’t want them to remove the soiled sheets from the bed. If they wanted to put on clean sheets, that would be fine. She didn’t want to think about how many times the staff had to do that when he’d brought other women here. Clearing her head of those thoughts, she kept her mouth shut. They were still too new. He hadn’t delved into her love life, other than to ask about Kenny.

He was looking through his phone as he stood on the back deck. The view was spectacular. The green grass, the tall trees. She felt like she was on top of the world. But then again, that’s what good—mind-blowing sex would do to you.

“It’s the entire weekend. We can either go today or tomorrow. I figured it would be something nice we could do out in town. Although I would be happy to keep you in my bed for two-days straight, I also know that might be too

much for you.” He reached out to her, pulling her close to him. “I’m trying to do this the right way.”

Burrowing close to him, Hyacinth inhaled his scent. She wouldn’t mind staying in bed all weekend, but didn’t want to be such a brazen hussy. The dick was on point though and as she felt her channel slicken with need, she pulled back. Having too much of a good thing too early maybe wasn’t the way to approach this.

They still had to work together almost every day. There had to be a way she could hold herself back from attacking the man every moment. “And I appreciate that.” She looked back toward the living area, where she noticed two cleaning ladies going back and forth. “So, is this a regular occurrence?”

Shit, she thought. That wasn’t what she wanted to say. Hyacinth wanted to be an adult about this thing. Not that she had a lot of one-night stands. She was smart to stay away from those situations because she always felt that it would tempt her to get caught up in feelings. Which, lo’ and behold, look at what she was doing. Yes, she wanted to be with Rhys, but she also had to remember that the man had a past. If no one else, there was that chick he’d brought to the restaurant for a date.

Rhys placed his phone in the back pocket of his jeans and turned to look at her. “Is what a regular occurrence?”

Suddenly shy, she avoided his gaze and changed the subject. “There’s so much I don’t know about you. Only so much information can be found on the internet.”

At this, he froze. “You looked me up?”

She turned to face him. “Just to know who I was working for. Why? Does that bother you? You do remember that you looked up my home address without telling me, right?”

He made a sound as if to dismiss what she said. “That was different. You needed help. I had to get you home safely.” Reaching down for his cup of coffee on the little table situated near the chairs, he took a sip. “What did you find out about me?”

She wondered why his voice had taken on that tone. Was he bothered that she had looked him up? Then again, as she remembered the phone call she heard yesterday, maybe he was concerned there was something out there about his less than legal activities. “Nothing much was out there. I saw that you’re a veteran. No kids that you know about. No wife or girlfriend that’s been named publicly.” At his low laugh, she smiled in return. “Like I said, nothing much.”

“Hmmm. Okay,” he murmured before looking back out at the view in front of them.

“Does it bother you that I looked you up?”

It took him a second to respond, but when he did, he shook his head. “Not at all. That just proves you’ve been interested in me this entire time.” Silence filled the air as he took another sip. “Before we head out to the festival, is there anything else you want to ask me? Anything else you want to know?”

Hyacinth now knew his monotone voice earlier wasn’t about what she’d found on the internet, but he was

leading up to something. Was he giving her permission to ask him about the phone call she heard yesterday? She already told him she arrived at his door right as Mateo called out to her. If that were the case, there was nothing for her to know, so no questions would need to be asked.

Plus, his other dealings had nothing to do with her. She knew how life happened and she was not an innocent. Life was full of gray. If she needed the black and white, she knew Rhys was not the man for her. But now that she had experienced the full effect, she didn't want to walk away. She just needed to know that he would protect her if shit went down.

“No other questions. If there are other things in your life that you want to share with me now, I'm happy to listen. Otherwise, I'll learn as I go. As long as there's no wife, girlfriend, or unclaimed children running around, then I'm good.”

His eyes stared into hers for a couple of seconds before he nodded, accepting what she said—and what she didn't say.

“No wife or girlfriend, unless you count yourself. No unclaimed kids. If one comes out of the woodworks, you and I will learn about them at the same time. That doesn't mean I don't want kids, because I do.” His gaze shifted to her stomach and lingered for a moment before he looked into her eyes again. “But I'm positive you'll be intimately involved in that decision and process when the time comes.”

Chapter 14

The next morning, they sat at a table in the kitchen eating breakfast. Instead of having the cleaning ladies come by this morning, Hyacinth changed the sheets herself. She wasn't a very good cook, but Rhys was amazing at it. Within minutes, he whipped up French toast, bacon, breakfast potatoes, and English-style eggs, which were heavenly.

Her eyes kept traveling to the man sitting next to her. How in the world did she get lucky enough to have him in her life?

Yesterday, he took the time to walk with her around the entire festival, stopping at each booth. No matter how long she stood talking with each vendor, he waited patiently, just letting her do her thing. When she tried to buy a few unique pieces, he refused to let her pay. Not that she was one of those women who felt some kind of way about a man paying, but she had to at least try to purchase her own things. Honestly, she was only too happy to let him do it for her. If that was his preference, so be it. She got a few amazing art pieces that she could put in her eventual home and didn't have to spend her own money.

She made sure to thank him properly when they got back to his house last night.

"Thank you for yesterday," she said aloud.

"Sweetheart, you thanked me quite well last night."

Hyacinth couldn't help the blush that came over her face. "Yes, well, I wanted to make sure I showed my gratitude in multiple ways. Plus, you made us this yummy breakfast. I'm starting to think I'm getting the better end of his deal."

He moved so quickly; she had no time to react. Rhys grabbed her arm in his tight grasp. Lifting her from the chair, he pulled her onto his lap. One hand gripped her jaw as he stared into her eyes. "There is no way in hell that's the case. You give me more than you realize. I would pay ten times the cost of that art with a moment's notice."

"But we're so new, Rhys. I just want to make sure you feel that I'm giving you what you need."

He sighed before brushing a soft kiss against her lips. "Baby, you give me more than you know. Just you being here with me is more than I can ask for. But you should know that I'm a greedy man, Cin. Now that I've had a taste of your sweet nectar on my tongue and felt your pussy wrapped tight around my dick, I don't ever plan to let you go."

Her eyes went wide at his declaration. There was no way he was serious about her so quickly.

As if reading her mind, he nodded. "Yes, I'm just that fucking serious about you. About us. I will make you happy, Cin. I just need you to believe in me. Trust me to make you happy. Trust me to protect you." Rhys knew that he was skating the edge of telling her about his dealings outside of the restaurant. She hadn't brought up the phone call, so neither had he. But soon enough, he'd have to come clean.

He only hoped there was more time before he had to do that. Things were so new between them. He could only imagine how something like that would blow up in his face.

She stared into his eyes. “As long as you know that I will protect you, too. I’m all in, Rhys. Who knows what the future has planned for us. But, I’m willing to figure it out. You need a woman who can handle things when times get tough and who can stand by your side when you need it. I can do both. I may be small, but I have some power behind me. If I’m who you want, then we can handle whatever comes our way.”

Rhys couldn’t help the smile that came over his face after her little speech. Her words just confirmed what he knew all along. She was the right one for him. They would be good together. All was right in his world. His shoulders relaxed a bit. Now, all he had to do was convince her to give up that small ass apartment with her roommate and move-in with him.

Hyacinth’s phone rang, so she lifted from his lap to go see who was calling her this early in the morning. Her parents usually called her once a week, so she didn’t want to miss out on speaking with them. If she didn’t pick up, it would only raise more questions.

When she saw the call was from Brie, she answered right away. Her roommate didn’t usually call her, so it was a bit strange to see her number. They were cool acquaintances, but friends who talked on the phone just for shits and giggles was not how they rolled.

“Hello?”

“Oh, thank God, Hy. I’m so glad you answered. Listen, someone broke into the apartment. I don’t know what they took, but the cops are here now.”

Shock filled Hyacinth’s body. She looked over at Rhys with wide eyes as she listened to her roommate. “When did they break in? Are you okay?” Hyacinth could hear activity on the other side of the line, which must be the police.

“I’m fine, thank goodness. I stayed out last night and didn’t get back to our place until just now. When I walked in and saw what happened, I ran back to your room to see if you were okay, and...”

At Brie’s pause, Hyacinth panicked. “What? Brie, what did you see?”

“Hy, you should just come back to the apartment. I don’t want to scare you, but you need to come back and see for yourself. Can you get here soon?”

Stomach churning, Hyacinth nodded even though Brie couldn’t see her. Tears filled her eyes as fear gripped her. Whatever Brie had seen in that apartment must have scared the shit out of her.

Rhys got up from the table and came to stand next to her. Hyacinth was nodding, but no words were coming out. Worried about what was going on with his woman, he snatched the phone from her hand. “Who the fuck is this?” he snapped at the person on the other end.

“This is Brie. Wait? Who the hell is this? Who am I speaking to?” The shrill, panicked tone came through the

phone.

“This is Rhys, a friend of Cin’s. What’s going on? Why the fuck is she so upset?”

“Her boss at the restaurant?” Brie questioned him, but he also could hear her take a deep breath. “Okay, okay. Yeah, she mentioned the place where she worked, and I looked it up. I’m nosey like that. Anyway, she needs to come home. Someone broke into our apartment and... and... the police are here. I need her to come home. They need to talk with her, and I need to make sure she’s safe. I don’t know you and although she didn’t seem scared, that doesn’t matter right now. If she’s not on her way here in thirty minutes, I’m telling the cops that you’re the one who has her. If you don’t want that to happen, I suggest you get moving and get her back here right now.”

The little snit had the nerve to hang up the phone on him, which only pissed Rhys off more. What the fuck was she talking about? The police were there at Hyacinth’s apartment? Why was it so urgent for Cin to return to her apartment right now?

Fuck it, it didn’t matter. He glanced around and saw Cin sitting on the couch looking spaced. He walked over and pulled her from the couch. “Come on, sweetheart. We need to get you home. Grab your purse and let’s go. Leave your other bags here. If someone broke into your house, you’re not staying there.” When she did not move on her own, he picked her up in his arms and walked to the bedroom. “No time to fall apart, honey. Let’s get moving.”

