



ONLY HIS

A DARK ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

OLIVIA ASHERS

Only His

Olivia Ashers

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Chapter 1

Isabella

I RAN MY FINGER OVER my sister's photo. Six months had passed since she died in a car crash, and every day, I missed her even more.

I had no idea why people said that time cured everything. It just didn't ring true to me. My chest was still full of holes.

My heart still broken into pieces.

Maybe I would feel whole again one day, but I had no idea when that would be or if that day would ever come.

After our mom passed away when we were teens, my sister and I had been inseparable. She'd been my strength and my reason to keep going.

"Don't worry, Isabella," Sofia used to say. *"I'm your big sister and I'll always keep you safe. No matter what."*

We were complete opposites, but that hadn't mattered to us.

She was a beautiful blonde with blue eyes, and very much like our mom, while I had long dark brown hair and brown eyes, like our father.

But it wasn't all just about our looks.

She'd liked to party and had always been the center of attention, while I preferred to curl up with a book in some quiet corner.

The beep of my phone pierced through my thoughts, bringing me back to reality. When I saw the number on the screen, I jerked back.

It was a number I hadn't seen for quite a while.

My father.

I hadn't been in contact with him much, ever since he and my mom divorced. He'd repeatedly cheated on her and never had the decency to even feel sorry about it.

I still remembered when they'd screamed at each other, and my father had been blaming my mom for his affair.

I had a feeling he never liked me much either and preferred my sister. She'd always been a daddy's girl, and it was like they'd shared a connection he and I had never developed.

He'd given her bigger gifts and spent more time with her while I'd always been more of a nuisance to him.

Even after everything that had gone down, my sister had found it in her heart to forgive him for what he'd done, and they'd been in touch all the time.

He'd even paid for her tuition for an expensive private college out of town and gotten her an apartment after she graduated. I'd had to get a job and take a loan to be able to attend a community college and stay at my mom's old apartment.

I never held that against her. She'd decided to give our father a second chance, and I'd opted for keeping any contact with him as minimal as possible.

My father had never protested my decision.

Actually, he was probably glad about it.

The last time I'd spoken to him was at my sister's funeral, and we'd merely exchanged a few words. Out of courtesy, I supposed.

Why was he calling me now?

I hesitated for a few moments before answering. "Hello?"

"Isabella, honey! It's so good to hear your voice." My father's voice on the other end of the line was unusually cheerful and warm.

Had he decided that, now that my sister was gone, he wanted to have a relationship with me after all?

"Do you need something?" I asked.

Somehow, I didn't believe he'd called just to check on me.

"Actually, yes."

I inwardly groaned.

Of course.

Had there ever been any doubt about that?

"What is it?" I sighed.

"Do you remember that necklace your sister used to wear all the time? The silver one with a dolphin? I gave it to her for her birthday."

"Um, yeah. Why?" My sister had loved that necklace.

"I'd like to have it. Do you think you could go to her apartment and find it for me? I'll be in town on business soon. We could meet up then and you could give it to me."

I thought about it for a moment. "Yeah, sure."

I had no idea why I'd just agreed.

He could've gone to her apartment himself. Her stuff was still there, untouched.

My father had said the apartment was on sale, and that we'd move everything out once it was sold, but I had no idea

if he'd actually put it on sale or preferred to keep it the way it was in my sister's memory.

Maybe a part of me wanted an excuse to go back there.

I'd spent days and nights crying in her apartment after she died. Having all her things and her scent everywhere was both soothing and heartbreaking at the same time.

It was like a piece of her was back with me, but at the same time, it also made me painfully aware that she was gone.

Forever.

"Great. Once you find it, text me," my father said. "And I'll let you know when we can meet."

"Okay." As soon as I said it, the line went dead.

Wonderful.

I'd just agreed to see my father again, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do. And yeah, despite not really wanting to have any contact with him, it still stung a little that he'd only called because of my sister.

Unfortunately, emotions were rarely simple, and I couldn't help but feel disappointed.

My father had never told me he hated me, but he hadn't told me he loved me either. Sometimes, it felt like a part of me wanted him to say out loud how he felt about me because anything would be better than him just ignoring me and pretending that our relationship wasn't completely messed up.

But wishing things and thinking about them wasn't going to make them true, and I didn't want to confront my father either because I could already guess what he'd say, and it wouldn't be pretty.

I pocketed my phone and went to my room to change.

The last time I was at my sister's apartment, I could barely see anything from the tears in my eyes.

Maybe now I'd have more strength and would be able to sort through some of her things. My father wasn't the only one who wanted to have something of hers with him.

I wanted something too.

Even though I already had a lot of her things, including all the stuff from her childhood she'd left at our mom's apartment because she hadn't had enough space left at hers, and the things she'd given me.

But there was probably something more I'd like to keep to remind me of her and the happy moments we'd spent together, and I wanted to find it before someone threw it out or my father got an idea to take it for himself.



Isabella

I PAUSED AT THE DOOR before entering my sister's apartment.

Seeing everything almost exactly as it had been on the day she died brought back even more memories. For a second, I waited for her to come out of the room to my right and flash me a smile before launching into a story about the latest party she'd been to.

But the whole apartment was awfully quiet.

It was as if everything was suspended in time and was patiently waiting for Sofia to come back.

“I miss you, Sofi,” I whispered as I entered, and closed the door.

On my way to her room, I brushed my fingers against her coat that was on the hanger in the hallway.

When I opened the door to her bright pink room, I fought the urge to cry.

Maybe it didn't matter if I broke down now because no one could see me here anyway, but I wanted my eyes to stay clear so that this time I could actually do what I'd come here for. I'd have to do it eventually anyway, and this was as good a time as ever.

Taking a deep breath, I steeled myself.

The necklace.

I had to focus on the necklace. If I occupied my mind, I could go through this without bursting into tears.

Where could she have put it?

I checked her nightstand first. It was the place where she'd kept her favorite things that she used every day.

But instead of the necklace, I only found a few scrunchies that she'd loved.

I moved on to her closet next. As soon as I opened it, a few things spilled out, and something between a cry and a laugh escaped my throat.

My sister had liked everything to appear tidy all the time, but she'd never felt like cleaning up much, so she'd stuff things under her bed or in her closet.

If no one could see it, she'd pretend like it wasn't there.

After I put back the shirt that had fallen out, I crawled across the carpet to the bed. There was a chance the necklace was under it in a small jewelry box.

I felt around under the bed until I touched something solid, and I tugged it out. But instead of a box, the thing I'd found turned out to be a folder.

I furrowed my brow.

What the hell was this?

I couldn't remember ever seeing the folder before, and I didn't think my sister would keep any papers or anything too important under her bed with all the other random stuff.

Shaking my head, I reached under the bed again, and this time, my fingers closed around a box that was small enough to contain the necklace.

I opened the box.

The silver necklace with the dolphin was nestled in it. I'd found what my father wanted. But as I pocketed the necklace, my gaze fell on the folder again.

I should just put it back where it had been. It was probably nothing special.

Sometimes, my sister would make sketches of some dresses and clothes, so maybe it was that.

Or it was something personal, like a diary.

Maybe even love letters.

Not that I'd ever seen my sister write any of those.

It was probably private, so I needed to return it to its place.

I bit down on my lip. Would it be a huge breach of privacy if I just took a quick look?

It was better if I found it and not my father, or someone who was going to throw it out once the apartment was sold.

"Okay, Sofi," I said, looking around the room as if she were standing there, like a ghost that I couldn't see. "Let's see what this is."

I opened the folder and a bunch of papers almost fell out of it. My frown deepened as I inspected the first one.

These weren't sketches.

No.

It was something more important.

A contract.

A marriage certificate?

I blinked at it, and at my sister's signature at the bottom of the page.

What in the actual hell?

My sister hadn't had a relationship that was serious enough for her to marry someone, and she definitely hadn't had a fiancé.

So who the hell would she be marrying?

But the name of the groom was empty.

Had she been planning to marry someone? Someone I didn't know about?

Hurt briefly squeezed my chest. My sister had intended to marry someone and she hadn't told me about it.

That was just...

I couldn't understand what was going on.

We'd always been close. She couldn't keep things from me for too long. She would've definitely told me about something like this, except...

She hadn't.

She hadn't told me anything.

Why?

I flipped through the rest of the papers.

There were bills for some very expensive dresses, perfumes, and even a car. All of them stated my father had been the one who'd bought her all those things, even though she'd insisted she'd taken a loan for the car.

What the fuck?

I did my best to ignore the feeling of betrayal, and I got to my feet so I could cross the room and get to my sister's laptop that was on the desk.

I'd never wanted to turn it on before, even though I was sure I knew her password, but now I needed to know what was going on.

"Sorry, Sofi," I said. "But you lied to me. I don't know what the hell's going on."

I waited for the laptop to turn on, and when I got past the welcome screen, I searched through the documents.

At first, I couldn't see anything interesting or suspicious, but once I opened one of her favorite chat apps, I found my father's name on the list of conversations.

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I clicked on the conversation.

Father: Princess, did you get my gift?

Sofia: Yep. Love u! :)

Father: Have you thought about what we talked about? He's waiting for your response, as am I.

Sofia: Idk yet. Marrying a stranger is a big deal.

Father: He won't be a stranger once you meet him, but this is a lifetime opportunity. He's very rich and he needs a wife, young and pretty like you. He's going to make your every dream come true, and if you said yes, you'd make your old man very happy.

Sofia: Can u tell me his name?

Father: Not here and now. I must know your answer first. He's a very handsome man, and he'll keep you safe.

Sofia: K. Call u later.

I stared at their exchange in wonder.

My father had been trying to do what, exactly? Arrange a marriage for my sister? And she'd actually been considering it?

What the fuck?

But why would my father want her to marry a stranger? I didn't understand any of this at all.

I clicked on a few more things and stumbled upon my sister's bank account statements that she'd downloaded. It was some bank I'd never heard of.

A gasp escaped my throat.

The transactions were huge, and they were all from some secret account that consisted of a bunch of numbers. No names anywhere.

What the fuck was all this?

I compared the date of the last transaction on the statement with the date of the conversation.

It matched.

My father must've been the one who'd been sending my sister huge amounts of money to some secret offshore account.

But where he'd gotten the money?

He'd always say he was between jobs, so I'd never really found out what he'd been doing, but this kind of money didn't just fall out of the sky.

My father had been doing something shady.

Something dangerous or illegal, or he wouldn't have needed all those secret accounts to transfer the money to my sister.

My thoughts flashed to that one time when my sister and I had been at a nightclub, and there'd been a raid for some reason.

My sister's eyes had gone wide and she'd been begging me to help her get rid of the drugs from her purse.

I'd helped, and when I asked her why she had those, because I was sure she hadn't been taking any herself, she said they were her friend's.

I'd believed her that day, especially since I hadn't seen her do anything suspicious later. But I'd been busy too, and we hadn't been going out together as much after that.

What if the drugs had been my father's? What if he'd been using her to sell the drugs to her rich friends from college?

I blinked.

It was like I suddenly didn't know my sister at all. She'd been lying about so many things when it came to our father that I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

But my father wouldn't have refused to tell my sister the name of her potential husband if he'd had good intentions.

If he only wanted her to marry rich, he would've set the two of them up so they could fall in love. And a rich guy wouldn't just agree to marry someone he didn't know, even if he needed a pretense wife for some reason.

Wouldn't my sister and the guy have been negotiating the marriage, rather than my father? We weren't part of a culture where arranged marriages were considered normal either.

So what other option was there?

Some kind of crime organization, probably.

Or a cult.

Except, my father probably didn't have any good reasons to get involved with a cult.

But all of this was horrible, and my father was the vilest of people if he'd tricked my sister and lulled her into a false sense of security only to betray her as soon as it suited him.

I reached for my phone to call my father and confront him, but I stopped myself.

He obviously thought he'd been secretive enough since he'd sent me here and didn't expect I would find anything.

Even though I was curious, I doubted calling him out for what he'd done would help me.

My sister was gone.

My father was doing who knew what, but I was pretty sure it was something criminal, and he'd wanted to use my sister—the daughter he actually loved and adored—and marry her off, probably to another criminal, to get what he wanted.

I was so much better off without him in my life.

He'd never tell me the truth anyway, and he'd try to spin the whole thing to make himself sound innocent. Hell, he'd probably blame me for snooping.

So instead of calling him, I decided to text him that I hadn't found the necklace. Whatever he was up to, I wanted no part of it.



Chapter 2

Isabella

I QUICKENED MY STEPS to get to my apartment as soon as possible.

After what I'd found out, I didn't want to stay at my sister's place. I needed to clear my head somehow, but it was impossible not to think about my sister and the whole thing I'd discovered.

Just when I was about to reach my building, I paused.

Two men were lurking close by, and it was already very late and dark. Not too many other people were outside. This was usually a safe and calm neighborhood, but something about those men set me off.

They hadn't been here before, or at least I hadn't seen them, and they were looking around too much, as if they were waiting for someone.

Someone like me.

I ducked behind a thick tree trunk when one of the men looked in my direction. Maybe those men were undercover cops and they'd found me because my father had contacted me.

But I highly doubted it. My father was as slippery as a snake when he wanted to be, and I didn't think the cops would've just now found out about me if they were after him.

But then who were they?

There was a tiny chance I was just being paranoid, and those men weren't a threat to me. It was possible they were waiting for some friends if they knew someone from this area, no matter how weird that sounded.

Just because they wore black jackets and seemed to stick to the shadows while glancing toward my building didn't mean they were after me. Our town wasn't crime-free, so maybe one of the gangs had extended their territory, and they were just making sure their business ran smoothly.

I wasn't a part of their world, so I shouldn't matter to them at all.

They weren't here for me.

But no matter how much I tried to convince myself that this was all super innocent and I wasn't in any danger, I couldn't force myself to get from behind that tree and continue my way to my building.

Just because those men might not be after me specifically didn't mean they couldn't attack me.

I was still a woman who was walking home alone at night. Predators wouldn't give a damn about who I was.

But would there really be two of them?

And sort of this obvious?

I ran my hand over my face.

After what I'd discovered, it was no wonder that I was all messed up and seeing things.

Except, there was also a tiny voice at the back of my mind telling me that something was terribly, terribly wrong and that I was in trouble.