She finally came out of her daze to look up at him. “Who would do this to me?” Her first thought was to call her parents. It wasn’t that she was afraid, but she *was* shocked. Who would target her? First the tires on her car, then her apartment. And if she were to go by Brie’s response, there was something specific that she needed to see. Snapping out of whatever was swirling around in her head, she pulled on some leggings and a t-shirt that she’d brought to lounge around in. “Yeah, let’s go. I’ll call Brie again once we’re on the road.”

When she glanced over at Rhys, she saw him opening a wall safe in the closet. Around his chest was a gun holster she hadn’t seen him wear before. He reached in and pulled out a weapon. With quick movements, he loaded a clip, checked the chamber, put the weapon on safe, and put it away in the holster.

Well, fuck. That was sexy as shit.

He turned around to see her staring at him and froze in place. “Don’t worry, Cin. It’s just for precaution.”

“Why does a restaurant owner need a gun?”

Rhys shrugged. “Everyone should know how to handle a weapon. It truly is only for protection, sweetheart.”

Hyacinth knew it was more than that, but she didn’t have it in her to pry it out of him. All the signs were there. Plus, the phone call from the other day. And the way he handled a weapon was not how a novice would do it. Yes, he was former military, but she knew there was something

more to the man standing in front of her. She smiled over at him as she began walking out of the room.

“If that’s the story you want to tell, then that’s what we’ll go with. But just remember, earlier today you asked me to trust you. To believe in you. To know that you’ll protect me. I made that same promise to you, and I meant it. I know you’re more than you show to the world and I’m okay with that. Then again, so am I. Maybe one day we’ll be ready to show each other the real us.”

Rhys had no response to her words, not that she was looking for one.

Forty-five minutes later, they were at her apartment. As they climbed out of the car, Brie came rushing over. “Hy, the cops want to talk to you,” she said in a breathless tone. “I’m just so glad you’re safe. Someone trashed the entire apartment.”

“Do they know who it was?”

She shook her head. “No. They think it happened sometime last night. They say they’re gonna check to see if any security cameras caught anything.”

Rhys stepped in. “What’s so significant about this break-in? Why so much attention?”

Brie looked at him, then back at Hyacinth. “Sweetheart, maybe you should ask the cops to let you see your bedroom.”

A few minutes later, Hyacinth and Rhys entered the apartment alongside a uniformed cop. Brie was behind them, bringing up the rear. The living area was ruined.

Pillows slashed and the fluff strewn all over the floor. Whoever had broken in must have pulled the television down to the floor and smashed the screen, because it looked like someone had stomped on it.

When they arrived at Hyacinth's room, the cop stopped them. "Ma'am, please don't touch anything. You can step inside, but that's it."

She nodded in response and waited for him to open the door. As soon as she stepped across the threshold, anger coursed through her.

"Motherfucker," she heard Rhys say behind her.

On the wall behind her bed, they wrote four words in red.

Whore.

Slut.

Die Bitch.

Oh, someone was going to die alright, and it sure as fuck wasn't Hyacinth. Seething with rage, she turned around and walked back out of the apartment.

Chapter 15

It took them a while to finish up with the cops. Hyacinth had no idea who would have put that shit on her walls. They had threatened her and that would never work. There was no doubt that she had been the target. Brie's room hadn't been touched at all. Only the main living area and Hyacinth's bedroom.

The authorities wouldn't let her or Brie stay in the house that night since the police considered it a crime scene. In fact, they wanted them both to stay away for the next week. They let her grab a bag of essentials and any important things, so she was happy about that. When she walked into the front area, a detective was standing next to Brie.

"Ma'am, I need you to stay close to town. As soon as we find out anything, I'll be calling you." He glanced between Brie and Hyacinth. "Will you be together?"

"No," Rhys interjected. "She'll be staying with me."

Hyacinth couldn't help but turn to stare at him after the words left his mouth. They hadn't discussed that. Just as she was about to open her mouth to disagree, Brie spoke.

"Okay, great. I'm going back to my parents' house for the next couple of weeks."

A bit shocked by the turn of events, Hyacinth glanced over at Rhys. His eyes were filled with anger.

“Are you sure, Rhys? I mean, I can get a hotel.” She didn’t want to interfere with his life. Not only did they see each other almost every night at his restaurant, but they had slept together. She was positive he hadn’t expected her to move in with him for the next week or more. Maybe she should go to a hotel after all.

“You’re staying with me.” He looked over at the cop standing in front of them. “We good here? You have her number already, but let me give you mine as well. If you can’t reach Ms. Moore, then you call me. Understood? I’ll make sure she gets back to you.”

After handing over his business card, Rhys didn’t wait for the officer to respond. He placed his hand on Hyacinth’s lower back and steered her out of the apartment. He hoped his face didn’t reflect the pure rage coursing through his body. Someone had made a direct attack against Hyacinth in her own home. What if she had been here alone? Her roommate hadn’t been home last night either, so the person could have had all night to do God knows what. Scenarios were playing in his head that he didn’t like one bit. When Hyacinth stopped, he wanted to pull her forward. He didn’t know if the guy was still here, watching and waiting. She wasn’t safe and that knowledge only made him angrier. What if the guy tried to attack her again? He looked at Hyacinth and saw her talking to her roommate.

“Be safe, Hy. I’m not sure what happened here, but I’m not coming back until they catch whoever did this.” She

paused before looking at Rhys from head to toe. “Are you sure you’re good? I’m sure my parents would let you stay with us until you decide what you want to do.”

“She’s good,” Rhys snapped.

“I’m okay,” Hyacinth said at the same time. Her eyes narrowed at Rhys. She understood his need to take control, but she could speak for herself. While she appreciated that he wanted her to stay with him, he needed to slow the fuck down. One hand reached out to grab Brie’s. “I promise. Staying here in the city keeps me close to work. Trust me, I’m not coming back here either. Not until we’re sure the person has been caught.” Or killed. Whichever came first. Of course, she wasn’t going to say that to Brie. “Go on. I’m sure your parents are worried. Text me when you get there. I want to know that you’re safe.”

“Just be careful, Hy.” Her eyes cut over to Rhys before coming back to Hyacinth. Leaning in for a hug, Brie whispered. “He’s a bit intense. If you need me, just call me.”

Once they broke and said goodbye, Hyacinth turned to Rhys. “What the hell was that?”

His gaze slid to face. Lips clenched tight, he walked beside her, steering her towards his car. Opening the door, he motioned for Hyacinth to climb inside. For a moment, she considered refusing. One glance at his face told her she’d have a battle on her hands if she tried. With all the cops around, she decided maybe that wasn’t the best thing.

“Get your ass in the car, Cin.”

Ready to go toe-to-toe with Rhys, she looked at him with a smirk on her face. “You don’t want to go down this road. I work for you...”

“No. You belong to me.”

Well, damn. That was unexpected. “What did you say?”

He lifted one hand and rubbed it down his face. “Just... please, get in the car, Cin. Let me take you back to my place so we can talk this out.” They stared at each other for a few moments before she sat down in the car. He closed the door and moved to the driver’s side before climbing in.

Since this was an emergency and they had to get here so quickly, Carlos had not driven them. Today was his day off so he could spend it with his family. There was no way in hell Rhys would have called him away to bring them here.

As he drove them home, his mind swirled with the possibilities. Who could it be? Why had they targeted Hyacinth? What would have happened if she’d been at home? The only solution he could come up with was that he needed to protect her. It had been a moment of weakness telling her she belonged to him. What he’d said was true, but he knew being with him placed her in danger.

They hadn’t been together for any time at all, unless the time she’d worked for him counted. He knew it didn’t. Then again, Hyacinth didn’t know how much he thought about her. How her laugh made him smile. How he goes crazy whenever he thinks about her walking to her car all

alone at night. Or when she doesn't show up when expected. Maybe he was irrational about his need to be with her, but it couldn't be helped.

She had been under his skin from day one. Looking back, he knew he didn't treat her as good as he could have. He was sure she felt second best at times. That was never his intention. Hyacinth was always on his mind and slowly becoming one of the most important people in his life. Before this weekend, it had been important not to show favoritism, but he knew that he had failed at that. If she gave him just one chance, he knew he could keep her happy and satisfied, but he needed to play his cards right.

After spending this time with her, his plan was to show her they were more than just a temporary thing. She meant more to him than just a weekend of fun. Hyacinth was the real deal for him. His *nonno*, or grandfather, had once told him and his brothers, when the day came for them to find their *amina gemella*, their soulmate, that nothing would get in the way of them being together. From the time he was a bambino on his grandfather's knee, he knew the story of how his grandparents met. As soon as his *nonno* set eyes on his *nonna*, their connection to each other was unbreakable. Through wars, separation, and moving to the United States with little to nothing to their name. Never had their love and dedication wavered.

Rhys knew that's what he wanted with Hyacinth. By today's standards, instant love wasn't real. That type of immediate connection was considered outdated. But Rhys knew that's what he found with Hyacinth. She belonged with him. And he would do everything in his power to

protect her, even if she tried to fight him every step of the way.

“Rhys? Don’t you think we need to talk about what you said back there?”

He sighed at her words, but nodded in return. “We do, but I’d rather have that conversation once we’re back at my home. But let me say this one thing and then you can sit over there and stew and overthink everything for the next thirty minutes.”

“I don’t overthink,” Hyacinth grumbled.

Rhys glanced over at her and smiled before turning his head back to the road. “But you do, and that makes you who you are. I meant what I said earlier. I know you feel the connection between us. We tried to fight it, but it only got stronger. And this weekend, when I was balls deep inside you, I know that tether between us tightened. We’ll talk more about who could have done this to you, but I need to tell you a little more about my past before I do that.”

Hyacinth’s eyes were open wide as she stared at him. He had been right about her overthinking his words, because she was doing that right now. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, but held off. If he was about to share some deep family secret, there was no way she was going to interrupt. Plus, she was nosey as hell, so she was ready for him to spill the tea. When he said nothing for a few moments, she wondered if he had changed his mind.

“Are you hungry?”