My father was willing to marry my sister off to someone to get something.

But now my sister was gone, and his business deal or whatever it was would fall through.

Unless...

I licked my suddenly dry lips.

Me.

He still had me.

I was his daughter, and if he no longer had his favorite, that didn't mean he couldn't offer the same deal to me. But even though he rarely paid attention to me, I doubted he believed I'd even consider such a ridiculous proposal.

Would he try to force me into it somehow? He liked me less than my sister, so maybe he wouldn't try to bribe me.

My life had just turned into a horror movie, except I didn't know the script.

Hoping I was majorly overreacting and jumping to crazy conclusions, I decided to take a different route to my apartment. There was a broken window at the back that no one had fixed yet, and I could get in through it.

The trees would help shield me from view, and even if my neighbors saw me, I'd find a way to explain what I was doing.

Maybe I could say I'd forgotten or lost my keys.

I scurried through the darkness, keeping my head down. When I glanced up, I couldn't see anyone watching me, so I headed around the building.

I pushed the window and it creaked, but I managed to open it. After picking up one of the bigger ornamental stones that surrounded the flowers, I set it on the ground under the window, stepped on it, and hauled myself up.

Luckily, it wasn't too high, and I managed to get into the hallway, which was empty.

I quickly closed the window and rushed to my apartment. My pulse sped up as I got closer to the door, but no one was waiting for me there.

I burst into my apartment and immediately grabbed a large duffel bag.

Maybe I'd jumped to conclusions, and there was a reasonable explanation for everything, but I didn't want to take any risks.

Staying at my apartment when I wasn't sure what my father's intentions truly were was dangerous, and I had to find some other place to stay.

Just for a few nights.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I jumped, my heart leaping into my throat. I hit myself on the edge of my small table and mumbled a curse under my breath.

It was a text from my father.

A shudder ran down my spine.

Forget about the necklace. I'd like to see you anyway. I missed you. We should catch up. How about tomorrow?

There was an address and time where he expected to meet me. I searched the address on my phone, and my eyebrows shot up when I saw the map.

He wanted to meet me at the outskirts of town in some small bar, just when the sun set. It was a business area, but I was sure that, at that time, most people would be gone since offices would be closed.

I didn't think I was overreacting anymore. Something sketchy was going on.

I was about to pocket my phone, but then I placed it on the table instead. If my father was so damn rich he could get my sister anything she wanted, then maybe he could also somehow track my phone.

I wasn't about to trust anything or anyone until I figured out what was going on.

At the moment, I had no clue how I was going to do that, but I'd come up with something. Now the only thing that mattered was putting some distance between my father and me and making sure he couldn't easily find me.

It had been months since my sister's death, so maybe my father had tried to find another way to close the deal with my sister's potential husband, but it hadn't worked.

And now he was desperate and was willing to settle for me too.

Always an afterthought.

That was what I'd always been to my father.

If I got away and he couldn't find me to use me for his weird schemes, he'd have to figure something else out and leave me alone.

I grabbed all that I thought I might need and stuffed it in my duffel bag, and then I hurried back to the window I'd used to sneak in.

After making sure no one was in sight, I threw the bag out first and then jumped out.

Collecting the bag, I broke into a run.

I kept to the shadows, and when I glanced back toward my building, I could still see those shady men close by.

Watching and waiting.

Well, they could do that all night long for all I cared.

I was out of here.

But where would I stay?

It had to be somewhere my father wouldn't look, so it couldn't be a friend or anyone I knew.

A hotel?

No.

It sounded like a too-easy way to find me.

A motel, maybe.

One on the other side of town.

There was no reason for my father to look for me all the way there. Besides, that motel only accepted cash and didn't give a damn about who you were, so most people used it as a place where they could have sex with their lovers or prostitutes.

I'd usually never go anywhere near it, but now I didn't have a choice. It was the best hiding place, and if I stayed in my room, I'd be safe and I'd figure out what to do next.

My mind was like mush, and I was still having trouble believing what was happening.

I kept hoping I'd wake up from this nightmare.

But the nightmare was real.



Chapter 3

Isabella

SLEEP WOULDN'T COME no matter how hard I tried, and it had nothing to do with the loud moaning that was coming from the room next to mine.

Of course, the more I tried, the less likely it was that I'd fall asleep.

But I couldn't stop going over everything that had happened in my mind again and again. I kept thinking about my parents and my sister.

A small part of me even wondered if my sister's car crash had been a real accident or not. But I supposed my father would've never rested if there was someone out there who'd hurt his favorite daughter.

Accidents happened.

Weird things happened.

Finding out that your father was deep into crime also happened. Well, probably not so often.

I let out a groan.

But maybe none of it should've come as a surprise to me.

I closed my eyes, letting my mind take me some ten years into the past.

I was huddled in the corner of my room as my parents screamed at each other. All I wanted was for them to stop.

"What's this? What is it doing here?" my mom shouted so loudly that it felt as if the whole house was shaking.

My curiosity won, and I padded over to the door of my room and cracked it open.

"Give it to me. You'll hurt yourself," my father said, extending his hand for the thing my mom tightly held in her hand.

A gun.

My mom snorted. "Really? I am going to hurt myself? What about our children? Did you even think about them before you brought this into our house? If our girls found it—"

"I was, and it's perfectly safe. I need it to protect us."

"No, you don't. Protect us from what? Your friends?"

"What are you talking about?" My father had the most innocent expression on his face.

"Do you think I don't know who you're going around with? That I don't know about that drug dealer?"

"What drug dealer? He's a businessman."

"What kind of business are we talking about? Would the cops want to hear about it too?" My mom tilted her head at him.

"Give me the gun. You're being unreasonable."

My mom let out a huff, but then her gaze fell on me. Her eyes widened in surprise and she quickly hid the gun behind her, but I still saw it as she handed it over to my father.

"Honey," she said, her face turning into a smile as she made her way to me. "Would you like a snack?"

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded.

My father disappeared somewhere with the gun, and my mom took me to the kitchen.

I slipped out of the memory and stared at the ceiling.

There were many, many more situations that I'd repressed, but they'd been clear signs that it wasn't just cheating that had been the problem in my parents' relationship.

It had been so much more, and I'd refused to see it.

Or maybe, I'd been too young to comprehend it.

My sister had never talked about any of it either, even though she'd been old enough to understand what had been going on more than me.

But I still couldn't understand why she'd kept it all from me. Maybe she'd known I'd judge her and freak out because of my rocky relationship with our father.

I wished I could ask her so many things.

A flurry of knocks on the door almost made me fall off the bed. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my jumping heart.

Someone must've gotten the wrong room.

I stayed as quiet as possible, waiting for the person outside to realize their mistake.

But they knocked again.

"Room service," a female voice yelled.

"I didn't order anything," I shouted back.

The knocking came again.

I hopped to my feet. Maybe it was too noisy, and the woman just couldn't hear me.

"I said I didn't order—" I cracked the door open, and my words died on my tongue.

Two huge, armed men in black suits showed the door wide open, and I backed away, my pulse racing.

I was only wearing my black nightgown, and I had nothing within reach that I could use to defend myself or fight them.

Who were they?

What did they want?

“Please.” I put my hands up, but I doubted they’d gotten the wrong person.

They were here for me.

“I don’t know what you want or who you are, but maybe we can reach an agreement,” I stammered.

My back hit the wall, and the men grabbed me by the arms, dragging me to the door.

“No, wait! Where are you taking me?” I screamed and thrashed, but they were too strong, their grip like steel.

They carried me through the door like a doll.

Had my father hired them?

Were they working for him?

But then my gaze fell on the handsome man with short black hair and piercing eyes who was leaning on the hood of a black SUV.

He was wearing a black leather jacket and dark gray jeans. There was something about the way he held himself that made me sure he was their boss.

Who the hell was he?

I screamed for help, but all I could see around me were more armed men.

“Please,” I tried again. “Let me go. Whatever my father’s paying you, I can offer you more.”

It was a lie, but I’d think about getting out of it later.

If they were open to negotiation, I’d come up with something. It would give me hope that this wasn’t over, and that my father wouldn’t win.

But the men ignored me and kept dragging me toward their boss, my bare feet scraping against the cold, wet pavement.

When their boss' cold blue eyes landed on me, traveling all over my body, an icy smile curved his full lips.

I screamed as hard as possible in hopes that someone would hear me and call the cops.

Maybe I didn't know who the man was, but I knew I should be terrified, especially when he shifted and I spotted a gun under his jacket.



Chapter 4

Sebastian

ISABELLA REDDING.

Now Isabella Leoni.

She was even prettier in person than in the photos her father had shown me.

Her hair was a rich brown and fell past her shoulders. Her face delicate, and her neck slender.

The nightgown she was wearing revealed her firm, high-perched breasts and long legs. The fire in her dark eyes couldn't be extinguished, despite all the fear spiking in them.

She was like a wild animal, trying to get free, and she kept screaming and thrashing about.

I tightly gripped her chin, forcing her gaze to meet mine.

“Quiet, princess. You don't want to get yourself in trouble.” I ran my finger over her full lips and she hissed.

So much fire.

I'd love to see her pretty little mouth around my cock, those wild eyes looking at me.

"Help!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, still trying to wiggle her way out.

"Tie her up, gag her, and cover her eyes." I snapped my fingers.

We didn't have much time, and we were out in the open.

The motel workers were on my payroll and wouldn't even dream of calling the cops, but if we stayed here, there was a risk some clueless human would stumble upon us.

I wasn't in the mood for complications tonight. It was already enough of an annoyance that I'd had to go collect what was mine myself.

Her father was incompetent at getting his house in order, but that wasn't what I needed him for anyway.

The man could sweet-talk and influence almost anyone into doing anything, and he'd made friends in all the important places, especially because he didn't have any obvious ties with any crime families.

It was the kind of connection that I needed to take full control of the area. I ruled the unground, but I wanted more.

I wanted all of it, and I had no doubt I was going to get it.

Redding didn't even have a clue that our deal was more beneficial for me than for him. His greed blinded him from seeing the obvious and had prevented him from reading the fine print.

Isabella's screams were muffled after she was gagged, her hands zip-tied behind her back, a blindfold over her eyes.

My cock hardened at the sight.

She was even hotter all tied up, and she was one of those things I intended to take too.

After all, she was my wife, even if she didn't know it yet, and she belonged to me.

At least for as long as she could keep me entertained.

No woman could keep my interest for more than a few hours, and she wasn't going to be any different.

I wouldn't have even agreed to marry her if my advisor hadn't suggested that having a wife would help me keep the charade of a perfectly innocent businessman who had absolutely nothing to do with the grime and blood of the underground.

"Let's go," I said.

Before getting in the car, I glanced at Isabella and her wiggling tight body.

I'd struck just the perfect deal, with all the benefits included.



Chapter 5

Isabella

I WANTED TO SCREAM, but I couldn't because of a piece of cloth in my mouth.

I didn't even know where I was since there was a blindfold over my eyes. The only thing I could do was focus on my labored breathing and the panicked ticks of my heart.

How was I going to get myself out of this mess?

This wasn't my father's doing.

Well, not directly, anyway.

I took a few deep breaths to try to calm my racing thoughts. Panicking wasn't going to help me, but it was hard not to give in to it when I'd been kidnapped by a bunch of dangerous, armed men who could hurt me, kill me, or do who knew what kind of terrible things to me.

I didn't want to think about my death.

What I needed was a way out.

No one was holding me down at the moment, and even though my hands were tied behind me and my ankles were bound together too, I was sure I was lying on a soft surface.

A bed, probably, which meant they'd taken me to a room.

If it was a room, then there had to be a way out. If no one was watching me and I got free, I could escape.

I shifted, hoping to loosen the zip ties on my wrists, but it was impossible because they were too tight and cutting into my skin. My arms already ached from the uncomfortable position they were in.

I rubbed my face against the bed to get the blindfold off so I could see something, but I was having trouble doing it.

My mind briefly flew to my sister and my father.

If only I'd asked more questions and pressed my sister to tell me the truth, especially after the incident with drugs.

I should've asked her about the expensive bags she'd claimed she'd gotten for herself because of the awesome internship she'd scored, with a rich boss who adored her.

But I'd been naive and believed every excuse and explanation she'd given me without further question.

It just hadn't occurred to me my sister would be covering for our father. Somehow, he'd pulled her into his game and made her lie to me.

I should've gotten out of town instead of thinking I'd be safe in that damn motel. I'd thought I'd been overreacting, but now it seemed like I hadn't taken the whole thing seriously enough.

But there was no way to change any of what I'd done, and I had to come up with some solution to get myself out of this mess.

Maybe these men were just someone my father had hired so they'd scare me into agreeing to do whatever my father wanted.

I could play along. I wouldn't even need to pretend that I was terrified because my fear was all too real, and then they'd have to let me go.

What was it that my father actually wanted?

A wife for some shady business partner of his?

I'd sign whatever he wanted me to sign. Maybe I wouldn't be required to actually be that man's wife. That would be insane.

But I'd been kidnapped.

That was already insane enough.

I strained my ears as the sound of voices reached me, but they were talking in a language I couldn't understand or I just had trouble understanding what they were saying.

I wished I'd taken a foreign language as an extra in school, but I'd already had too many classes that I'd wanted to attend, and I'd figured I could always learn another language on my own when I had the time.

Except, I no longer had the time.

If they were talking about me, I had no idea what they were saying.

But there were so many voices, which meant there were too many of them. It would make my escape plan more difficult.

My thoughts went back to their scary, drop-dead gorgeous boss.

I had no idea how I'd negotiate with him.

It seemed impossible.

Was he working for my father or someone else?

Or was he the one?

Was he the one my father had wanted my sister, and now me, to marry?

He didn't seem all that much older than me, maybe a few years, but there was just something about him that made me

think he was the one in charge of everything and not just someone for hire.

I didn't want to marry him, but maybe it was the only way for me to get free. If they kidnapped me, they need me alive. It couldn't be they had to do it just to finalize the deal, right?

But what could my husband-to-be want from me?

Did he expect me to be his wife in the full sense of the word? Or would he leave me alone?

The more I thought about it, the more worried I became.

I wouldn't be too surprised if my father didn't care about what happened to me, but would he really have agreed to destroy my sister's life like this?