Hell no, she wasn't hungry. What was he even talking about? They had just eaten before Brie called with the news about their apartment. "No, I'm fine."

Another moment of silence. "Had you ever heard of the Mannetti's before you met me?"

Now he wanted to play twenty damn questions. If Hyacinth wasn't so eager to know what he had to say, she would tell him to speed the fuck up. "No, I hadn't. Should I have known the name?" That last part came out on its own, but she couldn't help it.

His lips curled in a devastating smile. As they sped along the freeway, he weaved in between cars, his hand in full control of the steering wheel. "Not necessarily. It's an old name from Cremona, Italy. Some of my family hails from Venice, Italy. But members I'm going to discuss came to America from Sicily in the 1920's before settling in Massachusetts."

Unable to resist, Hyacinth shifted in her seat. Her ears were open, and she was all in.

"Now, these particular family members had nothing when they came over to the US. The clothes on their back, a small bag of important items from their home country, and each other. They wanted a new life for themselves. It was important for them to create a legacy for their children, and their children's children."

He stopped talking for a moment to focus on shifting lanes when they came up against a traffic snarl. Hyacinth was almost bouncing in her seat.

“As immigrants to this country, they were willing to do whatever needed to put food on the table. My great-grandfather was a man of few words, but he loved his family. Nothing was off limits. He would lie, cheat, steal, or kill to protect those he loved. Part of his legacy was to pass on those qualities to his children, including my father. Who then passed them down to me and my brothers.”

“Oh...” Just that one word passed her lips, but it conveyed so much more.

“My father wanted us to go the straight and narrow, and we built our lives around those careers. Me in the military, then the restaurant business. My other brother, Marco, also runs one of our family restaurants and he’s also the family lawyer. Our youngest brother, Leo, is the only one close to the other family business, and he works in Providence, Rhode Island with a close family friend.”

Hyacinth wanted to jump up and down. She knew there was something more to him. It explains the call she overheard. All the pieces were falling together. A smile fought to show on her face, but she had a feeling he wasn’t done.

“Seeing what happened in your apartment set me on edge. I don’t know what occurred at your place or who came after you, but I need you to know that nothing will happen to you on my watch. I’ve already contacted some of my guys and they’ll be in town shortly. You don’t go anywhere without one of them by your side. Don’t worry, you’ll meet them soon enough, so you’ll know who they are.”

Oh, this was too good. Her pseudo-boyfriend and the owner of the business where she worked was basically telling her he was part of the mafia. Laughter bubbled up, and Hyacinth couldn't help but curse her stupid luck.

What would he say when she told him her father was connected to some of the most dangerous criminals in Las Vegas? Hell, considering what happened to her place, she would have no choice but to contact her parents.

Fuck.

This just got a bit more complicated.

Chapter 16

Once they arrived back at Rhys's place, Hyacinth sat on the couch while he took her bags and walked to his bedroom. Her mind was still overcome with thoughts about what happened back at her apartment. She replayed every interaction with anyone she'd come into contact with during the past couple of months. When nothing came to mind, she went back through the last couple of years.

Sure, she'd had the minor argument or disagreement with people, but nothing that would rise to this level. Not even her ex-boyfriend...

"Hey babe," Rhys said as he walked into the front area. "Let's try to figure out who could be angry enough to break into your home. Any idea who would be this upset with you? Can you think of someone you pissed off recently?"

She shook her head. "I've been thinking about that. No one that I can think of, but maybe it's not someone who's been blatant with their hatred of me."

He sat down next to her and placed one arm over the back of the couch. "Do you have enemies? Maybe you took a promotion from someone?"

"No. I don't think that's it." She sighed, leaning her head back. "Actually, I was only thinking about my personal life. I hadn't even thought about work. Fuck. This is going to be harder than I thought." Glancing over at him, she smiled

before lifting her head for a quick kiss. “I need a drink. Want anything?”

He shook his head. “Nah, I’m good.” As he watched her lift from the couch and walk over to the bar, Rhys couldn’t help the thoughts running through his head. Maybe this situation had nothing to do with Hyacinth at all. He’d been spending a lot of time with her. His family had a lot of enemies. If given an opportunity, would they take the chance and make their presence known? Threatening women meant nothing to them. Killing women was supposed to be off-limits, especially if they were involved with someone so close to the family. If the break-in at her place was because of her connection to him, then heads would roll.

“I need to make some phone calls,” Hyacinth announced as she sat down next to him.

At her words, his interest was piqued. “Who do you need to call?” There shouldn’t be anyone she needed to reach out to, other than him. Then again, when did he become her protector? They were fucking. Seeing each other? Dating? Looking at her, he shook his head. Yeah, it was so much more than just seeing each other or dating. This woman was going to be the death of him, or she would make him more than he ever expected.

“My father.” Hyacinth knew she wasn’t quite ready to tell him everything, but it was time to let down some of her walls. “My dad will want to know what’s happened here. Actually, he needs to know.” She took a deep breath. “My family wanted me to build a life that was different from

theirs. They grew up in the streets. My father was connected, but he wasn't some big time criminal. Mostly low-level stuff, but he did enough to earn enough money to take care of me and my mom. Enough to make sure I could move here to go to college. We weren't rich, but we were comfortable enough to not want for anything. He and my mom wanted me to leave the life behind. But..."

Rhys interjected. "Just because we may want to leave the life, it doesn't always want to let us go."

She took another sip of her drink. "Yes, exactly. My parents have always been involved in my life, even as they tried to let me be independent."

"How'd that work out?"

She laughed. "Not so hot. Anyway. He has enemies. They could have found me here. This could be an attempt to get back at my father for some slight. Even if it's a small chance, I still need to tell him. He can put the word out to find out if this was a move against him."

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her closer. He placed his chin on her head and inhaled her scent. She always smelled so damn good. "Do you think this is really about your dad?"

Hyacinth shook her head. Snuggling closer to him, she turned her head to rest against his chest. "I just don't know, but I need to find out. There's nothing else I can think of to explain it. This was not a random break-in. With how my room was trashed, this seems very personal."

He silently agreed, but didn't say anything. His guys would do their own investigation to see what they could shake loose. No one attacked what was his, and make no mistake, Hyacinth belonged to him. No longer interested in talking about this anymore, he shifted his body as he turned her to face him. "Our time this morning got interrupted."

She tilted her head as she stared into his moss green eyes. "Rhys, I need to call my father."

"Later." He pulled her shirt over her head, baring her bra covered breasts to his gaze. "I want more of what we had last night and this morning."

She smiled at him as she climbed over his lap, straddling his jean-clad legs. "What do you want to do about it?"

"Oh, sweetheart. Just let me worry about that." Tightening his hold on her plump ass, he hoisted her up and walked to his bedroom. There would be enough time to focus on all the ugliness around them. He couldn't help the sense of pride that filled him when Hyacinth told him about her father. She was very keen on keeping her private family life, just that. Private. As he walked them to his bedroom, her lush form in his arms, he felt his dick thicken in his pants. Yeah, he needed to get in at least a couple hours of being deep inside his woman before he let her up for air.

By then, his men would have arrived. He'd already given orders for some to camp out at her place to see what they can find. Others were to come directly here. He still

hadn't decided if he would make a personal trip to Las Vegas so he could meet her father personally. That could be a bit much, but in this life, he had to make split-second decisions. If he was going to have her in his life for the long haul, then he needed to make some things happen quickly.

“Rhys, are you gonna put me down?”

Her question brought him out of his musings. When he looked at the woman in his arms, his heart clenched. How did she come to mean so much to him in such a short time? “Do you want me to let you go?”

It seemed like such an innocent, playful question, but there was a hidden meaning behind his words. He stared at her face, his eyes catching hers. Now that he was allowing himself to look to the future and accepting the inevitable truth of finding the woman meant for him, there was no one else he wanted more than Hyacinth.

They stood at the edge of the bed. Rhys showed no signs of tiring as he held her extra weight in his arms. In fact, he knew they could stand like this for hours. To most people, he looked like a simple restaurant owner. For those who really knew him, they understood that he trained every day to strengthen his body. The bulky, muscular look wasn't what he was going for, but the lean, sleek lines of his body hid the beast underneath the suit.

When she didn't respond, he asked again.

“Sweetheart, do you want me to let you go?”

Hyacinth shook her head, but kept her eyes locked with his. “No, I don't want you to let me go.”

“Are you sure? Because if I keep you, then all bets are off. You belong to me. I belong to you. We’re in this together, no matter what happens.”

“Yes, I’m sure. But, Rhys, my fa—”

“No, baby. None of that matters. You told me what you needed to about your father and his past. Plus, you know who I am. Who my family is. Does that knowledge bother you?”

“No. It doesn’t bother me at all. So, what does this mean?”

“It means we need to seal the deal. Then we call your father. After that, we take care of whoever the fuck came after you,” he ended with a low growl.

“We need to seal the deal? Well, then I say let’s get to it.”

With a swift movement, he placed her on the bed and climbed on top of her. Mouths fused together and clothes flew off. Their need for each other drove their movements. Within moments, they were naked, and Rhys was sliding his thick member inside her body.

“Oh, fuck. Yes, Rhys,” she hissed into the silence of the room.

“That’s it, baby. Pull me in,” he moaned into her ear. His arms were on either side of her head. Lips brushed the shell of her ear before he nipped the skin on her lobe. Stroking deeper and deeper, he tried to reach places no one had ever touched before. If he could live inside her body, he would. “Take all of me, Cin. So wet. Tight. You feel so good,”

he moaned. Leaning down, he captured her lips in a kiss. His entire focus was on making her scream his name as her body released around him. He wanted her essence to soak into his skin, so every woman would know he was taken. That he was hers. If he could mark her with his own scent, he would.

No man could ever have her again. He would kill a motherfucker for even coming close to her. She was his.

“Rhys! Yes!”

Her loud moans and screams of pleasure finally broke through his thoughts. When his gaze cleared, he looked down at Hyacinth to see her eyes rolled back in her head. Her mouth was open. Sweat beaded on her face. The nails of her hand clawed at his back. A smile came over his face. This is what he wanted. She is who he wanted. His hips swiveled as he thrust harder.

As Hyacinth cried out beneath him, begging him to slow down, then to go faster, he knew she was on the verge of flying off the cliff. Her slick channel pulsed and tightened around his thick shaft.

“Yes, baby. That’s it. Come for me. I want to feel you gush all over this dick.” Leaning his head down, he took her nipple in his mouth and bit down sharply.

Hyacinth exploded. Her scream sounded in the room. The flood of her juices coated his member as he felt her legs tighten around his body. Feeling his own release upon him, Rhys moved, placing his forehead against hers.

Whispering the only word that mattered, he felt his cum shoot from his body into hers. “Mine.”

Hyacinth nodded. “Mine,” she claimed right back.

He couldn't help the smile that came over his face. Rhys felt proud that she had claimed him. His heart and soul knew this woman was meant for him.

Once they got out of bed, the outside world would intrude on them soon enough. His family. Her own family. He just hoped that after everything was all said and done, his other life wouldn't be too much for her.

Chapter 17

It was like he'd looked inside her fantasies and fulfilled every one of them. He was the man of her dreams and the only person she could see by her side in the future. Hyacinth knew her life had been incomplete without Rhys.

So much had happened in the last twenty-four hours. A few of Rhys's men had shown up at his place. He shared that some others had gone to her apartment to check things out. The challenging part had been her father.

As soon as she called her parents on video chat to tell them about what happened, they were both ready to arrange flights to come get her. Instead of having them do that, Rhys said he would send his private plane for them. Well, that set off a whole new set of issues.

Questions around who was the man she was with? How could he so casually send a plane for them?

As soon as she told them his name, her father had gone silent. His face was like stone. Frozen in place. She knew that look, and it bothered her a little. Her father only did that when he was afraid for his family's safety. She was almost sure neither of her parents knew she had snuck around their house as a child, listening in on conversations she had no business hearing. Plus, she was a very observant child. Her father's facial expressions cued her in on how she needed to respond to meeting new people.

Since she'd moved to Santa Barbara and went to school, he had seemed to relax a bit. Maybe thinking that with her so far away, it removed her from the line of danger. But from how he looked when she told him that she was seeing Rhys Mannetti, she was right back in the thick of things. Even more than she'd already thought.

Glancing between her father and Rhys, who was sitting on the couch out of view, Hyacinth had to school her features. "Daddy, I promise that I'm okay. Can you and momma be ready to get on the plane in two hours?"

"Hyacinth." She could tell from the tone in his voice that he was going to refuse. Although he was no longer in the business, that didn't mean his need to protect his family had diminished.

Rhys must have seen the look on her face, because he grabbed the phone from her hand so that he could speak directly to her father. "No harm will come to you or your wife. Hyacinth means..." he looked up at her and smiled, "well, she means a great deal to me. Her happiness is all I care about. This situation with her apartment is... unexpected, but I plan to do whatever I can to help her handle it. For her peace of mind, she wants to have her parents close by. I promise you will be safe."

Hyacinth sat on pins and needles as she listened to Rhys speak. Who the hell was this guy? Clearly, she did not have the full story.

"Rhys Mannetti," her father said through the phone. Not sure if he was simply speaking to Rhys or talking to her mother. "My daughter means everything to me. She's the

reason I'm here today. Alive and still-kicking. I will do anything to protect her.”

“As will I,” Rhys said, staring into the tiny screen on the phone.

“A season, a reason, or a lifetime?” Isaac Moore asked. His voice was hard and clipped, but this answer to his question would help decide the next steps in his life.

Rhys paused as he thought about his answer. He knew what Hyacinth's father was asking. It was the same question he'd been mulling over for some time. The answer was clearer than it had ever been. It was time to make this official.

“A lifetime.”

After a slight pause, Hyacinth's father cleared his throat. “We'll be ready to go in two hours. We'll get ourselves to the plane. You just make sure my daughter is safe. There's a lot we need to talk about.”

“Yes, there is.”

“Let me talk to Hyacinth before we go.” Rhys handed the phone back over and Hyacinth could do nothing but stare at him. Of course, she'd heard the entire conversation.

“Hey, Daddy. Hey, Momma.” They were sitting together. Her father's face was still somewhat emotionless. Her mother's eyes were glassy, her love shining through the small phone screen.

“We'll be there as soon as possible. You call us if you need anything. And I do mean, anything.”

“I will, momma. I’m sure this will all get resolved soon enough.” Or at least she hoped it would.

Once she hung up with her parents, Hyacinth looked at Rhys. “Who are you really?”

The smile on his face made him even more handsome, if that was even possible. “I’m your man. The man who never wants to let you go. I’m the same man who you’ve been working with the past month and a half. Nothing about me has changed. When you need help, I’m the one you call. If you need protection, I’ll always come running. And most importantly, when you climb into bed at night, I’m going to be the man right by your side.”

She placed her phone down on the table and moved to his side on the couch. “Do I need to be afraid of you?”

“Never,” he shook his head.

“Should I be afraid of the life you lead? The goal was for me to get away from a certain lifestyle.”

“No. You don’t have to be afraid, but I know I can’t tell you how to feel. Being with me means that you’ll be connected to people you hadn’t expected to have in your life. But I’m strong enough to keep you safe. I will always protect you. All I need you to do is trust me.” He lifted one hand to cradle her face. “Can you do that?”

Hyacinth nodded. “I already do.” He did not know that he was the only man she had ever introduced to her father. That she allowed him to take her phone and do a video call with her parents was very telling. Of course, that wasn’t something he knew, nor did he need to. Her parents knew

the significance of what happened, which is why they were getting on a plane and flying to Santa Barbara on a moment's notice. Her father's business would be in good hands with his second in command, so that wasn't a concern.

No, they were coming because they knew their daughter needed them. Hyacinth wasn't afraid of Rhys or the life he led. If anything, she would be an asset to him.

Now, she wasn't what some would call a badass. She played with Barbies, was considered a book nerd, and went through all the normal stuff a child should. But while she was doing all the normal girl-child stuff that was expected of her, she also shadowed her dad when he went to the gun range. After school, she would practice her takedown skills. If needed, she could become exactly who she needed to be to take care of herself and her family.

But that's not what she wanted, and it sure as shit wasn't what her family wanted. All those uncles she grew up with considered her their princess. She was their hope for a better future.

There was a sliver of concern that she had fallen for a man like Rhys. Someone who would pull her back into a life she had tried to escape. She worried that being with him was like throwing all their hopes and dreams in her family's face. Then again, the heart wanted who it did. Her attraction to him was instant. Everything he'd shown her since that first day had only made her want him more. Sure, she'd seen some things that made her question who he really was. But nothing about him screamed gangster or

criminal. But now, she saw him in a totally different light. Her man had layers, and one of them put her father on edge as soon as he heard Rhys's full name.

That shit meant she was in deeper than expected. She just hoped she could handle what he was bringing to the table.

"Baby, what do you really know about this man?"

Hyacinth and her mom, Beverly, were out on the deck of Rhys's place. Her father and Rhys were inside talking with some of his men about what they'd found. Knowing this moment may not come again, she pulled her mother outside to talk.

"I know who he is."

With a side-eye, her mom sucked her teeth. "Do you really, Hyacinth? Because that man in there," she motioned with her hand back toward the house, "is not one to trifle with. His family name alone is enough for us to steer clear of him. You do know that your dad isn't too comfortable with this, right?"

"Daddy doesn't have anything to worry about. Rhys may be connected to his family's *other* business, but he knows how to keep the balance."

"Honey, you've known him for what... a month? Two months, maybe?"

Hackles immediately up, Hyacinth turned to face her mother. "Don't do that."

“Don’t do what? Remind you of that sorry ass man who you thought you loved? I’m just asking. How do you know this Rhys guy is the right one?”

Great question and one Hyacinth didn’t have a full answer for. What about him made her think this would work? Yeah, the dick was good, but sex was just one part. If she thought about it, everything about Rhys made her believe he was the one. When she was out of his presence, she couldn’t stop thinking about him. When he walked into the room, her entire body lit up with awareness, and that was before they had sex. Those rare times he smiled were like little bursts of sunshine. And when he told her she belonged to him, it felt right.

When Kenny tried to claim her or get all ‘Me, Man. You, Woman’, it only, pissed her off. In fact, she’d never felt that all-encompassing need to be around him or got all giddy when he touched her bare skin.

His cheating hadn’t surprised her, but it had made her question if she had actually pushed him into doing something. Could he have known that she wasn’t all in? It wasn’t so much that he’d broken her, but that he’d been able to fool her for so long. She’d become good at reading people and knowing when they were hiding things. That’s one reason she knew Rhys had been holding something back. At the time, she was clueless about what secrets he was keeping, but her spidey-senses had tingled enough to let her know there was more.

Glancing at her mother, Hyacinth smiled. “Mom, I know because he’s the only man I’ve let get close to me in

the past two years. The way he looks at me, kisses me, touches me..." she smiled as her mother rolled her eyes.

"TMI, Hyacinth. I know you're grown, but please spare your mother."

She laughed. "I'm just saying. I don't feel the need to be on edge every moment I'm with him. Our attraction was there from the first moment. Even as I tried to deny it, nothing could stop the path we were on. He reminds me of Daddy."

A soft smile came over her mother's lips. "Honey, there is no man like your father. From the moment I saw him, I knew he was the one for me. A hustler with a slick tongue. There were all these girls running up after him the whole time he was running after me. It was a hard road being with your father. There were things we had to do for ourselves and our family that I never wanted you to deal with. We wanted a different life for you."

"But you and Daddy made it. It may have been hard when I was young, but the two of you live a good life now. The business is making money. You're still married and in love. Those women aren't coming after him no more," that last statement said with a bit of snark.

Hyacinth had seen women try to catch her dad's attention when they were out in public, not realizing his wife was a whole damn killer. Of course, Hyacinth wasn't supposed to know that either.

"Honey, they've learned that his wife has the patience of a damn gnat. All those damn floozies coming after my

man. Don't they know I would ki... well, I would do anything for him?"