I'd always thought he genuinely loved her and cared about her. Would he really just hand her over to some monster while telling her lies about how awesome the whole thing would be for her?

The answer was obviously yes, even though my mind was trying to come up with some reasonable explanation so the whole thing would seem less horrifying and disturbing.

I didn't think this had been done just to scare me and show me I was just my father's pawn.

And if this man who held me captive, whoever he was, was decent and wanted a wife he could spend the rest of his life with, he wouldn't have kidnapped me.

He would've come to talk to me instead and tried to convince me that marrying him was a good choice for me.

Maybe he would've said something like my father had told my sister and offered me all the riches of this world or something.

I wouldn't be gagged and tied up in some room.

My stomach did a nervous flip.

Not knowing what was going to happen to me was making this whole thing even scarier, and even if my kidnapper agreed to talk to me, I didn't know what angle to try first.

Could he be reasoned with?

What if my father had lied to him too?

If knowledge was power, I didn't have any.

The feeling of helplessness wrapped itself tightly around my chest, making it hard to breathe.

How was I going to survive this?

Would I survive it at all?

I fought even harder against my binds, but all that did was cause my wrists to hurt even more. The disgusting taste of the cloth on my tongue made me feel like I was drowning.

I managed to roll over to the edge of the bed, but I was too afraid to let myself fall.

I didn't know how high the bed was, or if I'd get a concussion if I ended up hitting my head on something. It was more likely I'd hurt myself than free myself.

I'd have to wait for my kidnapper and see what he'd do with me.

Every second was like an eternity.

And all I could do was just exist.



Chapter 6

Sebastian

“WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH the girl?” Vico asked, his dark brown eyes focused on me from under a mop of dark brown hair. He was my second-in-command.

“I’ll handle my wife.” I’d been thinking about her more than I’d expected.

“We have a potential problem,” he said, his brow furrowing. “Someone from that motel called the cops to complain about the noise. They said they heard screams.”

It wasn’t an unexpected complication or anything we couldn’t take care of.

“Make sure everyone knows that if they talk, they’re going to suffer the consequences,” I said, and lifted my glass to take a gulp of my whiskey.

Sometimes, people needed a little reminder of who was in charge of their lives.

Vico inclined his head. “But I also heard that Detective Sargetti might get involved.”

I snorted. “Of course. He’s always everywhere. But there’s nothing he can do. What’s his excuse to get involved now? The word of some drunks and addicts from that filthy place?”

“Our SUVs, apparently. Some street camera caught us, but it was far away enough from the motel that he can’t easily make a connection. There were no cameras anywhere close to the motel. We made sure of it.”

“He’s grasping at straws. He’s got nothing. Come up with an alibi, just in case. You can use some fake footage too. But I don’t think this will go anywhere. He’s already accused me of a lot of things, and he’s not just going to get a warrant because he wants one. Even his friends think he’s talking nonsense by now.”

Detective Sargetti had been after me for years, without much success.

He was going to drive himself crazy if he kept like this, which was good for me, because even if he was on to something, no one would take him seriously after all his failed attempts to have me arrested.

“There’s one more thing,” Vico said. “We caught the rat. He’s in the back.”

“I see.” I downed the rest of my drink and got to my feet. “Then I’ll deal with him so we can get that pesky problem out of the way.”

Vico followed me out of the room.

The house we were in was just one of our temporary hideouts, but I liked it the most because it was cold, dark, and plain.

A nice little bunker.

It was easy to clean the floors too.

As we passed by the room where my wife was being held, an image of her all tied up filled my mind.

I'd get to her soon enough and figure out what was it about her that intrigued me so much.

Vico opened the door to a small, dim, windowless room.

A guy was tied to a chair in the middle of it. As soon as his gray eyes saw me, they widened.

"Please," he said. "Don't kill me! Please! I'll do whatever you want, but please have mercy! I didn't have a choice."

Why did they always beg when they were perfectly aware they'd royally fucked up? What was the point? It was just a waste of breath.

No one was brought to any of my secret hideouts just for a chat. The guy was delusional if he thought I was going to spare his life. He was the reason why one of my drug shipments had been busted after he'd gotten a little too friendly with the wrong people.

"I don't give second chances." My lips pulled up into a smile, which I didn't feel.

If I let anyone off the hook, even once, everyone would think they could mess with me and get away with the shit they did.

There should be no confusion about what the price of betrayal was.

"I'm begging you!" The guy was openly crying.

It was pathetic.

He should accept the consequences of his actions. I had no time to waste on his stupid whining, so I pulled my gun out of my holster and aimed it at him.

The guy didn't even have a chance to react. His head jerked back from the impact of the bullet, his eyes turning empty.

"Finally. Some peace and quiet." I tucked my gun back into my holster. "Clean up the mess."

When I glanced down, I spotted a splash of blood on my pants and groaned.

Somehow, blood always found its way to me. Or maybe it was me who always found my way to it.

Before I paid a visit to my wife, I needed a change of clothes.

And a cold shower.

For the first time in a long time, I was looking forward to something.

She'd better not disappoint.



Chapter 7

Isabella

THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS getting closer roused me from my slumber, and a surge of energy rushed through my veins as I tried to free myself again, even though I knew it was futile.

I'd been trying to get free for hours, maybe even more.

It was impossible to tell how much time had passed. It could be only a few hours or it could be an eternity.

My whole body ached, and my throat was dry.

When hands grabbed me, I struggled and gurgled. A strong masculine scent enveloped me as someone's lips brushed my ear.

"Don't struggle, and be quiet. If you don't..." He yanked at my hair so hard pain spread through my skull. "Okay?"

All I could do was nod.

"Good." He tugged the blindfold off my eyes, and I squinted because there was too much light all of a sudden.

The blindfold was so damn thick I had no clue if I'd been in the light all this time or if it had been switched on recently.

When I could see again without my eyes feeling like they were going to burst, I recognized the man in front of me.

The boss.

He pulled the gag out of my mouth next, and I pressed my lips together, licking them, as my jaw hurt.

“Who are you?” My voice was hoarse, and my throat raw.

“Sebastian Leoni,” he said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. “I'm your husband.”

“No, I... I never agreed to marry you.” So my guess had been correct.

It was him.

“Your father did. You're mine now, and you're going to obey me.”

“Please.” I cleared my throat. “Please let me go. I don't know what my father agreed to, but I don't want to have any part of it. So please release me, and I promise I won't tell anyone or report you to the cops for kidnapping me.”

A deep laugh rumbled from his throat. “I don't think you understand what's going on here, princess. I don't give a fuck what you want. You belong to me, and you're going to do as I say. If you don't, there will be consequences.”

I didn't like the cold look in his eyes. He wasn't joking or trying to mess with me. He was serious about this.

Oh shit.

“I'm going to untie you now. You need to get cleaned up. If you scream or try anything, you're going to regret it. Got it?” His eyes bored into mine.

I watched him carefully and slowly nodded.

He was clearly insane, and I couldn't negotiate with him or try to talk him into letting me go.

My only option was to try to find a way to escape, and maybe I could do that if he took me to a bathroom. I really needed to pee too.

Maybe I could find out where I was and plan my escape better.

Once he released my wrists and ankles, I had trouble getting up because my knees felt weak. The floor was cold under my bare feet.

Sebastian caught my arm, keeping me up, his grip tight.

I looked around the room that consisted only of the bed I'd been lying on.

There were no windows either.

He led me to the door, and when we exited into a narrow, dim hallway, a bunch of armed men stared back at me.

Shit.

What the hell was this place?

A prison?

Actually, there were probably fewer guards at a prison.

Sebastian took me in the opposite direction, toward an open door. We entered a spacious bathroom that actually had stalls and a shower area.

"I need to—" I said as I looked in the direction of the stalls.

"Go." Sebastian released me, and I hurried into the first stall.

At least it was clean and there was more than enough toilet paper.

I lowered my head into my hands. This was an actual nightmare from hell. How was I going to get past all those men?

Would Sebastian really keep me in that empty room all the time? What would he do to me?

I had so many questions, but I doubted he'd answer them.

When I was done, I found him lounging against the wall near the sinks and watching me like a hungry wolf.

After washing my hands, I splashed some water over my face and took a few large gulps to soothe my throat.

“Undress,” Sebastian said, and my head snapped to him. “Shower, now.”

I glanced at the showers. There was nothing shielding the view.

No curtain or anything.

Seriously, this place was a prison.

He tilted his head at me. “What are you waiting for? It’s not like you have much to take off.”

“Um, can you—” Maybe he could at least avert his gaze.

“I’m your husband. You don’t get to hide from me.”

I bit down on my lip.

Shit.

But as I glanced at the showers again, I spotted something I hadn’t noticed before. A window.

It was just at the end of the shower area, and even though it was covered by a curtain, I thought I could see some light coming through it.

A way to escape.

But how could I get to it?

Sebastian had his eyes on me all the time. Was there a chance he’d leave if I did as he asked? Maybe he’d think I’d given up and wouldn’t keep such a close eye on me.

I padded over to the showers and pulled my nightgown over my head. My gaze flitted to Sebastian, who kept staring at me as I undid my bra.

My hair hid my breasts from view, and when I lowered down my panties, I angled away from him so he’d see as little as possible.

I turned on the shower and pressed a button to get some shower gel out. As I soaped my body, the warm water sliding down my skin, I couldn't stop feeling Sebastian's intent gaze on me.

"Boss!" Some guy appeared at the door, but before he could look at me, Sebastian got in his way, blocking the guy's view of me, and pushed him back through the door.

As soon as he and Sebastian were no longer in sight, I waited for a few moments. Then I grabbed the towel that was on a rail and rushed to the window while wrapping the towel around me.

I yanked the curtain and was thrilled to see that the window looked onto a yard. Just as I opened the window, hands wound around my waist and pulled me back.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Sebastian's voice was like thunder.

I tried to elbow him, but I couldn't get free. His arms were like steel around me.

"What did I tell you?" He hissed, and then he dragged me to the corner of the room and zip-tied my wrists to a rail that was just above my head.

I faced the wall, so I couldn't see what he was doing, but I heard him turn off the shower I'd left on, and then I heard a strange whooshing sound.

Like a belt being pulled out of the loops.

I craned my neck, but Sebastian's fingers buried in my hair.

"You'll never, ever try to run away, do you understand?" He tugged my head back.

"Okay," I choked out because I was afraid he'd rip my hair out. "Please don't hurt me."

"But I have to hurt you. You deserve to be punished." He pressed himself against my back, his hand slipping out of my hair and sliding down my neck.

“Wait—” I gasped when he yanked the towel off me, leaving me completely naked.

My heart jumped into my throat.

What was he going to do to me?

The first blow struck my ass so unexpectedly that I jumped and cried out. He didn't give me time to recover, just kept bringing down his belt on my bottom.

No matter how much I wiggled, I couldn't get away from the punishing strokes that made my skin burn and sting like hell.

“Please,” I gasped out.

But he didn't seem to care about my pleas at all.

The blows kept falling on my tender flesh until my knees were shaking.

Tears streamed freely down my face by the time he stopped.

His arm snaked around my waist as my body shook with my sobs, and his hand lowered to my burning bottom, caressing.

Warmth formed between my legs as he kneaded my throbbing cheeks. His fingers slipped between my legs, spreading my folds and sending a jolt through me.

“You're dripping wet,” he whispered into my ear, raising goose bumps all over my skin. “And it's not from the shower.”

I didn't even want to think about what he was talking about.

“Are you going to behave now?” he asked, his palm resting on my ass.

“Yeah.” I bobbed my head.

“Good.” He pulled out a knife from somewhere and cut through the zip tie.

I held onto the wall for a few moments, trying to catch my breath.

“Get dressed.”

When I looked at him, he tossed a black nightgown at me.

“Nightgowns look really good on you.” He flashed me a smile.

I quickly put on the flimsy thing, grateful that at least I had something to cover me, even though the fact that he hadn't given me any underwear scared me.

But right now, I didn't think I could handle too much material chafing against my bottom.

“Come,” Sebastian said, and before he turned away from me, I noticed the bulge in his pants.

He was turned on by what he'd done to me.

He got off on my pain.

I didn't even want to imagine what that meant for me.



Chapter 8

Isabella

I LAY ON MY STOMACH, wondering when I was going to get another chance to escape. Maybe there'd still be a way for me to get to that window, and this time, I could be more careful.

Sebastian had just left me here, locked up in this damn room.

At least it was warm enough in here, so I didn't feel cold in the nightgown that I was wearing. I was sure my ass was bruised, and whenever I thought about it, I couldn't believe he'd done that to me.

When the door opened, I immediately sat up and regretted my decision instantly, wincing.

Sebastian entered, a big paper bag in his hand. His black jacket seemed a little bulky, and I wondered if he was hiding a gun under it or something else.

His lips spread into a smile. "Hello, wife."

He opened the paper bag as I watched him carefully. First, he pulled out a plastic water bottle and set it on the bed. Then he got a disposable food container with multiple compartments, opened it, and placed it next to the bottle.

I tentatively reached out for the bottle because I was parched, and Sebastian didn't stop me, so I opened the bottle and took a few big gulps of the refreshing liquid.

"Eat." Sebastian pushed the container toward me.

There was a little bit of everything in it. Some meat, salad, and vegetables.

And a plastic fork and a spoon.

My gaze lifted to his.

I was hungry, although I didn't really feel it because the stress of the whole situation I was in was too much, and I didn't even know if I'd be able to keep anything down.

"What are you waiting for? Did you already forget your first lesson?" He cocked his head at me.

Anger bubbled up inside me.

I wasn't his toy so he could do whatever the hell he wanted to me. If I was his wife, then why did he expect me to obey his every order?

It was ridiculous, even if his world was way different from mine.

"Your defiance is entertaining," he said. "But not entertaining enough, and I won't tolerate it anymore. When I say you do something, you do it immediately. No hesitation."

I glared at him, my jaw set. "I'm not hungry."

He barked out a laugh. "I didn't ask you if you were. I gave you an order. You may be my wife, but that doesn't mean I have to keep you. If you're of no use to me, I'll kill you. Now eat."

There was something in his voice and on his face that made me believe he was serious.

Killing me would mean nothing to him. He'd probably done it countless times before, and he didn't feel anything about it.

But did I even want to live like this?

"Too late." He lowered the container to the floor and sprang at me, grabbing my arm and pulling me to him before I could even react.

He reached into his jacket, and I caught a glimpse of a rope as he shoved me down and pinned me to the bed.

Forcing my hands behind my back, he tied my wrists tightly with the rope, and then he moved to my ankles.

He hog-tied me, the rope cutting into my skin, and I couldn't get free no matter how hard I tried. My nightgown rode up my thighs, exposing me to him.

A shudder rushed through me, and I felt tiny pinpricks of need between my legs.

I couldn't possibly be turned on by this.

But I was.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

Sebastian turned me around, so I was facing him.

"If you don't want to eat food, then I'm going to feed you something else," he said, and a gasp escaped my throat as my eyes widened.

My gaze fell on the contraption he was holding in his hand.

"You're so predictable I brought this." He grinned, showing me the thing.

It was some kind of gag with a huge ring.

I clamped my lips tightly together.

He grasped my face, his fingers digging into my skin. "Open your mouth."

I refused to obey him.

The corners of his lips tilted up, and I could see the bulge in his pants growing.

He pinched my nose closed, and I was out of breath, tears filling the corners of my eyes.

As soon as I opened my mouth so I could breathe, he shoved the ring between my teeth, forcing my mouth so wide open that my jaw hurt. He fastened the gag behind my head.

My saliva started dripping out, and I unsuccessfully tried to close my mouth and get that thing out.

Sebastian unzipped his pants, and when he pulled out his thick length, a thrill rushed through me, along with fear.

He pushed his cock through the ring and into my mouth. His fingers gripped my hair as his length hit the back of my throat, making me gag.

He pumped in and out of my mouth, shoving my head down and forcing me to take as much of him as possible.

I wiggled my hips as he face-fucked me, and despite the tears that had appeared in the corners of my eyes, I was trying to rub my pussy against the bed to get some relief from the tension building between my legs.

Sebastian laughed as if he could tell exactly how I was feeling, which made me feel even more embarrassed than I already was.

And my core even more wet.

Fuck.

Sebastian shoved his cock deep into my mouth and groaned as his release spilled down my throat. He held my head in place as I fought for breath.

When he let go of me and pulled out, I could barely think.

He removed the gag, and it took me a moment to remember to close my aching jaw. I could still taste him in my mouth.

I waited for him to untie me, but he only smiled at me.

“Your punishment isn’t over yet, princess,” he said, and then he picked up the container off the floor, turned off the lights, and left me all tied up and frustrated.

Without any chance to get any relief or settle my restless mind.

Fuck!

I let out a sigh, pressing my face against the bedsheet. Struggling against the ropes only made them tighter and my frustration stronger.

And now I couldn’t even brush my teeth or drink something to wash his taste away.

Why was he doing this to me?

And why the hell did I like it, even if I wasn’t willing to admit it out loud?



Chapter 9

Sebastian

I KEPT MY EYES CLOSED as I lay in a dark, cold room, but even though the conditions were just the way I liked them to fall asleep, I was wide awake.

And wishing Isabella's hot, lithe body was under mine.

Fuck!

I ran my hand over my face before opening my eyes.

What the hell was it about her?

I'd used her mouth. I should be satisfied, but whenever I thought about her, my balls tightened.

That perfect, pretty mouth of hers, her wide eyes as I emptied my load into her.

She hadn't been scared.

No.

She was burning with need.

Was she still awake too and desperately trying to rub her pussy on something? Were her hips grinding against the bed?

And just like that, my cock was rock hard again and ready for action.

I could do something about it, but I refused.

I was in control of my cock, and I would never let it rule me.

My advisor had suggested I should get myself a quiet and obedient wife from some powerful mafia family, but instead, I'd picked Isabella.

Still, I didn't feel any regret about my choice.

She was far from quiet, and far from obedient.

I liked that about her.

It was way more fun when she looked at me with anger and fire in her eyes while unable to hide her thirst.

But I was looking forward to her misbehaving again a little too much.

Sure, fun was good, but I had way more important things to think about than fantasize about fucking my wife until all she could think about was my cock inside her.

I was going to break her.

Everyone broke sooner or later, and she'd be no different.

I was going to use her body the way I wanted, and once I got bored of her, she'd be out of my mind and sight, locked up in one of my houses.

Completely forgotten.

I closed my eyes again.



Chapter 10

Isabella

I'D BARELY GOTTEN ANY sleep, and it wasn't only because of the uncomfortable position that I was in. I couldn't stop thinking about Sebastian and what he'd done to me.

Me being aroused by anything he'd done was absolutely insane. I had no explanation for it.

Something had to be wrong with me or with my brain. Maybe it was some weird reaction to shock and fear.

Except, I was sure it wasn't.

It wasn't just my body playing tricks on me.

It was me.

I definitely didn't have enough experience to know everything about what turned me on and what didn't, and I supposed I'd just discovered one or two of those things.

But why the hell did it have to be with Sebastian? Why not with some decent guy somewhere out there?

When the door opened, I lifted my gaze.

Sebastian entered the room with a peculiar expression on his face and dark circles under his eyes.

I'd bet he was upset about something, but I had no idea what it was.

He didn't say a word to me as he untied me.

I stretched out my sore muscles. Even if I saw a way out of here now, I probably wouldn't be able to run for it because my legs were too sore.

"Behave," Sebastian said coldly as he pulled me up to my feet, tugging my nightgown down so it would cover my thighs.

He caught my arms and inspected my red wrists and my hands.

I had no idea what he did or didn't see because his face was giving me nothing, but when he let go of me, he headed to the door.

"Bathroom time." It was all he said before he disappeared, and an unfamiliar armed man appeared in the doorway, obviously waiting for me.

Shit.

I didn't know why, but I so didn't want that man to touch me or do to me what Sebastian had done, so I had to comply.

Besides, going to the bathroom when Sebastian wasn't there might give me another chance to run away.

When I got to the bathroom, I spotted a toothbrush and toothpaste on the sink. I glanced over my shoulder, but my guard had stayed behind and hadn't followed me inside.

Was I imagining things or did Sebastian have an issue with other men potentially seeing me naked?

I hurried to the window.

A gasp escaped my throat.

It was gone.

Completely walled up.

My heart sank. How was I going to get out of this place now?

I couldn't go through all the guards or through Sebastian.

Shit!

I was angry with myself again for getting myself into this situation. When I'd found out something was going on with my father, I should've gone straight to the cops.

Or I should've let the whole world know my life was in danger. I could've posted about it all over social media and contacted everyone I knew, even if we weren't close, and told them to call the cops if I went missing.

Maybe people wouldn't have believed me, but at least someone would be looking for me. I didn't think anyone was doing that right now, and even if they tried, my father could always find a way to convince them that everything was okay.

No one would ever assume it wasn't safe to trust my father. It wasn't like anyone knew much about my family because I mostly avoided talking about my private life.

My grandparents were all long gone too. My mom didn't have any siblings, and as far as I knew, my father didn't have any either.

For the first time ever, I wished I lived in some very small town where everyone knew one another and nothing could be hidden.

A place where no one could just disappear without someone gossiping about it and wanting to know more.

I was all on my own.

As I took my shower, I rubbed at my skin, trying to wash Sebastian's scent out of it.

But if I couldn't just escape and no one was going to come to my rescue, then what could I do?

There had to be something.

I thought about trying to talk to my guard, but I didn't think that was going to work.

Sebastian wasn't an idiot, so I doubted he'd let someone who could easily be influenced guard me. And if I started talking to the guards, he might get angry too.

No, it had to be him.

He was my only way out, no matter how crazy that sounded.

He was the one I had to convince to let me go.

But how?

I could try to seduce him.

He clearly liked me. Maybe not as a person, but he was definitely into me. Too bad I didn't have more experience with flirting and sex. He wasn't going to fall for me the moment I batted my eyelashes at him.

Could I even get him truly interested in me?

To make it into more than just sex for him?

Maybe I should give him what he wanted and sleep with him.

But I was a player in a dangerous game and I didn't know all the rules yet. One wrong move, and I could end up dead.

I was sure Sebastian would put a bullet in me without blinking if that was what he wanted.

Before I made my move, I'd have to find out more about him. But that wasn't going to be easy, especially if he remained completely closed off as he was today.

Still, I had to try something, and I needed some kind of plan so I wouldn't lose all hope and drown in my desperation.

I'd find a way to get close to Sebastian and learn more about him, and then I'd use that knowledge to get my freedom back.

It was a nice and very optimistic plan, but Sebastian was unpredictable, and figuring him out wasn't going to be easy.

I'd probably end up pissing him off some more. Maybe I should stop doing that.

Unless that was what he actually wanted. He'd mentioned something about finding me entertaining.

Seducing a criminal who didn't have a heart or didn't care about anyone seemed impossible.

But maybe there was more to him.

There had to be.

Maybe a tiny little piece of humanity stuck somewhere.

If I could find it, then I might get what I wanted.

Or I'd die trying.



Chapter 11

Sebastian

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT noise?” I all but growled as a loud beeping sound kept piercing the air.

“It’s the detective. He’s been spotted only a block away from here. We think he’s coming here.” Vico turned the screen of his phone toward me, showing me a map.

“Why would he be coming here?” I furrowed my brow. “Is he alone? What about our informants? Is there any sign that he might have a warrant?”

“No. There hasn’t been anything official, as far as we know.”

“Well, we clearly don’t know enough, so try better next time. We can’t just have that damn detective showing up here like this. Does he really know where we are? Or is he just passing through? Maybe he’s off duty and visiting a friend.”

“None of his friends or family members live in this area,” Vico said. “Maybe he’s hoping he’ll surprise us and see something he can use.”

“He thinks he’ll get lucky,” I muttered, and then remembered Isabella.

Shit!

“How much time do we have?” I asked.

“Not enough to get away. We could try, but it would look hella suspicious.”

Since the detective probably didn’t have a warrant, I could just send him on his way without telling him anything.

But if Isabella screamed, there’d be a problem. Killing the detective would solve it, but then we’d have an even bigger problem.

“How much?” I repeated.

“About two minutes.”

I raced out of the room so I could grab what I needed.

Isabella had to stay quiet no matter what. Not even the tiniest sound could escape.

Detective Sargetti absolutely couldn’t get a reason to call for backup or an excuse to try to get inside.

I quickly unlocked the door to Isabella’s room and burst inside. Her eyes widened and she jerked back when she saw me pull the rope out of my inner pocket.

She tried to scurry off the bed, but I caught her arm. As she thrashed against me, I was glad I’d perfected my skills to tie someone up as quickly as possible.

When I saw her like that, hog-tied and both terrified and excited at the same time, my cock twitched, but the last thing I needed right now was a raging erection, so I forced myself to focus on what mattered.

She tried to turn her head away, but I shoved the gag in her mouth anyway and fastened it around her head. Muffled sounds came out of her throat, but that was all she could do.

Satisfied with my work, I hurried out, just when the doorbell rang.

My guys were ready as they waited for me in the darkness of the hallway, and I signaled for them to pull into the shadows and wait.

This had better not end up badly.

I put on my brightest fake smile on my face and opened the door to greet the man who had to be my least favorite person in the whole world.

Most of the other people I hated, I could kill.

But getting rid of the detective was difficult since his death would bring way too much heat onto everything I'd worked hard for.

Sargetti would go down eventually, but until then, I had to be patient.



Chapter 12

Isabella

I STRUGGLED AND STRUGGLED, but it didn't help.

If only I could scream, but there was a gag in my mouth.

Something was going on. If I'd heard right, some detective was at the door, and judging by the hasty way Sebastian had tied me up, that had to be true.

Was someone looking for me after all? Had someone noticed something suspicious? I sure like hell hoped they had.

It would help me a lot, unless Sebastian panicked and killed me first to hide the evidence that he'd kidnapped me. But he didn't seem like someone who panicked easily, so there was still hope.

Maybe I could find another way to make some noise, even if I couldn't shout for help. I shifted and wiggled closer to the edge of the bed.

"Detective Sargetti, you again." Sebastian's voice carried through this place with ease, which probably meant that the

front door was very, very close to my room. “What do you think I’ve done now?”

Although Sebastian’s voice was pleasant, there was a dangerous undertone in it.

“Your car was seen in front of a motel just when someone heard screaming and shouting for help. No one can find the screaming woman now,” a rough male voice said.

It had to belong to the detective.

“And the camera footage miraculously disappeared into thin air, and no one can find it either.”

Someone had heard me! Even if they didn’t know who I was because I’d given a fake name.

Sebastian must’ve had friends at the motel who knew what I looked like, and they’d alerted him of my presence or sent my photo to him.

I should’ve disguised myself, but it had all happened so fast I hadn’t really thought about it.

“Interesting story,” Sebastian said. “Are you writing a novel or something?”

“It wasn’t easy to find you, Mr. Leoni,” Sargetti said. “You seem to move around a lot. And you have a lot of company wherever you go.”

“What can I say? It’s the life of a successful businessman. I get bored easily. And yes, I have a lot of friends. But if you expect an invitation to my party, I’m afraid I can’t give you one.”

“Do you think this is all a game?” Sargetti’s voice grew angrier. “A woman was screaming for help. What have you done to her? Am I going to find her body somewhere, huh?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. But if someone was really kidnapped, you should be focusing your attention on finding them, and not wasting your time here. I guess you don’t have a warrant either.”

I managed to push myself over the edge of the bed, and a groan formed at the back of my throat as I hit the floor, pain spreading through my side.

Would the thud be enough for the detective to hear me? I looked around, but I couldn't find a way to make some more noise.

"Is she in here? Are you keeping her here for whatever twisted fun you're having?" Sargetti asked.

"Why are you so obsessed with me, detective? Are you jealous I'm spending my time with someone else and not with you? I hate to disappoint you, but if you're into me, I'm really sorry, because it's never going to happen."

"You son of a bitch! I'll find her! Do you hear me? I'll find her and I'll end you!" Sargetti was shouting now.

"I think you should find a different job. This one isn't doing you any favors, and honestly, you're terrible at it," Sebastian said. "Is that alcohol I can smell on you? Go home, detective. There's nothing for you here, just like there wasn't anything last time. You won't find any drugs, kidnapped women, weapons, or whatever the hell you get an idea to accuse me of."