Hyacinth nodded. "And that's how I feel about Rhys. I know it hasn't been a long time that Rhys and I have been together, Momma. But the way you feel about Daddy is how I feel about that man in the other room. I haven't had to do the things you have. Not yet anyway. But for him, I know what needs to be done. Plus, I had the best teachers in the game. You and Daddy taught me well. He's my one, Momma."

Her mom looked out over the view and took a few deep breaths. "Okay. If he's the one you want, then you go for it with both hands. Finding your one is hard, but I know you're a smart young woman. I'll make sure your father doesn't give him too much shit. Now, that doesn't mean we aren't watching. We don't give a fuck who his family is or who they're connected to."

Laughing, Hyacinth nodded. "Momma, I love you." And she did. Her parents were her biggest cheerleaders and her OG protectors. "I would expect nothing less from you and Daddy." Yeah, her mom and dad weren't scared of much, even a well-known crime family connected to the Providence Lucarelli's. If anything, they'd better watch out for the Moore's from the west side of Las Vegas.

Chapter 18

Rhys was on edge. A few days had passed since the break-in at Hyacinth's apartment. The police had no leads on who had gotten into her place or how. His men were running down some potential options, but he didn't want to mention anything to Hyacinth until they had something concrete.

He was at the restaurant for a few hours, trying to get some work done. Hyacinth had taken a few days off work from both her marketing job and Mannetti's. Well, more like Rhys had forced her to take the time. A smile came over his face as he thought about the method of persuasion he used.

Just thinking about how he ate her pussy for hours until she was a blabbering mess made him want to do it again. The taste of her essence was his new favorite treat. By the time he finished, Hyacinth was willing to give him anything he wanted by the time he was done. When he'd finally stopped making her cum with his mouth, he thrust his rock-solid dick inside her body.

He held off from kissing her as he fucked her into the mattress. That was, until she reared up, capturing his lips with hers. Her essence had covered his face and Hyacinth moaned as she tasted herself on his lips. By the time they finished, she was too tired to do anything but lie in bed and look up at the ceiling.

That escapade managed to get him a week of her not going into work while staying at his home, where he felt she would be safest. Her parents were still in town, which he was okay with. After getting to know her father, Rhys understood why he still had so many friends and connections, even though he had officially left his past behind to be a better husband and father.

Isaac, Hyacinth's father, was silent, observant, but when he needed to speak up, he did. With the right connections, he could have risen to the top ranks of any family smart enough to bring him inside. That he had no desire for that was not overlooked by Rhys.

Nevertheless, the man's steely eyed gaze never missed the opportunity to size up Rhys or any other man in their vicinity. On his side, he wore a Glock 9mm, which he never touched. It was as if the weapon was simply a part of his body. Yeah, that level of comfort only came from years and years of practice.

When the knock came on Rhys's door, he was fully expecting one of his men. Turns out, this was the day he would have his first private sit down with two people he hadn't expected.

"Hello, Rhys," Beverly greeted as she walked into his office.

"Mrs. Moore." Glancing over at Hyacinth's father, he nodded. "Isaac."

"Rhys," the older man returned the gesture.

He motioned to the chairs in front of his desk. "Please have a seat. Or would you be more comfortable on the couch?" His office was big enough to have a full sitting area where he could relax, look over business papers, or simply be more comfortable.

"This is fine," Beverly said after getting a nod from her husband.

So this was her play? A private meeting to feel out the man in her daughter's life. Rhys was surprised it had taken her this long to approach him. Then again, Hyacinth's parents seemed to be smart people who knew how to play in this world. They wouldn't do anything without a plan. "Would you like a drink?"

She nodded. "Yes, thank you."

He glanced over at Isaac, who shook his head. "Nothing for me."

Rhys got up and retrieved a glass and poured two fingers of whiskey. He handed the glass to Beverly before sitting back down behind his desk. "So, how can I help you?"

As he waited for Hyacinth's mother to settle in for their talk, Rhys took in her appearance. If Hyacinth aged as gracefully as her mother, she would remain beautiful for the rest of her life. Although he knew the woman in front of him was the mother of a twenty-eight-year-old daughter, she still looked to be in her 20's. Her sepia skin glowed with youth. Thick hair covered her head, but she had it pulled into a graceful topknot. Brown eyes stared back at him with intelligence and a bit of defiance.

Ah, so this is where Hyacinth gets it from.

Beverly sat her drink down on a coaster on the small table next to her. “Rhys, I want to talk with you about my daughter.”

He nodded. “Yes, I figured that’s why you’re here. Does Hyacinth know you’re here?” The one thing Rhys did not want to do was keep secrets, but he also knew that her parents meant a lot to Hyacinth. He hoped like hell there would never be a reason for that to change.

“No, she doesn’t. But I plan to tell her we visited you when we leave here.”

Another tic in the ‘good parent’ column. “Fair enough. How can I help you?”

She cleared her throat. “Have your men figured out who it is that came after our daughter?”

Although Rhys had an idea about who it was, he wasn’t ready to talk about it just yet. He needed to speak with Hyacinth first. “Not yet. We’re still working on it.”

Beverly nodded as Isaac spoke. “We will do whatever it takes to protect our daughter. She knows enough about our life to understand the world we live in and the dangers that can come from that.”

Rhys nodded. He figured that was the case. She always seemed a bit too calm when things popped off. Other women would have been screaming, shaking, and crying uncontrollably. Hyacinth became angry. She wanted to act. Never cowered or cried. He stayed silent as his future in-laws spoke.

Yes, he was planning to marry Hyacinth as soon as they cleared this mess up. He hadn't spoken with her about, but he was positive that it was the next step for them. Not only did he want her to have his last name, but he wanted her to have his babies. A few little light-skinned mini-Hyacinth's running around would be good for him. Grandchildren would give his father a reason to keep going, while showing his brothers that it was time for them to move on and find their special someone. After their mother had died of breast cancer years ago, their father had become a shell of a man. No other woman had earned the right to bear his last name. Rhys was sure he had his dalliances, but no woman could take the place of his only true love.

It was a sad situation, but Rhys had no qualms about going all in with Hyacinth. She would be by his side for as long as this life granted them happiness. A smile came over his lips as he pictured her stomach big and round with his child.

"Rhys. Did you hear anything I just said?" Beverly was speaking to him when he came out of his daydream. He hadn't heard a word she said, but he wasn't going to admit it.

"Beverly, the only thing you need to know is that your daughter is meant for me. Nothing will get in the way of that. You don't have to worry about my family interfering. I'm outside of the direct line. My father gave me and my brothers different options. Just as you did for Hyacinth." He paused, letting his words sink in. "She loves you and respects you both. You want only the best for your

daughter. That's me. It will always be me. I will always keep her safe. And if that safety is threatened, I have enough resources to make sure we take care of anything or anyone that's trying to harm her."

He could see the couple in front of him relax at his words. "Our daughter," Beverly began before looking over at her husband with a smile. Turning back to Rhys, she continued. "She's strong enough to take care of herself."

Rhys nodded. "I figured it was something like that. So, is there anything else you're concerned about?"

Isaac spoke up, his tone strong and confident. "My connections have scoured the streets in Vegas. This isn't blowback from me. No one is holding a grudge against me, and no one is looking to teach me a lesson."

As Rhys himself had already figured out, this was something personal against Hyacinth. He had done his own checking around and had come to the same conclusion. This had nothing to do with Hyacinth's father. It also had nothing to do with her to connect to him or the Mannetti family.

This was all about Hyacinth.

Standing, he picked up his phone and pressed a button. "Carlos, come grab me out front. I'm done here."

Just then, a knock sounded on his door. "Come in."

"Mr. Mannetti, I just got a call from the guy watching your place. Says Ms. Moore walked out. He's behind her now, but he doesn't want to scare her. Do you want him to intercept?"

Rhys's anger and frustration rose. "What the fuck is she doing?"

"Rhys?" Beverly asked before standing. Her husband Isaac was by her side. Just looking at the two of them, they didn't seem like they would fit. Isaac was a tall man, firm jaw, blue eyes, scarred hands, and bulky. He spoke gruffly and didn't mince words. Beverly reminded him of his Hyacinth. Sweet. Soft. Loving. Protective of those she cared about. He only hoped Hyacinth could see herself by his side for thirty-plus years.

"Bruno, please take care of Mr. and Mrs. Moore and get them back to my home. Tell Tito to follow Cin, but not to stop her. I'll have Carlos take me to her."

"Yes, Boss."

He tried not to allow his family business to interrupt his time at the restaurant, but there were times like this when that was impossible. Grabbing his phone, he came from around his desk to exit his office. "I'll meet you at the house once I grab Cin."

"Do you need backup?" Isaac asked.

While he appreciated the offer, he also knew Hyacinth would never forgive him if he started using her father as one of his hired guns. The man would soon be his father-in-law, so he needed to be treated with a certain level of respect. There were some old school ideals he still held on to, even though he had forged his own path.

"Not this time," he said with a half-smile. "I'm sure she's just tired of being cooped up in the house while we're

looking for whoever messed up her apartment. Appreciate the offer.” Without another word, he walked past them and toward the front of the restaurant.

Rhys called his guy that was following behind Hyacinth. “Where is she?” he snapped as he climbed into the waiting car. Carlos must have picked up on his urgency, because he got in the car quickly and pulled off. The glass partition was open, so he called out. “She’s at the sandwich shop we ordered from the other day. Let’s meet her there.”

As the car sped off, Rhys was tempted to call Hyacinth and ask what the hell was she thinking? Since they were still unsure about who was after her, it was still safer at his house. Inside. Not outside. It was foolish of her to be walking around as if she didn’t have a care in the world.

Maybe she needed another lesson in doing what she was told. Rhys smiled as he thought about all the ways he could punish her, his dick thickening in his pants. “Fuck, I got it bad for her.”

“Hey Carlos, I need you to go faster.” He could feel the car pick up speed.

“Yes, sir.”

With a few minutes before they arrived at their destination, Rhys picked up his phone and dialed the one person who would understand his complete and utter obsession with his brown-skinned beauty.