"You're going to make a mistake once," Sargetti said. "And I'll be there, waiting. I've always known you were trouble. I could see it in your eyes, and I see it now more than ever."

"Good for you, but now it's time for you to leave me alone. Goodbye, detective."

I pressed my cheek against the cold floor as the house went completely quiet. Shit!

An actual detective had been so close to me, and yet, he hadn't managed to save me. I was glad that someone was at least looking into the reports of me screaming in front of that motel, but I was also afraid that nothing much would come out of it.

The cops had no clue who I was, and Sebastian's friends at the motel surely weren't going to tell them. If no one had

come forward with my description or reported me missing, then it was unlikely there'd be any further investigation.

And Detective Sargetti didn't inspire much confidence.

Maybe he was a good detective, or he'd used to be, but there had been no reason for him to come talk to Sebastian without a warrant or anything, especially when he must've known Sebastian would give him nothing.

Sargetti must've been frustrated because Sebastian always got away, especially if he'd tried to arrest him before.

His beef with Sebastian also sounded personal, which might be clouding his judgment. And if he'd really shown up here drunk, then I didn't know what to think.

Someone rushing in here to save me was probably only just a dream. I couldn't count on anyone.

The only person who could save me now was me. And if I didn't save myself, no one else would.

But as the rope cut tighter into my skin, I felt more trapped than ever.



Chapter 13

Isabella

WHEN THE DOOR OPENED after what was probably an hour or two, Sebastian entered, carrying a brown paper bag again.

My stomach growled at the idea of food because by now I was completely starving.

Sebastian's lips pressed into a tight line when he saw me on the floor, and he placed the bag on the bed first before crouching next to me.

"I'll untie you now, and you won't try anything stupid," he said as he started undoing the rope.

I nodded, even though it hadn't been a question.

Once I was free and the gag was out of my mouth, I didn't get a chance to push myself up to my feet because Sebastian picked me up as if I weighed nothing and lowered me onto the bed.

He eyed me for a moment before giving me a bottle of water from the bag.

I gulped down almost half of it and let out a small sigh.

“Eat.” He placed the container with food within my reach.

“Can we talk first?” I needed to find out something about him.

Something that would help me get to know him.

At least he could tell me what exactly he wanted from me. If I was to be his actual wife, then he should treat me as such and not like his slave.

“You’re a slow learner, aren’t you?” He snatched the plastic fork and spoon from the container. “You can eat without these then.”

I gaped at him. “I’m not an animal! I’m a human being. At least you can give me some—”

“If that’s how you want things to go...” He caught my wrists. “You’ll eat today, even if I have to shove the food down your throat.”

I wanted to struggle, but his words stopped me, and I stared at him as he tied my wrists with the same rope he’d used before.

“Please,” I said softly, hoping he had a tiny shred of decency in him. “I’ll eat, okay? Just please release me.”

“No. You lost the privilege to use your hands too. Luckily, you still have your mouth.” A smile stretched across his lips. “And if you say one more word, you’ll be in a whole lot of trouble.”

I blinked at him, but it didn’t look like he was joking. Clenching my jaw, I wanted to scream at him and throw the food container in his face.

He was a fucking monster.

But if I didn’t do what he said, he’d fulfill his threat. I didn’t want him to force-feed me or do who knew what to me,

so I reached for the container with my tied hands so I could try to bring it to my mouth.

“No, not like that. No hands. At all,” he said.

Fuck.

Frustration built inside me as I lowered myself onto the floor so I could actually take some food out of the container without making too much of a mess. Knowing Sebastian, he'd punish me for that too.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see his smirk as he watched me struggle. I closed my mouth around a piece of carrot.

As I chewed, my hunger hit me with a vengeance. I forgot Sebastian was even there as I swallowed as much of the food as possible, even though it smeared all over my face.

Everything was so damn delicious.

“Easy,” he said, tucking a few strands of my hair behind my ear and making me jump.

I slowed down a little, and when the container was mostly empty, I fought the urge to lick it off.

“Sit on the bed,” Sebastian ordered as he picked up the container and tossed it back into the bag.

Once I sat down, he bent down and brushed his fingers against my cheek. A jolt of electricity shot through me, and our gazes locked for a few moments.

He rubbed his fingers around my mouth, and my lips parted in surprise at the gentleness of his touch.

The way his piercing eyes were trained on me was slightly intimidating, but I was sure I could see desire in them.

As he let go of me, I shifted, moving my nightgown up my thighs a bit.

He was hot. I could do this.

Maybe I wouldn't even mind having sex with him. If it helped me get my freedom back and gave me a bit of pleasure

too, it would be worth it.

If we'd met somewhere else and he wasn't who he was, I didn't think I would've minded hooking up with him.

His gaze followed my movement.

He couldn't blame me for teasing him if all he let me wear were nightgowns.

Unless he was like my father. That man would pretty much blame anyone for all his problems before he ever thought about blaming himself.

Sebastian's lips parted briefly, but then he grabbed the paper bag, turned on his heel, and stormed out of the room.

Maybe I was on to something here.

He wanted me.

And maybe, in some twisted way, I wanted him too.

But would any of that be enough to save me?



Chapter 14

Sebastian

“BOSS?” VICO’S VOICE brought me out of my thoughts.

“Hmm?” I focused on him.

“What do you want me to do then?” he asked.

I had no fucking clue what he was talking about.

Isabella.

She was a sweet little curse.

I’d been thinking about her instead of about what needed to be done. She was a very good distraction, and I needed it to end.

“We’ll discuss this some other time.” I got to my feet and headed out.

What had Vico and I been talking about?

It had been something about Detective Sargetti, but I’d spaced out in the middle of the conversation.

Because of her.

She'd lifted her nightgown on purpose.

I was sure of it.

The last thing I should do now was give her what she wanted, but I had to get her out of my system once and for all.

I should've fucked her as soon as I'd brought her here. I wouldn't be in this situation now.

She should be yesterday's news, and not the thing I craved most.

Nothing was going to satisfy my desire except for her warm, tight pussy.

I had to have her.

Today.

And she'd be more than willing.

If she thought she was going to mess with my head and get what she wanted, she was wrong. I wasn't going to fall for her.

I was just going to use her for my pleasure.

She would be the one craving my cock after I was done with her.

A smile spread across my lips.



Sebastian

ISABELLA WAS QUIET when I entered her room. She just watched me with those big brown eyes of hers.

This time, she didn't try to argue or fight me when I gave her food.

Probably didn't want me to take away the fork she was gripping in her hand as if she wanted to stab me with it.

The corners of my lips quirked up at the memory of her licking at her food. If she licked my cock like that...

"Can I ask you a question?" she said, her voice far from timid, her eyes trained on mine.

Despite everything, she wasn't cowering, and she still dared to open her pretty mouth.

"No." I didn't want to answer any of her questions, even though I wondered what was on her mind and what she was thinking about asking.

Giving in to my curiosity would be a bad idea. She'd only think she was getting to me, and I wasn't going to have any of that.

She pouted, but surprisingly enough, didn't say anything.

I wasn't sure if I was disappointed or glad about it.

When she was done, I tossed the empty container into the paper bag and lowered it to the floor so it wouldn't get in the way.

Isabella's shoulders tensed as I started toward her.

"I have something special in mind for you. A reward for being such a good girl today. You're going to like it," I said as I sat on the edge of the bed.

She opened her mouth, but I didn't give her a chance to speak. I grasped her arm and tugged her to me.

She yelped in surprise as I pulled her over my lap.

My cock was instantly hard as she wiggled on my lap, and I pinned her wrists at the small of her back with one hand.

"What are you—" she gasped out.

I brought my palm down hard on her ass twice. "You like this."

My hand slipped between her thighs.

Already wet.

She squirmed some more as I lifted her nightgown, exposing her. She pressed her legs together, but I pried them open, sliding my fingers up and down her slit.

A choked moan came out of her throat as I explored her opening, my finger brushing her clit.

Her muscles relaxed, and she kept her legs spread, thrusting her hips against my hand.

No longer able to hide her need.

I smacked her ass a few more times, turning her skin a soft shade of red. She still had some bruises left from her last spanking.

I dipped my fingers inside her again, delighting in all the delicious noises she was making.

Mine.

She was completely mine, whether she wanted to admit it to herself or not.

She groaned in protest when my fingers left her, and I slapped her pussy.

I tormented her with my fingers, watching the way her body reacted to my touch. When it looked like she was getting closer to the edge, I pulled my hand away.

She let out a noise that sounded like a plea that she wasn't willing to voice just yet.

My hand connected with her bottom, and I kneaded her heated cheeks.

I shoved my fingers into her, pumping in and out, and before she could reach her peak, I withdrew my hand.

"I'll let you come only if you beg me to fuck you," I said, trailing my fingers up her thigh.

A strangled groan of frustration slipped past her lips as she squirmed once again.

"Is that your final answer?" I rested my hand on her ass. "I'll leave you tied up again."

And I'd do it.

Even if my balls hurt.

"Please." Her voice was so low it was barely audible.

"Louder." I gave her ass a hard smack.

"Please," she cried out.

"Please what?" Another slap.

She was quiet for a few moments.

Was she going to say anything?

Or was this going to end with both of us unsatisfied?



Chapter 15

Isabella

MY CORE THROBBED WITH need so strong that I couldn't think about anything else.

All I wanted was some relief. But it was so hard to say the words Sebastian wanted me to say.

I wasn't sure why.

I wanted this.

And it was possible it would help me with my plan too.

Sebastian's grip on me loosened, and I could no longer feel his palm on my heated flesh.

Was he going to do as he promised?

Despite the fact that I could feel his hard cock poking against my stomach through his pants?

He probably was.

The man had a really strong power of will.

I had a split second to decide what it was that I wanted.

“Please! I want you to fuck me.” I couldn’t quite hide the desperation in my voice.

But I wanted what I wanted.

Sebastian lifted me off his lap and sat me down on the bed. Gripping my nightgown, he tugged it up, and I raised my arms so he could pull it over my head.

His hungry gaze traveled my body as I sat there, completely naked, in front of him.

Almost in a flash, he got rid of his clothes, and my eyes lowered to his thick length, my insides tingling with even more desire.

He pounced on me, pushing me down on my back and pinning my wrists above my head. His lips found mine, demanding and punishing.

He bit down on my lower lip and sucked, tracing his hand down my arm.

Lowering himself down my body, he nuzzled my breasts, licking and sucking on the tips. His tongue trailed a path down my stomach as he squeezed my breast and pinched my nipple.

Ragged moans pushed past my lips as he forced my legs apart and buried his head between my thighs.

His fingers stroked me, sending shivers of ecstasy through me. When his tongue parted my folds, I almost clenched my thighs around his head, but he had a tight grip on me.

His tongue explored me and set off a wave of heat inside me. He teased and licked me, circling the hard nub of my clit.

His mouth worked me relentlessly as I writhed and gasped, and I arched into him. I was getting closer and closer to the edge again, and as if he could tell, he pulled away from me.

Before I could protest, he flipped me over onto my stomach, lifting my ass up.

“You wanted me to fuck you,” he whispered into my ear, his erection pressed against my ass as he leaned over me.

“Yes,” I whispered.

He pushed inside me, stretching and filling me, inch by inch.

A pinch of pain that I felt disappeared very quickly.

He pulled out almost all the way and then slammed himself back inside me, making me groan. His hand pressed against the back of my neck, his other hand capturing my wrists behind my back.

His thrusts were relentless as he rammed into me, his strokes deep and hard. He plowed into me, igniting a completely different fire inside me.

I'd never thought it would feel so good.

His furious strokes as he slammed into me over and over again forced breathy little moans out of my mouth.

His strong body colliding against mine as he held me down, trapped under him, only made my pleasure stronger.

After another powerful thrust, I cried out, and my release rippled through me in cascading waves, leaving me breathless and shaking.

I felt his body jerk, his muscles tensing, his grip on my wrists tightening before he let out a rough grunt.

He leaned over me, his hand winding into my hair and yanking back.

"You're mine," he whispered into my ear before sucking on my earlobe.

And then he let go of me, pulling away and leaving me completely spent on the bed.

I barely had the energy to look up at him as he quickly put his clothes on.

He picked up a blanket from the other side of the bed and spread it out over me. Before leaving through the door, he smiled at me.

I gripped the blanket, wondering what the hell was going to happen now.

He'd gotten exactly what he wanted.

I supposed I had too.

Or maybe we'd both gotten what we wanted, in a way.

Was that good or bad?

I was going to find out soon enough.



Chapter 16

Isabella

WHEN SEBASTIAN BROUGHT me food, I could barely contain myself because I was starving. As I was shoving the food into my mouth, he kept his gaze on me.

“Has anyone ever fucked you like that before?” he suddenly asked.

Why was he even asking that? Was he trying to get me to confirm the obvious?

“Answer me or I’ll take your food away.”

I almost hugged the container to myself. “No.”

“Good. Then you won’t miss your boyfriend. I killed him.”

I cocked my head at him, my brow furrowing.

What the fuck was he talking about?

“I don’t know who you killed, but he sure like hell wasn’t my boyfriend.” I eyed him carefully.

A smile broke out on his face. "I'm just messing with you."

Why?

I couldn't figure out what he wanted now.

Did he believe there might be someone else in my life? A secret boyfriend who might be looking for me? Someone my father didn't know about, maybe.

Dammit, maybe I should've pretended there was someone.

Or maybe not.

"Why don't you have a boyfriend? You haven't met anyone who was up to your standards?" he asked.

"I don't know. I guess I was too busy to have one. I moved into my mom's old apartment when I started college, and I didn't really know anyone. I focused on studying, mostly so I wouldn't think about my mom, who passed away." I had no idea why I'd just told him all that.

Maybe it felt good to actually be able to talk to someone, even him, like an actual human being. Besides, he was listening to me and his face was serious, so that was something too.

Could I get him to feel sorry for me and let me go?

Probably not.

"So you were on your own?" he asked.

I nodded. "Pretty much. Well, I had my older sister until she died too."

I took a sip from the water bottle as I tried to push back the tears that were forming in the corners of my eyes. It was impossible to think about Sofia and not want to cry.

"What happened to her?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You don't know?"

Had he just forgotten because it didn't matter to him? Or had my father failed to mention it?