“*Papà, ho trovato il mio.*” Dad, I found my one.

Chapter 19

Hyacinth knew Rhys would be on his way. If there was one thing she'd learned about her man during these past few days, it was that he did not like being disobeyed. He was very clear about what he wanted from her.

Stay inside.

Be safe.

Wait for him.

Don't do anything to give him a heart attack.

Yeah, all of those flew out the window today.

Why?

Because she was done with waiting. All morning, she'd had a feeling that something was going to happen. She knew Rhys had men watching her. They were there for her protection and she would allow them to do their jobs. On the other hand, she also wanted this entire situation over. Although Rhys had an amazing home with everything she could want, she no longer wanted to be a prisoner.

Whoever the motherfucker was that chose to target her had clearly picked the wrong person. If they wanted her, then she'd give them what they were asking for. She didn't have her weapon on her, which was probably stupid, but she wasn't sure if the person would come out in public to get her. Plus, if Rhys got here first and he found a weapon on her, that would result in too many questions.

When her parents had dropped off a P99 to her this morning before running an errand, she'd been tempted to strap it on. She'd chosen not to and placed it on the table on the side of the bed where she slept.

In plain view, Rhys would know that she wasn't hiding it from him. But he also would realize that she wasn't new to this game.

"Hi Hyacinth."

Her blood ran cold at the voice. Glancing up, she noticed Kenny standing off to the side near her table. She was sitting outside since the weather was so nice. A decision she now regretted.

"What do you want, Kenny? Didn't we say all there was to say to each other?"

"I saw you sitting here and wanted to say hi. You don't respond to any of my text messages. I've sent you flowers. You won't accept my apology." Without permission, he sat down at the table with her. "I don't understand why you won't talk to me."

She rolled her eyes, not trying to hear any of his bullshit. On the other hand, she also didn't want to make a scene. "We said all there was to say. You can stop with the flowers and text messages. When I walked in and saw you fucking our neighbor, the message couldn't have been clearer."

Kenny's breathing became more ragged the longer he was in front of her, but Hyacinth was not focused on him. She was looking around for Rhys to arrive. Some of the

surrounding tables cleared out. There must have been a lull in customer activity. Again, not paying attention to what was happening around her, Hyacinth did not see the anger simmering in Kenny's gaze.

"You were never supposed to come home early that day," he snapped.

The tone of his words caught her attention. Hyacinth swiveled her head to look at her ex-boyfriend and knew he was the one coming after her. Threatening her. She never would have thought him capable, but it was staring her right in the face.

His thinned lips, clenched fists, and wide eyes made her pull back. She didn't recognize the Kenny who was sitting across from her. In the two years they'd been together, he had never shown this level of aggression. That was one of the reasons she knew they would never make it together. He never got angry, just held everything inside, and let it fester and grow. She had always considered him weak. Which was why she could walk away without a fight and not look back.

"It doesn't matter what I was supposed to do. You weren't supposed to be fucking another woman in our bed."

He tried to reach out and grab her hand, but she snatched it out of his grasp. "How could you just leave me? You walked away as if I meant nothing to you. As if you never loved me."

Rage filled Hyacinth as she listened to Kenny whine like a little bitch. She wasn't the one cheating on him. It

wasn't her who had brought someone else into their bed. "What did you expect me to do? Stay with you after what I saw?"

"You should have known she meant nothing." His voice rose, and his pupils seemed blown out. His head shifted and moved all around as if he were looking for someone. "You should have stuck around. You knew how much I loved you, Hy. You knew no one else could take your place. But you left me. All our friends left me. Everyone thought I was a fuck-up because I cheated on you. You never understood how hard it was for me as a man. I said no to so many women. Maria was supposed to be safe. She was married. Had small brats at home. There was never any danger of her taking your place. Plus, she was clean, so I didn't have to worry about wearing a condom. Don't you see? It was the perfect solution. I could get what I needed to keep me sexually satisfied, but I could still love you. And you ruined everything!"

Now on high alert, Hyacinth caught the eye of a server. They motioned toward a phone and mouthed 9-1-1. Choosing not to respond, so as not to give anything away, Hyacinth turned back to Kenny. On the table, he had a long, sharp butcher knife.

"You're fucking crazy." She couldn't help the words from escaping even if she tried.

When he continued, his words sent shivers up her spine. "Then I see you working at Mannetti's. You're wearing tight clothes and shaking your ass all over for that fucking thug. Everyone thinks he's just a business owner,

but I know exactly who he is. And there you were, taking rides from him. Probably fucking him in the back of that car like a fucking whore. You were never a slut for me, but I know you are for him. You belong to me, Hyacinth. That you think you can move on without me..." he laughed maniacally. "When I broke into your apartment and trashed your bedroom, I thought you would call me for help."

Yup, that was the missing piece. Her mistake was not considering him to be a real threat. His absolutely crazy ass really thought she would need him again after what he did to her. "Why would I do that?" she asked, trying to stall. Her eyes kept going back to the knife resting on the table, his hand covering the handle.

"Because you're mine. You've always been mine. You love me and I love you just as much. No. I love you more." His lips turned up in a snarl. "And then you showed up with that guy from Mannetti's. You were in his car early in the morning, which meant you probably slept with him. Then he kept on touching you, as if you belonged to him." With one hand, he began hitting the side of his head. "No. No. No. No. You belong to me. I don't care if you're a whore. I'll fix you once we're back together."

Hyacinth didn't want to listen to any more of his ramblings. Making a split-second decision, she stood from her chair and went to run. She had to get away from behind this table where she was trapped. If nothing else, she would go down fighting. The yell that came from Kenny was unlike anything she had heard before. As soon as she heard him running behind her, she looked around to find something she could use to defend herself. With her long

hair trailing behind her, she felt Kenny grab her strands and pull tight.

“Stop running from me, Hyacinth,” he yelled at her.

“Fuck you,” she spat. The sound of police sirens could be heard in the distance, but she didn’t know how long it would take them to arrive. Was she willing to wait and take the chance that he would use that knife on her? No, she wasn’t.

Adrenaline rushed through her. The words of her father echoed in her head.

“Everyone has a weak spot. You just have to put up with some pain in the process. Go for whatever area will stop them the fastest. If you must decide between them and you, always choose you. Damn the consequences. Just live.

And she had every intention of doing that today. As he raised the knife to plunge it down, she shifted her stance. As his arm came down, trying to strike her in the chest, she moved to the side. She screamed in agony as the blade sliced through skin and muscle.

“Asshole! You fucking stabbed me.” The pain was overwhelming, but she was still on her feet and ready to fight. When he tried to pull the blade from her body, she swept his feet from underneath him. In the background, she could hear the sirens getting closer. Screams of horror surrounded her. If she was ever welcome here again, it would be a miracle, which only made her angrier. She really liked their breakfast sandwiches.

“I loved you, Hyacinth,” he continued yelling as he scrambled to find something else to use as a weapon.

“Fuck you, Kenny.” Gritting her teeth, she removed the knife from her shoulder. The pain was excruciating. She could feel the flow of blood gushing from her body. Her mom and dad would never believe this. They’d tried to get her away from danger, only for this sorry motherfucker in front of her to bring trouble to her doorstep. Why couldn’t he just move on? “Did you think I would just let you kill me? Man, you got me all fucked up. You have no fucking clue who I am or what I can do. That you really came after me in my home to harm me is some bullshit. Did you really think I wouldn’t be ready for you?”

“I’m gonna kill you,” he yelled before running towards her.

Adjusting her feet, tilting her back foot up and bending her knees, she smiled. Now, if anyone other than her parents, or maybe even Rhys, had seen that smile, they would think she’s just as crazy as the man running towards her.

But the smile covering her face was one of absolute knowledge that the person she was facing was about to meet their maker. And Hyacinth knew Kenny had no clue what was about to happen. Just as he got closer to her, she turned ninety-degrees. Her hand with the bloody knife dropped and arced back up, hitting Kenny directly in the heart. Not willing to allow that to be the end of it, she balled her fist and punched him in the face before placing both hands on the top of his head and pushing with all her

might. His face crashed into her knee and she heard a sickening crunch.

When his body fell to the ground, the knife lodged in his heart went even deeper. He was dead before his body hit the ground.

“Hyacinth!”

She heard Rhys calling her name, but it seemed so far away. When she glanced up, she saw him running towards her. Her lips tried to tilt in a smile, but her face seemed heavy.

Just as he arrived next to her, she whispered, “I’m sorry, Rhys. I’m so glad you came. I’m sorry I didn’t stay inside,” she said in a shaky tone. “I love you.” Then everything went black.

Chapter 20

One Month Later

“Marry me, Hyacinth.”

“I already married you. Don’t you remember flying to Vegas with my parents? My arm was still wrapped in a bandage. The chapel with the gaudy decorations and larger-than-life officiant. Are you feeling ill?”

Rhys pulled her body close to his as they lay in bed. His face snuggled close, and he inhaled the scent of her hair products. For some reason, he couldn’t sleep at night unless he had the scent of her around him. As a result, she now had to travel with him whenever he left for an overnight trip.

One day, he’d stop needing her so much.

Maybe.

Unlikely.

“Of course, I remember. Your mother was crying the whole time. Even Carlos and Bruno looked a little teary-eyed.” He would never forget that day for the rest of his life. After they released her from the hospital, they had to stick around for a few days to deal with the police. After Rhys had watched Hyacinth handle Kenny, he’d called the detective and told him to meet them at the hospital.

It had taken a few days to put all the facts together, but it seemed Kenny had been stalking Hyacinth all this time. He was fine when she was alone, but as soon as Rhys started playing a role in her life, he'd gone off the deep end. They found pictures of Hyacinth taped to the wall with red X markings on her face. Notebooks full of Kenny's ramblings were all around his place. He'd stopped working and his parents had been paying his bills.

As soon as they got the all-clear that Hyacinth wasn't going to be charged in Kenny's death, Rhys got them all on a plane and flew to Vegas for a quickie wedding.

"Baby, you can't blame my mother. Her only daughter was getting married in a shabby wedding chapel. It wasn't quite the wedding of her dreams. Nor mine."

"Do you regret marrying me?"

She shook her head. "Absolutely not. But my dream wedding would have taken place in a garden, surrounded by Hyacinth's. Our closest family and friends would have been with us under the moonlight on a starry night. Baby's breath would have covered my hair and I would have worn a beautiful white mermaid wedding dress. My dad would have walked me down the aisle and my mother would have sat in the first row beaming with pride." She leaned over to kiss him. "I would never regret being your wife, but I want my moonlight wedding so we can do some sexing under the star-filled night sky."

Rhys smiled. "Our very own moonlight plucking?"

Climbing on top of his naked body, she slid her wet channel over his thick member. "You do have a way with

words, Mr. Mannetti.”

“For you, Mrs. Mannetti, I’d be a fucking poet.”

Reaching up to grab her hair, he fused their lips together as his dick notched at her channel. A hiss escaped her lips, and Rhys slowed down. Last night had been rough. Although they’d made love after her injury, he’d been taking it slow. He was selfish and wanted his wife every night, but he wasn’t an animal. Yesterday was the first day in almost a month when she felt like her old self. He let all his pent-up needs out, fucking her hard and fast as they came together.

He had no doubt she was sore this morning. But if his baby wanted more from him, who was he to deny her? Sliding inside her slowly, he positioned both hands on her ass, grabbing her flesh tight in his grasp.

“Rhys,” she moaned out loud.

“Yes, Wife,” he said in return. It made him very happy to call her that. His wife. His heart. His love. Every chance he got, he called her wife or Mrs. Mannetti. When he thought he’d lost her that day, his entire world had stopped. Although they had no proof, he knew it had to be Kenny who had almost run down Hyacinth that day on the street.

That fateful day she’d come into his life.

As she continued to ride him, he couldn’t help but smile at the surprise he had in store for her. He knew she would balk and tell him he didn’t need, but her words today made him realize how much she had missed with

them doing a Vegas wedding. For the woman who would give him children, and be by his side for the rest of their days, she deserved everything and more.

“I love you, Rhys,” she moaned against his lips, her hands cradling his face.

“I love you, Hyacinth Mannetti. You are my light, my flower, my sun, and my moon.” Although he spoke sweet words, his hips never stopped lifting beneath her. His only goal this morning was to make damn sure she knew it was his job to bring her pleasure every moment for the rest of their lives. “Having you in my life was meant to be. One day soon, I want you to swell with my child. I want to experience everything with you. Your smiles, your tears, your laughter, and everything in between.”

One hand reached up to grab her breast, his fingers tweaking and pinching her nipple. Tonight, they’d play a little. He had some new toys he wanted to try with his wife. When he realized just how much fun Hyacinth liked to have in the bedroom, it opened so many options for them to explore. She was so fucking perfect for him. Rhys almost couldn’t believe it was real.

“Marry me, Hyacinth,” he demanded again.

“Yes. Yes, Rhys. I’ll marry you,” she screamed out as her body clenched in release. He followed swiftly after.

After a few moments, he rolled them over. “Come on, sweetheart. Time for us to get up. We have a long day ahead of us.”

“What? How? I thought this was going to be a lazy weekend.”

Yes, that’s what Rhys had promised, but that was mainly because he wanted to make sure she did not know what he had planned. He had worked closely with Beverly, Hyacinth’s mom, to make many of the arrangements. Leo and Marco had arrived last night, along with Arturo and his wife, Sydney, as well as Angelo. Tristan and his wife Camille were due to arrive this morning. Some of her family friends, the uncles she always bragged about from Vegas, had also come into town.

“Come on baby. Trust me, you’re going to love this. You have thirty minutes to get dressed or I’ll drag you out to the car naked.”

“Sadist,” she accused.

“Yeah, and you love me.”

“I do. I really do,” she mumbled into the pillow.

One hour later, they arrived at another house overlooking the beach. Her mother was waiting out front, along with two other black women Hyacinth didn’t know.

“Hi, I’m Camille Lucarelli, wife to Rhys’s friend Tristan, from Providence.”

“Hey. I’m Sydney Sabatino, wife to his cousin Arturo from Boston.”

At the deer in the headlights look on her face, Hyacinth’s mother stepped up. “Close your mouth, dear.

This is a special day that your husband has been planning for a while. He wanted to make things special for you. His close family and friends flew in to meet you.” She motioned toward the two women. “They’re going to help you get dressed and prepare. Are you ready for your surprise?”

The two beautiful women smiled before turning to walk away.

“Mom,” Hyacinth hissed. “Did you say Lucarelli?”

Just as low, Beverly responded. “Yes. I think he’s mentioned before that they’re childhood friends. His brother Leo apparently works for Tristan, but you knew that already. Apparently, he wasn’t kidding when he said they’re all very close. Oh, and there are two other guys here that you should know. Max Bishop and Nico Mitchell, and they’re both with their wives. Those guys... let’s just say, I’m glad they’re on our side. Sweetheart, with who your husband has in attendance, your father and I will never have to worry about you again. I think your circle of protection just got much larger.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

Four hours later, Hyacinth walked out into a beautiful garden with flowers surrounding the guests on all sides. The crowd of onlookers wasn’t overly large, but she couldn’t help but notice the men sitting on Rhys’s side, along with their beautiful wives. Camille and Sydney were sitting with their husbands. While she chose not to have them walk in front of her down the aisle, she asked if they

would sit in the front row as a sign of thanks. They readily agreed.

Then she looked up at the front and saw Rhys waiting for her with the priest. Looping her arm around her fathers, she looked up at him and saw the emotion on his face. “Dad, you know we’re already married, right?”

Her father shook his head at her smart remark. “Of course, I do. I just never thought we’d get to see this day. That man of yours... I have a feeling he’s going to do right by you. You’ve found what your mother and I have. Our only wish is for you to be happy.”

Looking at Rhys before turning back to her father, she nodded. “I am. He makes me happy.” Shifting back to the front, she walked toward her future.

When she arrived at the altar, Rhys grabbed her face and leaned in for a kiss. The priest cleared his throat, but neither of them were paying any attention. As their kiss broke, she stared up at her husband and smiled.

“Thank you.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you never have to thank me.” He kissed her again before leaning back. “And don’t worry, we’ll do more of that tonight.”

She motioned to the surrounding area and the wedding guests staring up at them. “You are amazing. I don’t know how you pulled this off. You even arranged for my mermaid wedding dress, which fits perfectly, by the way.”

“I had a little help.” He turned to look at her parents. “Your mom loves her new son-in-law. But the picture isn’t quite done yet. Look up, sweetheart.”

As Hyacinth raised her head, she saw the moon sitting in the sky. It wasn’t completely dark yet, but it was enough to see the moonlight shining down on them. The sound of the beach and the ocean waves crashing against the shore seemed to play as a soundtrack for their night. Tears filled her eyes as she stood ready to marry Rhys again. Her heart swelled with so much love for her husband. The man who loved her with an intensity she had never experienced before.

“The day you saved me was the best day of my life. No matter what happens from now on, I’ll be by your side. I love you Mr. Mannetti.”

“From the moment you crashed into my life,” he began, but he was stopped as everyone laughed. The story of their fated meeting had been shared with others many times over and had become almost lore. With a smile, he looked down at Hyacinth and started speaking again. “After one look in your eyes, I knew you were meant to be mine. No matter that you can wield a knife and a gun like nobody’s business—” he paused as Hyacinth glanced over at her dad.

“Thanks, Dad,” she said with a smile.

He nodded in return, placing one hand over his heart. “You’re welcome, princess.”

Not that she ever intended to use those skills again, but it was good that she could hold her own if needed. Plus,

considering who her husband's friends were, she had a feeling their life together wouldn't be all flowery goodness.

Rhys shook his head at his wife and her father. The more he learned about that family, the happier he was that Hyacinth was his wife and they were on his side. "Just know that I will always be there to protect you and keep you safe, Mrs. Mannetti."

A discreet cough sounded next to them. "Um, sir. Maybe we can get started on the ceremony now."

Rhys nodded, but never took his gaze from Hyacinth's face. "Yes, you can go ahead and marry us. Again."

Hyacinth smiled as she thought about the secret hiding underneath her clothes. Just a couple of days ago, she found out there would be a little Mannetti running around in less than nine months.

If he thought he'd surprised her with this unexpected wedding, then just wait until she got him alone tonight.

Meeting Rhys had been fate.

His love was a gift.

Hyacinth had no doubt their life together would be a wild ride, but she was ready for anything that came their way. As long as they had the moonlight beaming down on them, flowers to brighten their day, and each other to hold on to every night, that's all they needed to be happy.

Once the ceremony ended, Rhys turned to her. "Forever, Mrs. Mannetti."

Tears flowed down her face as she gazed into his eyes. “Forever, Mr. Mannetti.”

~ FIN ~

Thank You!

Thank you for supporting my writing. It truly means a lot to me. If you enjoyed **Moonlight Plucking**, Rhys and Hyacinth's story, please take a few moments to leave a review on the platform where this book was purchased.

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Ruthless Bachelor

Summary

People say I don't have a heart...or a soul. That I'm not capable of caring about anyone but myself. They're wrong. I love my family, even my troublemaker little brother. Women? Meh, not so much. I learned the hard way to never confuse my heart with my dic... well, you get it.

I have the perfect life. I answer to no one and everything I do is on my terms. Nothing gets in the way of what I want, and yes, that includes women. I've had countless attractive women in my bed, for a night, but never more than that.

Heads up ladies, I have very special skills that women crave, but I'm a one and done with you kinda guy. Don't give me your number. I won't be calling you. Names are optional. I'll probably forget it anyway. I'm not a complete ass about it. I always make sure to have a car waiting in the morning.

And then Anya walks into my neat, compartmentalized life and now the jokes on me. One taste of her, and I want more. Need more. Crave more. Does Anya really believe that she can deny me? Hasn't anyone told her that I play dirty? I'm not going anywhere because I know I have what she can't resist. One problem, she seems to hold the same power over me. My name is Hunter, but I might just have become the prey.