He shook his head. “Your father only said that he changed his mind about which daughter he wants to give me. He said you were younger and prettier.”

I made a face.

My father was a lowlife piece of shit.

“Well, she died. In a car crash,” I said, and gritted my teeth.

I couldn’t keep my anger in check because this whole thing was ridiculous.

My monster of a father had simply used me as a replacement, and the monster of my husband hadn’t cared enough to even ask more about the girl he was supposed to marry.

“And that’s how I got forced into becoming your wife,” I spat out. “Am I even your wife, officially? Because I don’t remember signing anything. My sister signed something, though. Maybe you think you married her.”

“I know who you are, Isabella,” he said. “And yes, we’re officially married.”

“You faked my signature. Great,” I muttered. “You know what? This is actually hilarious. I always thought that marriage was completely stupid and pointless. People break their vows all the fucking time. They fall out of love. Hell, they sometimes marry without even loving each other. Or they get forced into it. Wonderful, right? So you can keep your stupid certificate. It means nothing to me.”

Sebastian’s face was expressionless, and I had no idea what he was thinking, or if he was mad at me for what I’d just said.

“It would be nice if people meant the things they said.” I didn’t know why I couldn’t just shut the fuck up already before I got myself in trouble, but I was just so angry at everything.

My situation among all those things.

“My parents pretended they were in love. But my father cheated on my mom, and she tried to make their marriage work. Because hey, they were married and had kids, and they promised they’d love each other forever. Except, the stupid certificate didn’t stop them from fighting or screaming at each other.

“It didn’t stop the pain or even make them happy. It took forever for my mom to finalize the divorce, and it broke her. So maybe I should thank you and my father, because I know from the start that our marriage is bullshit and that there’s no love between us. At least you won’t break my heart. Hell, I don’t even have any real plates here to throw against the wall.”

I lifted the plastic container for emphasis.

But when I looked at Sebastian, he was perfectly still.

It was only his eyes that were swirling with emotion.

He was thinking about something.

Or reliving something.

I stared at him, but it was like he didn’t acknowledge me at all.

What the hell?



Chapter 17

Sebastian

THE PLATE HIT THE WALL with a loud crashing sound only a few inches away from my head and shattered into pieces.

“I hate you! I fucking hate you! I wish I never had you!” my mother screamed as she glared at me with eyes full of rage.

I huddled on the floor, covering my head with my hands and hoping she’d stop. Squeezing my eyes shut, I wished I were somewhere else.

Someone else.

I wished her words would come true and I’d cease to exist.

Another plate broke right next to my bare feet, and I opened my eyes.

“He wasn’t supposed to leave! He was supposed to stay with me, not ask for a divorce!” She raked her hand through her disheveled hair, her makeup smeared around her eyes, and pinned her furious gaze on me. “Why doesn’t he want you? It’s all your fault!”

She rushed at me, and I backed away, but she grabbed me by the hair and pulled me up.

I stepped on a sharp broken piece and cut my foot, but the pain barely registered because she threw me against the wall.

“Sebastian?”

I blinked, back in the room with Isabella.

She was looking at me with a worried expression on her face.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” I wiped all emotion off my face.

There was no need for her to know anything about my demons from the past.

“Well, I don’t know. You looked like you were somewhere else.”

Why did she even care?

Or was she hoping I’d tell her something she could use against me somehow? She might’ve had sex with me, but her spirit was far from broken.

She was up to something.

I could see it in her eyes.

Her mind was always working.

“I guess you don’t give a damn about marriage and love either,” she said. “I mean, you married me for who knows what reason.”

“Business,” I said.

“For business, right.” She pressed her lips into a thin line. “That means you’re not in love with anyone and you don’t plan on being in love with anyone. Unless you have someone somewhere who’s actually willing to be with you while you’re married to me and keeping me prisoner here, but I highly doubt it.”

I should tell her to shut up already.

It was a surprise I'd let her speak for so long at all. A part of me was curious about her, but she'd also managed to bring up a memory I'd tried really hard to forget.

"I don't do love." I flashed her an icy smile and took the empty container.

She crossed her arms, which brought my attention to her breasts.

Fuck.

I had to get out of here before I had my way with her again.

She was watching me with interest when I glanced back at her from the door.

So beautiful.

So full of fire.

My Isabella.

I locked the door and ground my teeth together. After I tossed away the container, I headed to the small gym that had been set up in one of the rooms.

But even as I punched the bag in front of me over and over again, my thoughts kept going back to her.

I'd thought she'd be out of my system by now, but she wasn't.

I still craved her.

I still wanted to fuck her until her body shuddered from pleasure under mine.

Hell, I even wanted to know more about her.

What she liked.

What she hated. Aside from me.

My obsession with her was getting stronger instead of weakening.

I hit the bag so hard my hand hurt, and I welcomed the pain.



Chapter 18

Isabella

I COULDN'T STOP THINKING about Sebastian and our conversation, even though I'd been the one who'd mostly talked.

But I couldn't help but wonder about him and his life.

From what little I could see of this place, it wasn't big. The hallway and the bathroom weren't anything special either.

If he was really rich like my father had told my sister, then why wasn't he living in a mansion?

Unless the mansion was somewhere on the other side, and I didn't know anything about it because I was stuck in this part of the building.

Maybe my father had lied, which was highly possible, but I didn't think he would've made a deal with some random guy.

No, Sebastian had to be rich, but maybe he couldn't really show it because everyone would figure out he hadn't earned all that money legally.

But then again, if he was a successful criminal, he would've laundered the money, and there'd be no problem.

Maybe he didn't want to live in a mansion because it would be easy for his enemies to find him. Except, with his army of armed men, he wouldn't have that problem.

I groaned.

It was possible he just liked this place, or he had his reasons for being here. I doubted he'd tell me anything about those reasons if I asked.

I wasn't sure why he'd married me either.

He'd said it was about business, but what business? What had my father offered? I didn't know my father well enough to be able to tell.

If Sebastian just needed a fake wife, he could've hired one. She'd be willing to do whatever he wanted, and he wouldn't have to worry about her saying or doing the wrong thing.

What if he was actually lonely? Or did he just want easy access to sex, without having to worry his enemies would get him?

Shit. That was probably it, and I'd ended up giving him what he wanted.

If I hadn't, would he have just taken it anyway?

If my sister were in my place, would things have been different? Would she have charmed him easier? Would she have agreed to be whatever he wanted her to be?

I pushed those thoughts away.

It was stupid to even think about that. My sister wouldn't have liked any of this, and I would never, ever want her to be in my place right now.

There was still hope that I'd get free, as long as I was alive. I thought back to that moment when Sebastian had turned pensive.

He'd remembered something.

But what was it?

His eyes had darkened, so it couldn't have been something nice. Maybe I'd brought up memories of his family too.

What had happened to them? Where were they?

If I could find out even a little bit of what was going on in Sebastian's mind, then maybe I could find some kind of connection.

Something I could use to convince him to let me out of this room. Maybe allow me to see the rest of this place.

There had to be another window in this house.

I also wouldn't mind having sex with him again. Just thinking about it made me feel warm all over.

I bit down on my lip, blinking at the ceiling.

What the actual fuck?

I shouldn't be wishing to have sex with my kidnapper again, even if it might help me get my freedom back.

But wait, getting my freedom back was good.

Except, the sex was good too, even if it shouldn't be.

No, wait again, it was better that I was enjoying myself rather than hating every second of it, wasn't it?

I rolled over and buried my face into my pillow, growling in frustration.

Why was my mind such a mess?

I should be clear on what my goals were and on what I should do. Whether I liked having sex with Sebastian wasn't the important question here.

Maybe the fact that I was stuck in a windowless room without much to do was affecting my brain.

I had to get out of here sooner rather than later, and I had to figure out how to do it before Sebastian decided he no longer wanted me.

My father had used me as a replacement, and Sebastian could always replace me too. It wasn't like it would be hard for him to just go out and find someone to fuck.

He wasn't locked up in here like I was.

He was free to do whatever the fuck his heart desired.



Chapter 19

Sebastian

“WE NEED TO GO!” VICO yelled from the hallway.

I’d just finished my shower and gotten dressed, so I went out of my room to see what was going on, picking up my gun and my holster on the way.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, adjusting the holster.

Vico’s eyes were wide. “He has a warrant!”

“What?” I creased my brow. “What do you mean? Who? Sargetti?”

He bobbed his head. “He’s coming here. We don’t have much time.”

“Okay. Tell everyone to get ready to leave as quickly as possible. They know the drill.”

“Yeah. I’ll do that right away.”

“How did he get a warrant?” I strode with him down the hallway.

“I don’t know, but one of our stash houses was busted. It looks like there was something in there that points to you, and since Sargetti knows where we currently are—”

“But that’s impossible.” I’d made sure nothing ever led to me.

Not a single little thing.

If there was something in that stash house, then it had been planted. But who could’ve done it?

A traitor?

Or Sargetti?

If he’d been there, he could’ve slipped something on purpose. Still, he had to know doing that wouldn’t help him.

I could clear out this place completely before he even got here. And there was no way he had something on me that could put my whole operation in danger.

Maybe he wanted me to think that there was a rat among my men and expected I’d drive myself crazy while searching for the person responsible.

“From what our informant heard, it’s not anything big. Just some business card with your name that was apparently found in one of the boxes with weapons. He has to know we have illegal weapons here, so he slipped that card on purpose, because if he catches us, no one will care about what he did. I don’t know if he mentioned anything about a missing woman too. But he expects to burst in here, surprise us, find our guns, and start with that,” Vito said.

“Son of a bitch! Well, he’s not going to get what he wants. We’re getting out of here.” If Sargetti really wanted to take me down, he’d have to try much, much harder than this.

This house wasn’t my permanent residence anyway. We were all used to moving around. Sometimes, I wondered what having a real home felt like, but I figured it didn’t matter because it wasn’t something I was ever going to have.

As Vico broke into a run, I stopped in front of Isabella’s room.

Maybe I should just kill her.

It would be easier to get rid of her body than drag her around with me, especially if the detective had actually found something we weren't aware of yet and we'd have to be on the run.

She'd only be a problem.

Slow me down.

Make me lose my focus.

She was a wild card.

One mistake with her, and she could bring everything crashing down.

I reached for my gun.

Something in my chest tightened. It was the strangest of feelings.

One I hadn't felt before.

No.

I couldn't kill her.

Not yet.

She still might be of use to me. Or at least that was what I told myself.

I'd keep her in check.

Getting rid of her so soon would be a waste.

I was about to unlock the door when I realized all she had on was a nightgown, so I raced down the hallway to get her some clothes.

"Boss!" Vico yelled.

"I know! I know!" I shouted.

Already, I was taking a risk because of Isabella.

But I didn't have a choice.



Chapter 20

Isabella

I KNEW SOMETHING WAS up because I could hear a whole lot of noise.

It was like everyone was on alert, and they were rushing around. But I couldn't hear anyone saying anything about what was going on, even though I strained my ears and listened carefully.

Maybe we were under attack, or the cops were coming. It just felt like it was something big, and I couldn't think of anything else that could cause so much commotion.

When Sebastian burst through the door, he tossed some clothes to me.

“Put this on,” he said. “Quickly. If you want to live.”

I looked at the clothes and realized they were mine. My jeans and my red sweater.

He must've taken the bag I'd had at the motel so that no one would find it, and he'd kept it somewhere.

I wished I had some underwear too, but this would have to do. Once I got dressed, I felt a bit weird, as if I'd forgotten what it was like to wear actual clothes.

My back itched a little, and my jeans felt a bit too tight, but the feeling wore off a few moments later.

“Come on!” Sebastian waved me on.

I'd be getting out of the room and out of this house.

It might be a good thing.

Sebastian snaked his arm around me as he ushered me through the door. His touch created warmth all over my back, and I wondered if he was trying to protect me or making sure I wouldn't try anything.

Once we were outside, my eyes stung a little because of too much light, but I could see there were plenty of cars and a whole lot of men.

Escaping right now would be impossible, but maybe we'd go somewhere with more windows.

Sebastian led me to a car.

We both got into the back seat, and I heard the click of the door as it locked. I was sitting right next to Sebastian, our shoulders touching.

“What's going on?” I asked as the car started moving. There was a privacy panel in front of us, so I couldn't see the driver. “Are we in danger?”

“No,” he said, his voice calm. “It's just a mild inconvenience. There's a detective who's after me, and he actually faked evidence to get a warrant. If he caught me, he'd win, and it wouldn't matter what he did to get the warrant. But if I get away and he finds nothing, I'll have time to get my lawyers to deal with the whole thing.”

“Why would he do all that just to arrest you? Wouldn't that put his career at risk? It just sounds like a stupid thing to do.”

“He's had it out for me since I was a kid. He caught me stealing.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Stealing what?”

He didn’t say anything for a few moments, and I thought he wasn’t going to answer. “Just something I needed to start my business.”

“Wait, you started your business? I thought it was a family thing.”

“Because of our marriage?” A smile quirked his lips.

“Well, yeah. I guess I associate arranged marriages with the mafia and someone with a long family tradition. Otherwise, I’m not sure if it would make sense.” My gaze met his.

“I started from scratch and got to where I am now on my own, but I did join the Leoni family at one point. Their boss didn’t have any heirs, and I started from the bottom and fought my way up the ranks. When he died, I took over and joined my own business with the Leoni family’s legacy. Increased the value of both and created a true empire.”

“Oh. That’s impressive.” I might not know much about his world, but I doubted there were many people who’d achieved the same. “How did you do it?”

“With a lot of work and effort.” His smile widened. “And a lot of bodies. Killing the right people at the right time can be of a lot of help.”

I felt my eyes widen as my lips parted.

I’d almost forgotten how dangerous he really was. Killing people meant absolutely nothing to him. Just one step he had to take to get what he wanted.

He could kill me too if he wanted.

“Are you afraid of me?” he asked.

My gaze fell on his holster.

The gun was within my reach. I could try to get it, and if I got extremely lucky, maybe I could point it at Sebastian without him overpowering me.

But it was a crazy thought.

I'd never even held a gun before. I wouldn't know what to do with it. He would take it away from me in seconds.

"I was just thinking about something," I said when I realized I'd taken too long to answer.

I was avoiding actually answering his question, so I hoped I could distract him.