One

Hunter

Sipping my favorite scotch, I looked around at all the single women mixing and mingling, playing their nightly game of ‘Catch a Bachelor.’ If only these women knew the truth, they’d probably run for the front door as fast as they could. I could describe every single man in this room as an Apex Predator, myself included. We didn’t play fair. We played to win. And tonight, winning the game meant getting the hottest, most beautiful woman in the room to take a ride in the elevator upstairs to our expensive apartment.

Just thinking about the possibilities in store for tonight brought a smile to my face. I took another sip and watched as one of my buddies strolled through the crowd, making his way over to me. A half-smile tilted my lips as I watched him get closer.

“Hunter,” he greeted, sitting in the chair across from me.

“Bryce,” I returned, lifting my glass in a mock toast.

His gaze flitted around the packed room of people before he turned back to me. “Full house tonight.”

“Yup,” I agreed. This bar was the place to be. The luxury could not be hidden or denied. Living here was the ultimate sign of success, and I deserved every bit of the life I’d created for myself.

“Yeah, this place is a damn smorgasbord of beautiful women,” he said, winking at a woman walking past us. “Plus, you know how it is in here when the sun goes down. The food isn’t the only buffet laid out for us to sate our appetite. It’s been a long ass week, and I’m ready for some fun.”

Usually, I agreed with him, but I was feeling off-kilter this evening. There was something in the air, and I wasn’t sure how to explain it. “I’m not even sure why I’m down here tonight. It’s been a long fucking week. I just want to relax, not deal with this game.” I could feel a headache growing behind my eyes. I’d been in the middle of negotiations for two weeks working on a purchase from a small information technology company. They had software I needed to expand my business to better support my federal government clients. This deal could not fail. If it did, there would be significant ramifications for my company.

Pinching my fingers against my temple, I tried to hold off the pain making its way through my head. The company knew they had me over a barrel because my Chief Technology Officer let it slip that our government contracts were as good as dead without their software. I might just fire his ass on Monday.

Now, because of his fuck-up, I had to come up with a new strategy to help the owners understand this wasn’t a deal they should pass up. I’d offered them a sweet deal, but they needed to get on board.

My fist clenched as I thought of my CTO’s fuckup. It would serve his ass right if I made a few calls and made sure he never worked in the northeast again. My anger and

frustration at his reckless slip of the tongue wasn't going away anytime soon. I needed something to take the edge off. Maybe I needed to take a page from Bryce's playbook and get lost between the legs of a buxom blonde or brunette.

Bryce lifted his feet and placed them on the table in front of him. Rude? Yes. Then again, it wasn't my building. If there was a problem with what he was doing, someone would speak up. Then again, with how much we paid to live here, maybe they wouldn't.

"Did you wrap up that acquisition?" He asked, his gaze tracking the women around the room, trying to identify his prey for the night.

Shaking my head, I placed my drink on the table beside me before leaning forward. "No. I have a feeling I'm going to spend more on this deal than I thought." And just the thought of that frustrated me even more.

"Is it too late to walk away?"

There was no easy answer to that question. On the one hand, I wanted to wash my hands of this whole thing. Contracts with the government always came with a load of bullshit extras. Picking up my drink and taking another sip, I felt the burn down my throat and let it calm the fire inside me.

"At this point, I wish I could. There's some real momentum behind what they're doing with their software. This is a game changer for me." I shook my head. "No. It's too late to walk away." I could feel my jaw clenching. "This shit was supposed to wrap up two days ago. If I don't get what the fuck I want, heads are gonna roll."

“Damn, man. What are you going to do?”

Leaning back in my seat, I reached over and picked up my drink before answering. “I’m going to win. That’s what I do. There’s no other option.”

Laughing, Bryce nodded. “Yes. Yes, winning is definitely what you do. Just don’t ruin anyone’s life in the process.”

I glared at him. “What the fuck are you talking about?” I knew, but I wondered if he was brave enough to say it.

“As if you didn’t know that your name on the street is the Grim Reaper. Try that ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about’ shit with someone else. You don’t have to upend someone’s entire life just because you want what they have.” He took another sip of his drink as he stared at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Asshole,” I gritted out, which made him chuckle.

“Right back at you. Now,” Bryce exclaimed, finally removing his feet from the table, “what kind of trouble are we getting into tonight?”

“I’m not seeing anyone worth the trouble,” I respond.

Here’s a bit of truth serum from me, which I know isn’t always well received. I don’t do well with people looking to latch on to someone who can help them get a leg up in this world. No, don’t take that the wrong way.

I’m not saying people don’t deserve to get rewarded for hard work, dedication, loyalty, or any other word you can add to the mix. On the other hand, I distance myself from people who appear needy and desperate. Their only focus on life is to

latch on to someone else and ride their coattails. Those are the kind of people I walk away from as fast as I can.

Here's the thing: if you can't make it on your own, then I don't want you around me. That's not my game and I can do without the trouble. My little brother, Caleb, tells me I have a fucked-up view of people. Yeah, maybe I do. Then again, he and I grew up in a family dynamic as fucked up as any sob story. Our father was a mean drunk and regularly abused our mother. Our mother was a saint. She deserved so much more than the life she had with our father, taking his abuse for too many years to count. Even though she was hurting and struggling to deal with the pain he put her through, she tried to instill the right morals and values into Caleb and me. One's like kindness, charity, empathy. All the things that made a person weak and prone to manipulation.

Thank God neither my brother nor I followed that path.

Bryce's voice broke through my inner musings. "I see we have some new visitors to the Tower." His eyes were focused on the entrance to the large bar area.

A little about this place, which we fondly referred to as the Bachelor Tower. This place caters to men. Single men. Wealthy Men. No kids. No women. No animals. Well, women and animals were allowed if a resident escorted them.

This place was meant for us. It was all ours, and it was perfect. We had a lounge/bar that served the best scotch, whiskey, or whatever you preferred to drink. It also had a fully equipped gym, a sauna to release the tension, and yes... even a cigar lounge for those who occasionally enjoyed a good toke after a long day closing multi-million-dollar deals.

Safe haven didn't even begin to explain the feeling of this place. It was so much more than that.

The one exception to the no-woman rule was the bar. Women could come and go as they pleased, but they could not go beyond these walls without an escort. It was a hard and fast rule of the Tower. And as far as I know, everyone abided. There'd been talk of allowing women to live here, but from what I'd heard, that hadn't gone over very well. Hell, the only reason I had my apartment here was because my mentor had it first. When he found a woman to marry, he moved out. I was the first person he called about moving in. It was all hush-hush since getting into this place was like getting entry into a secret society. An invitation to move into Bachelor Tower was almost invaluable.

But, hell, I wasn't looking a gift horse in the mouth, but I also knew without my mentor, they wouldn't have let me within thirty feet of the front door. Didn't matter how much money I had in my bank account. To move into the Tower, there are extensive background checks. And let's just say, my background ain't squeaky clean. In fact, it's pretty much black and gray from some of the shit I've done in my past and the people who helped me get a leg up.

See, I know what it's like to be at the bottom, but my pride and ego wouldn't let me stay there.

Turning my gaze to where Bryce was looking, my eyes homed in on the vision in front of me, and everything around me stopped. Including the breath in my lungs. My drink was halfway to my mouth when my hand paused. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Goddamn, she was beautiful. This was one woman I definitely wanted to know better.

Laughter met my ears, but I didn't turn to look at Bryce. "You can't have her," he said. His tone was light, but I wasn't in a playing mood. "I saw her first, and I plan on doing bad things with her all night."

"I can't have who?" Even I could hear the deadly growl in my voice. I don't know why I felt a surge of jealousy as I looked at the woman walking with her friend. If Bryce thought he would push me out of the way and stop me from getting what I wanted, he'd better think again.

"The blonde, of course."

My head whipped around. "Of course?" I couldn't help but question his words. Did he miss the stunning creature walking next to the blonde? Legs a mile long. Body like a country back road. Wavy hair hung down her back. Full, lush lips. Nah, I didn't want the blonde. Watching her walk closer to me, well, closer to the bar, I knew my night had just gotten much more interesting.

Bryce opened his big mouth again. "Yeah, you need to find your own woman tonight."

I ignored Bryce and his inconsequential words. That he'd passed over and dismissed the beauty walking next to the blonde was unfortunate. Then again, his preference wasn't my concern. My gaze tracked her every move. I watched her smile at the bartender as he took her drink order. My pants tightened at the thought of having her beneath me. Yeah, things were beginning to look up in my world.

Calling over a waiter walking by, I told him what I wanted. He nodded and walked off to take care of my request.

“What did you just do?” Bryce asked, a frown on his face.

“Don’t worry about me. You can have your chosen woman. She doesn’t entice me in the least. I have... someone else who’s caught my attention.” Tipping my drink at my friend, I stared across the room as things played out. If everything went according to plan, I would have an exceptionally good night.

* * *

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About the Author

USA Today bestselling author Reana Malori pens gripping multicultural/interracial contemporary romance novels full of love, steam, and suspense that will pull you into her world. You'll want to run away with these smoking hot book boyfriends and find a happily ever after alongside heroines you'd love as a best friend. Grab a glass of wine and enjoy!

Reana began her writing journey in 2009, releasing her first novella, *To Love a Marine*. Since then, she has published more than 40 books, to include *Weekend Fling*, *Finding Faith*, *Odin's Honor*, and *Secret Devotion*. She currently resides in Montclair, Virginia with her husband and two sons who keep her busy laughing, having fun, and making sure she doesn't take herself too seriously.

Love and Hugs,

Reana Malori ♥

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[Weekend Rendezvous \(Book 2\)](#)

Wicked Nights - A Collection of Sexy Shorts

Change of Heart

Need You Tonight

Night in Heaven

Praline Dreams

Shadow Mates

Taylor's Gift

Decadent Delights: A Collection of Steamy Shorts

Accepting the Dragon

Dinner for Three

Hidden Depths

Naughty Nanny

Holiday Desire