"About what?" he asked.

"I used to dream about starting my own business too, but I realized it wouldn't get me rich. Probably not even a little. I guess I never dreamed big enough." I let out a small laugh. "But it would've probably made me happy anyway. Not everything is about money, and I never really needed much. It would just be something I truly loved."

"Tell me." He leaned closer to me, his eyes filled with curiosity. "What kind of business are you talking about?"

"I've always loved painting, and I saw this cute, perfect little space not too far away from my apartment. It would be perfect for an art gallery. I could put up my art there, and maybe someone would like something and buy it. I doubt I'd earn much, and I probably wouldn't be able to afford the gallery. But it's just a dream, right?"

Sebastian watched me, an emotion I couldn't identify flashing in his eyes.

The car came to a stop.

"We need to switch cars," Sebastian said. "We have to make sure no one's able to follow us."

The car door unlocked, and a man opened it a moment later, so I got out. Sebastian didn't let me out of his sight as we were led to a new car.

Maybe it was weird, but this whole thing was kind of exciting.

Adrenaline was pumping through my veins, and I wondered what would happen if the cops showed up right now.

But that was very unlikely, so I decided not to think about it and just wait and see where I'd end up next.



Chapter 21

Isabella

THE NEW HOUSE WAS MUCH bigger and nicer. It was surrounded by a huge fence and had a large lawn with some shrubs and flowers as decoration.

A true mansion, this time.

It had huge windows and all the rooms were spacious. Even the hallways were full of light.

Valuable paintings and artwork hung on the walls, and the heavy oak furniture seemed to be custom made just for this place. I couldn't imagine how much it cost to even rent it, let alone buy it.

I had a new room on the third floor, which was too high up, so escaping through a window wasn't going to happen.

Aside from a nice big bed, there was also a large closet, a desk with a chair, and a nightstand.

More clothes had been brought for me too, probably because we might find ourselves on the run again. This place

was a bit colder, so it was a good thing I could put on some pants and a sweater.

The view from the window was amazing. So much greenery and trees. It was very peaceful.

But there were way too many guards lurking around. They were good at hiding, but I still spotted them if I looked hard enough.

The bathroom was at the end of the hallway, but this time, I could knock on the door if I wanted one of the men to let me out, and I didn't have to wait for someone to come for me first.

When the door opened, an unfamiliar man stared at me a little too much, but I ignored him.

Once I was done and on my way back to my room, a beautiful painting caught my eye in the hallway and I stopped in front of it, admiring the colors.

It was as if someone had been looking through the window and had perfectly captured what they could see.

“Hey,” my guard snapped. “Move, bitch!”

Shit.

I turned away from the painting, but before I could take more than a few steps, I heard a yelp and a thud.

My pulse sped up, and I spun around.

Sebastian had the guard by the neck against the wall, and his face was so full of fury like I'd never seen it before.

“Disrespect my wife again, and I'm going to kill you,” he said, his voice cold.

The guard's eyes were wide, his face red.

“Apologize,” Sebastian said, and he must've increased the pressure on the guard's throat because the guy sputtered and gasped for breath.

“I'm sorry,” he choked out.

“Not to me. To her.”

The guard's eyes found me. “I'm sorry, ma'am.”

Sebastian let go of the guy, who sucked in a deep breath and started coughing.

“Now get out of my sight,” Sebastian said.

“Yes, sir,” the guy said before almost running off down the hallway.

I stared at Sebastian in surprise.

His anger vanished as he approached me, and a smile curved his lips.

“Do you like this painting?” he asked, glancing at the one I’d been looking at.

“Yeah.”

“Why?” He cocked his head at me. “You could look through the window and have the real thing.”

“Exactly.” I offered him a small smile. “It’s so calming. And peaceful. And you can take it with you wherever you go.”

His brow furrowed.

“I guess you don’t feel the same about it.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just a painting.”

I took another look at the painting, and then I let him take me back to my room.

He entered with me, and when I glanced at him, I saw that his shoulders were tense and his smile had faded.

“Are you worried about the detective?” I asked.

“What?” He blinked at me as if I’d just pulled him out of some distant place in his mind.

“You look like something’s bothering you. Is it the detective?”

He shook his head. “He won’t find us here. Not so quickly anyway. And my lawyers are going to stop him. He’s got nothing.”

“Then what’s wrong?” I tilted my head at him.

“Why would anything be wrong?”

“Because you look... I don’t know. Tense.”

He sighed. “It’s just this place. It was the only thing I could find on such short notice and off the books.”

“You don’t like this house?” I gaped at him. “Really? It’s a beautiful house.”

Would he rather be in a bunker somewhere?

Underground, maybe?

I couldn’t imagine why he wouldn’t like the house. Okay, maybe it wasn’t modern enough, but the one where we’d been before was way worse, and he’d seemed less on edge there.

“It reminds me of a house where I used to live as a kid,” he said softly. “Actually, two of my foster homes were similar to this one.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, the fancier the house, the worse they were. Or at least that was how it was for me. I moved from house to house a lot until I managed to run away. Living on the streets was no fun, but it was better than living with any of those families.

“They either wanted me so they’d get paid or to show off to their friends. Sometimes they caught me and returned me, but I escaped again. I got beaten up on the street a few times too, but I eventually learned how to avoid dangerous people and stay out of certain areas.”

I couldn’t imagine how bad things had to be for him that he’d preferred to live on the streets where he’d had to steal to survive and deal with all kinds of dangerous people.

“And Detective Sargetti? Did he know about your situation?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. I was unlucky enough that he saw me when I was trying to steal some food. He told me that he could tell who I really was, and that I’d grow up to be a criminal because it was all I was capable of doing. He told me that what was happening to me was my fault, and that if I behaved, then surely all those nice families would treat me better. He actually gave me an idea.

“If I couldn’t get the education I needed and I barely had enough to survive because of the *kindness* of those families, I realized I had to take it all myself because no one was going to help me. I could either win or die trying. So I got braver and bolder. I got familiar with my surroundings and people. I learned what to look out for and who to friend. I figured out how to be in the right place at the right time. And it all worked out.”

I could barely believe what he was saying, but I could see it in his eyes that he wasn’t lying.

“What about your parents?” I asked softly.

“My father left my mother. Their relationship was already rocky, and she came up with this brilliant idea that having a baby, meaning me, would help her save it. Of course, my father disappeared even before I was born and she was left with nothing. She turned to alcohol and drugs for solace, and she hated me. I was very young, but I still remember when she yelled at me and hit me. They took me away from her after I ended up in a hospital with a broken arm and a concussion. She was glad to finally be rid of me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Not your fault.” He gave me a sad smile.

“Not your fault either.”

His lips parted in surprise, and then a frown creased his brow. “You’re not allowed to tell anyone about this. No one knows. Not all of it anyway. If you say anything, I’ll kill you.”

His face was serious, but his tone lacked its usual bite when he was threatening me. Maybe he was just surprised he’d told me all this.

I was glad he had.

“Okay,” I said. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Good.” He stormed to the door.

I sat down on the bed and stared at my hands in my lap.

The things he'd been through... It was so much to handle.
No wonder he was a bit messed up from all of it.

And hell, I'd thought my life was the worst. At least I'd
had my mom and my sister who loved me, and I'd never been
hungry.

But Sebastian...

He'd had no one when he'd needed it the most.

My heart broke for him.



Chapter 22

Sebastian

I LEANED MY FOREHEAD against the door of my room and groaned. The compassionate look on Isabella's face as I'd spilled my guts to her haunted me.

Why the fuck had I told her all of that?

I'd kept most of those things to myself because I'd never wanted people to pity me or see me as less.

And Isabella...

She should hate me.

She should rejoice in my painful memories.

Except, she didn't.

The look in her eyes had been genuine, and her face had been like an open book so that I could see her surprise, her shock, her concern, and her understanding.

She was so full of empathy, even for someone like me.

If I was someone else and capable of love, I would've fallen in love with her. She was perfect.

Amazing.

And she was wasting away her life with me.

Her spark was impossible to extinguish.

She deserved so much better.

But the last thing I could right now was let her go. Sargetti would jump at the opportunity to talk to her.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

Dammit, Isabella!

Why did you have to be so perfect?



Sebastian

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO stay away from Isabella, so I found an excuse to pay her a visit. She had to be bored out of her mind in that room, even though she'd never said anything.

“I have something for you,” I said, and offered her a large paper bag.

Her brow furrowed as she took the bag, and then a surprised gasp escaped her lips.

“Oh, my god!” Such a wonderful smile spread across her lips that I wanted to remember it forever.

She stared at the canvas and painting kit, excitement dancing in her eyes.

It wasn't long before she had the canvas spread out on the floor and paint everywhere around her.

She used the rubber band that had been holding the brushes together to tie her hair up. My gaze lingered on her slender neck, and I wanted to kiss her, but I didn't want to disturb her or break her focus.

She effortlessly moved the brush over the canvas, and the image of angry waves that were hitting the shore during a storm looked beautiful even to me.

Calming somehow too, although it probably wasn't supposed to be.

I hadn't even realized how much time had passed when she sat back on her heels and smiled at her work.

“I missed this so much,” she said, glancing at me. “Do you like it?”

I nodded.

“Really?” She cocked her head at me.

“Yeah.” A smile tilted my lips.

“Okay. I believe you.” She grinned.

“We should put it up somewhere so it can dry undisturbed,” I said.

“Oh, sure.” She got to her feet, rubbing her hands together. “But I need to wash my hands first.”

“Yeah, come.” I carefully picked up the canvas.

While she was in the bathroom, I stared down at her painting. I'd never wanted to keep something before because I knew it would eventually be ruined, or taken away from me, or I'd have to leave it behind.

But this...

I wished I could have it with me.

It was like Isabella's essence was in it.

When I lifted my gaze, I saw her standing across from me, a smile on her face.

"You *do* like it," she said.

"Come with me. Let's find a good spot for this."

We went through the whole house, looking for a good spot, but the only room where the painting would be safe was on the first floor.

As I led Isabella down the hallway, we both spotted that the front door was wide open, and no one was guarding it.

Isabella's lips parted as she glanced at me.

Her way to freedom.

She could make a run for it.

But she didn't.

Instead, she turned to me and trailed after me into the mostly empty room. I placed the canvas on a table that was in the middle of it.

"It will be safe here," I said. "No one needs this room."

"Does that mean I can have another canvas?" Her lips spread into a grin. "This room is huge."

"Yeah. I'll bring it to you."

"Thanks."

As I watched her, I couldn't stop thinking about the open door and the look on her face. She'd been torn on what to do, but she'd decided not to go for it.

Why?

I knew she was brave enough to try.
Or maybe she thought she wouldn't get far.
I wanted to ask her but decided against it.
It would be a shame to ruin this moment.



Chapter 23

Isabella

I COULDN'T SLEEP, SO I sat up in bed and turned on the lights.

Sebastian had brought me another canvas and some other stuff I might need, which meant I had something to do instead of tossing and turning in bed.

I set everything up on the floor, glad that it wasn't too cold, so I could still sit down on the carpet in my nightgown.

I didn't even have any underwear on because, thanks to Sebastian, I'd discovered how much better I felt sleeping without it.

As I picked up one of the brushes, I bit down on my lip.

The front door had been open, and I hadn't gone for it.

Maybe I should have.

But it was unlikely the guards wouldn't have caught me, and I wouldn't have gotten far. It would've all been for nothing.

It was better not to think about it.

I got up because my shadow was in the way. As I glanced up at the light to try to find the best angle, my foot got caught on something and I went down with a thud.

I also kicked the painting kit, which made a loud crashing sound. A few paint tubes rolled across the floor.

Shit!

While I was trying to push myself up, the door flew open.

Sebastian ran inside, only wearing his black boxer briefs, his eyes scanning the room for a threat.

“Isabella!” He rushed toward me, but he didn’t see the open tube of paint and he slipped on it.

I gasped as he fell to the floor.

I managed to get to my feet and padded over to him as he groaned.

“Oh, my god. Are you okay?” I asked as I crouched next to him, placing my hand on his arm.

A current of electricity zapped through my arm at the contact.

“Yeah,” he said as our gazes locked, and then we both burst into laughter.

“Boss, are you all right?” someone yelled from the hallway.

“Yeah, go away!” Sebastian shouted as he sat up.

“You got some paint on you,” I said, and hurried to get some wipes.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I had no idea painting was so dangerous. Are you okay?” Concerned filled his eyes as he looked me up and down.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. I was just having trouble avoiding my shadow and—”

Sebastian eyebrows lifted up.

“Never mind,” I said as I kneeled next to him and pulled out one of the wipes so I could clean the paint off his arm.

His gaze was trained on me as I rubbed his skin, and I kept glancing at his lips.

“You have some paint on you too,” he said softly when I was done.

“Oh.” I looked down at my hands.

He grabbed one of the wipes and pressed it against my thigh. Heat rushed through me, especially because his fingers were pushing my nightgown up.

Next thing I knew, his lips crashed against mine. He didn’t hold back, ravaging my mouth with an overpowering need.

His lips lowered to my neck, and all I could focus on was him. He shoved the things around us away, making space on the floor as he got on top of me.

His mouth devoured mine again as he pushed himself between my spread legs, his erection rubbing against me through his underwear.

I was instantly on fire and wanting more.

He caught my nightgown and yanked it up, sliding it over my head. But instead of tossing it away, he used it to wrap and tie my wrists together above my head.

His lips trailed a path down my body, his hands probing, exploring, and touching.

I writhed as his mouth closed around my hard nipple, sucking and gently biting while his hand kneaded my other breast.

His tongue moved down my body, tickling my belly button. My pussy was already dripping wet when he nuzzled the inside of my thigh.

His fingers stroked my opening, slipping inside. Then his tongue found my throbbing clit and twirled around it as his fingers pushed in and out of me.

I lifted my hips up as his tongue lashed inside me, driving me wild. His tongue and fingers found all the right spots, and soon, my body was flooded with overlapping waves of endless pleasure.

A satisfied moan tore its way out of my throat as he kept working me, pushing me to another climax.

My whole body still throbbed and ached with need when he rose to his feet and pulled down his briefs, exposing his thick length.

He lifted me up until I was on my knees in front of him.

“Open your mouth,” he commanded, and I obeyed.

He shoved his cock past my lips, his fingers curling in my hair. I struggled to take as much of him as possible without choking, licking and sucking.

My gaze lifted to his.

I loved the reaction on his face and the look of pure bliss in his eyes.

He worked my head up and down his shaft until he exploded in my mouth with a content sigh.

When he pulled out, he bent down and trailed his hand down my stomach. He cupped my pussy, and I spread my legs wider for him as he fondled me.

A sharp slap across my center made me jump, but my desire soared.

“Lie down,” he said, helping me to lower myself back on the floor.

I kept my legs open for him.

“Close your eyes.”

I did, wondering what he was going to do.

A few moments later, something tickled my stomach.

“Don’t open your eyes,” he said.

A brush.

A big and soft one.

He'd taken one of my unused brushes and he was running it over my body, tickling me and teasing me.

His lips left a scorching kiss on my stomach, and then the brush danced over my nipple. Soon, I was lost in the sensations as he showered me with kisses and kept running the brush over the most unexpected places.

He tickled my core, making it impossible for me to stay still. My moans grew louder and louder as his tongue followed the path of the brush.

"Please, Sebastian," I whispered, unable to take it any longer. "I need you inside me."

"Shh." He pressed his finger over my lips as he kept tormenting me.

When I felt the tip of him against my entrance, I bucked my hips. He grasped my thighs, keeping me in place, and then he plunged inside me.

I let out a loud cry as he began to move inside me, his strokes hard, rough, and fast. Our bodies melted together, our grunts and gasps filling the air as he pounded into me.

All I could focus on was his strong body against mine, and when he kissed me, slamming himself deep inside me, I moaned into his mouth.

Our bodies shuddered as pleasure overcame us at the same time.

We both cried out, and I broke free of the nightgown that was holding my wrists and wrapped my arms tightly around him.

Unwilling to let go.

A voice at the back of my mind was telling me that this was wrong, even if it felt nice.

But I chose to ignore it.

At least for now.



Chapter 24

Isabella

I WAS SO INSPIRED THAT yet another painting was done.

After I went to wash my hands—Sebastian had told the guards to stand at the other end of the hallway, so I no longer needed to ask to be let out of my room—I heard a commotion from one of the rooms.

Even though I probably wasn't supposed to go farther than my room, I kept walking.

The guards tensed. I poked my head through the open door of one of the rooms.

Sebastian ran his hand over his face as he paced up and down. A TV on the wall was turned on, and there was an image of a smiling girl with long brown hair and hazel eyes on the screen.

Missing.

It was written under the photo.

“Do you know her?” I asked, and Sebastian looked up at me.

He nodded. “Her name is Amanda. She was with me in one of the foster homes. She was only eight then, but she was also the only person who was kind and nice to me.”

“What happened?”

“I wish I knew. I thought she went to a good home. A family adopted her. I checked them out when I could and everything seemed fine.”

“Can you maybe contact her family then? Maybe they can keep you updated or something.”

He shook his head. “When they found out about me, they forbade me from ever going anywhere near her. They said I was a bad influence, and they were right, so I didn’t try to reach out to her again. She probably doesn’t even remember me, and it was better that I didn’t put her at risk. She should’ve been safe. I don’t understand how this could’ve happened.”

“Do the cops have any information? You have some contacts who might be able to find out, right?”

“They don’t know anything. At least not yet. They’re just searching for her in the area where she was last seen.”

“Let’s hope they find her and that she’s fine.” I placed my hand on his shoulder, and he covered my fingers with his.

“I just hate not knowing anything and not being able to do anything. If I send everyone to look for her, my enemies might notice, and then they’ll try to use her against me. I can’t let that happen.”

“Have you checked her social media? Maybe there’s something that can help. A clue of some kind. Maybe she had a fight with her parents over something and went to a friend.”

His brow creased. “Social media? I haven’t thought about that.”

“Well, she’s not a kid anymore. Now pretty much every teen has a bunch of online accounts, and she might have some too. Unless her parents didn’t want her to have any.”

“I’ll check.” He pulled out his phone and focused on the screen.

His head jerked back.

“What?” I leaned closer so I’d be able to see what he was looking at.

“She has an Instagram account. With a whole lot of pics.”

“You sound surprised.”

“No, I just... Yeah, I guess I still have trouble seeing her as anything other than a sweet kid who shared her last cookie with me.”

He scrolled through the photos.

“There’s nothing here,” he said. “Just a bunch of teen stuff.”

“Wait,” I said before he could close the account. “Let me see.”

He handed me the phone without hesitation.

I opened a few images that contained some text.

“This isn’t just a bunch of teen stuff,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“I know this poem. It’s Poe.” I furrowed my brow. “And there are more similar poems.”

“What? I don’t get it. I didn’t exactly finish school, and even when I was there, I could barely focus. Poems aren’t my thing.”

“Right. It’s just... All these poems... They talk about depression and suicide.”

Sebastian’s eyes went wide. “No. Amanda would never—”

“Maybe it’s just something she likes. That’s all. It could be nothing. A lot of kids like dark stuff.” I tried to console him, but it wasn’t really working.

I could see it in his eyes.

I went through the photos again. The last one was a photo of a lake with some numbers. She'd taken more than one photo of that lake over the past few months.

"Um, Sebastian?" I met his gaze. "You might want to check out this lake."

"Why?"

"Well, look at these numbers. It's like a date or something. Tomorrow. Midnight." I wouldn't even know what date it was today if I hadn't seen it on the phone.

"You mean midnight, as in a few hours from now?"

"I guess."

He let out a curse.

After he snatched the phone from me, he furiously tapped the screen.

"We can make it!" he said after a few long minutes. "I found the lake. We can get to it in time."

"I still hope I'm wrong about this."

"Doesn't matter. We need to check it out. Let's go." He started for the door.

I blinked. "Wait, you want me to go with you?"

"Yeah. Unless you don't want to go."

"I do." I just hadn't expected he'd let me.

"Then hurry!" He broke into a run, and I raced after him.

Maybe this was my chance to get away, while Sebastian was distracted, but I couldn't think about that when Amanda's life was in danger.

I might not know her, but Sebastian did, and if I could help find her and save her, I'd be happy.

Even if the cost was my freedom.



Chapter 25

Sebastian

AS SOON AS WE REACHED the lake, I jumped out of the car and grabbed a flashlight. Isabella followed me as we tried to see something in the darkness.

“Amanda!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, but all I got for an answer was silence.

The grass crunched under our feet.

A bird chirped here and there.

What if we were too late?

I didn’t even want to think about it. Maybe she wasn’t here at all. My men spread out, looking for her.

Isabella and I got closer to the lake.

“Amanda!” she shouted. “If you’re here, please come out. We just want to make sure you’re safe.”

Something rustled, and we both turned our flashlights in the direction of the sound.

Amanda lifted her hand in front of her eyes as she rose from behind a large bush.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Amanda!” I dropped the flashlight and raced to her.

My relief was immense as I pulled her into my arms and made sure that she was okay.

“Sebastian? Is that you?” Her surprised eyes lifted to mine.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

She let out a squeal as she wrapped her arms around my neck. “How did you find me?”

“My wife did.”

“You have a wife? Wow.” Her gaze shifted to Isabella as she pulled away from me.

“Is that such a surprise?” The corners of my lips tilted up.

“Um, yeah,” Amanda said.

“Hi, Amanda.” Isabella approached. “I’m Isabella.”

“Hey.” Amanda gave her a shy smile.

“What are you doing here?” I focused on Amanda. “We saw the poems you posted.”

She licked her lips, and then glanced with suspicion at my men, who were getting closer. I waved them away to give us some privacy.

“We brought some company to search for you. Everyone was looking for you,” I added.

“It’s okay,” Isabella said. “You can tell us anything. It can be a secret between us. Or, if you want to talk to Sebastian alone, I can leave.”

Amanda eyed us both for a few moments.

“I just got tired of everything,” she said. “I don’t know what I was trying to do. I guess I posted that stuff and came here to see if there was anyone left who cared about me.”

“There are a lot of people who care about you,” I said. “But maybe they just didn’t understand what you were trying to tell them. Is something going on at home?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Evans don’t love me anymore.”

“I thought you were happy. They chose you, and you chose them.” But if she was calling them by their last name, then something had gone wrong.

“Yeah, but that was before, when they thought they couldn’t have any children.” She pressed her lips into a tight line. “But a miracle happened, and now they only care about their precious little Olivia. She’s everything they ever dreamed about, and they don’t want me around anymore unless they need me to babysit.” Her gaze narrowed at me. “You left and forgot about me too.”

I let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t have taken you with me. I didn’t have a place to stay or any money. And later, I found out you were adopted and that you were happy. Your parents and I decided it was for the best that I didn’t visit so you could leave your old life behind.”

“You mean *they* decided because they were always too good for trash like us.” She crossed her arms. “I tried to ignore my gut feeling about them because they seemed so nice, and I wanted to have my own room and nice clothes, go to a good school, and never have to worry if I’m going to find any food. But it was all a lie. As soon as Olivia was born, I stopped being their daughter.”

“You deserve much better than that, Amanda.”

“I don’t want to go back to them. Please don’t make me go back.” Tears filled the corners of her eyes.

“I won’t. You’re like my little sister. I’ll protect you and find a safe place for you.”

“Can’t I just stay with you?”

I glanced at Isabella.

I wanted nothing more than to make sure Amanda felt safe and loved, but she couldn’t have any of that with me.

Not when I was who I was.

“Sebastian travels a lot because of his job,” Isabella said. “If you stayed with us, you wouldn’t be able to go to school and make friends. But I’m sure we can find you a good home.”

Amanda bit down on her lip, but then she nodded.

When Isabella looked at me, I inclined my head.

She always knew how to say just the right thing, didn’t she?

“You’re coming with us for now,” I said, and Amanda’s eyes lit up.

“But what if my parents call the cops or something?” she asked. “They might not want me anymore, but they don’t want their friends to think they’re heartless.”

“They won’t call anyone.” I’d make sure of it.

Mr. and Mrs. Evans were going to find out exactly who I was and what I was capable of if they didn’t do what I told them to.

“Come. Let’s get out of here.” Isabella placed her arm around Amanda’s shoulders.

When Isabella glanced back at me, I wondered how she felt about this whole thing.

For some reason, she was willing to lie and pretend everything was okay in front of Amanda. She could’ve disappeared into the darkness and left.

But she hadn’t.

Deep down, I wished all the lies were true, and that I was just a regular businessman who was lucky enough to have married such a wonderful woman like Isabella.

We’d have a future then.

All of us.

I shoved those thoughts into the darkest corner of my mind.

It was stupid to even think about something like that.

I didn't regret who I was.

A normal life would've never worked out for me.



Chapter 26

Isabella

I WAS SITTING ON THE bed in Sebastian's room, which was very similar to mine, except it had a huge TV on one of the walls, a balcony, and a private bathroom.

Sebastian entered the room with two ice cream containers, and he handed one to me.

"Mmm. Chocolate," I said as I dipped the plastic spoon into the ice cream.

"I'm glad you like it." He flashed me a smile as my mouth closed around the spoon.

"Love it." It was like eating the tastiest piece of heaven.

"I think I found a family for Amanda," he said.

"Oh?" I perked up as he settled next to me.

"It's one guy who used to work for me until he met his wife. She runs a very successful business. Legal one. And they have two kids of their own. They also recently got approved

for fostering. I know them, and I think they'll be a good fit. I'll pull some strings to make sure there aren't any legal issues."

"Sounds great," I said. "What does Amanda think?"

"We're going to find out. I don't want to just ship her off to someone she doesn't know, even if I'd trust the guy with my life. But first she's going to spend a few hours with them and see how she feels about them. If things work out, then she might go on a vacation with them. After that, hopefully, it will be a permanent thing."

"That's a good idea. But what's going to happen in the meantime? Can she stay here with us? Your guys might be good at hiding their weapons around her and making themselves scarce, but if the cops show up and if she gets curious—"

For now, Amanda thought that Sebastian was just a super-rich businessman who was so successful he needed bodyguards. The guards were now mostly on the first floor, so she'd only see them if she went out for a walk.

But if the detective showed up with a bunch of cops, there'd be a problem.

"We're safe for now. If there's any news about the detective or the cops, I'll have to speed up the process with Amanda and say I'm going away on a business trip that can't be postponed," he said.

"Good plan." I could see how it could work out.

Actually, I was impressed with how Sebastian had handled the whole thing. He might want to make everyone believe he was a monster, but he wasn't.

Monsters didn't care about anyone other than themselves, and they would've never gone through all the trouble to save a teen girl.

"I hope it'll work out." He sighed, and I placed my hand on his leg.

My fingers trailed up.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes at me, his eyes filling with desire. “If you keep that up, you’re going to wake up the beast.” He grinned.

“Oops,” I said as I stroked him through his pants, feeling his erection grow under my fingers.

He snatched the ice cream container from me and put it on the nightstand along with his.

“Now you’re in trouble,” he said, getting to his feet and going to his closet.

I bit down on my lip as I watched him pull out a rope.

“Undress,” he ordered.

I got up and slowly took off my clothes, piece by piece, as he watched me with hungry eyes. Once I was completely naked, he pushed me down on the bed on my stomach.

He wrapped the rope tightly around my wrists behind my back, and then secured my ankles and legs too.

After grabbing one of the pillows, he lifted up my hips and placed the pillow under me, so my ass was sticking up.

When I heard him pull his belt out of the loops, I instantly burned with desire and anticipation.

The belt landed on my ass, making me yelp, but the sting quickly turned into something else.

He brought the belt down again and again, and fire spread through my cheeks and my whole body.

I couldn’t avoid his merciless blows, and when he finally stopped, I was trembling with need. I heard him come closer, but my hair was in the way, and I couldn’t see what he was doing.

When his fingers slipped between my legs, I let out a groan of frustration because I couldn’t spread them wide and give him more access.

But it was a sweet, sweet frustration.

Something cold fell on my heated flesh, making me jump. I managed to glance at the nightstand and realized one of the ice cream containers was gone.

The hot and cold shock made me wiggle my hips, even if that didn't help me get any relief.

When Sebastian's tongue glided over my ass, lapping up the ice cream, I thought I was going to spontaneously combust.

"Oh fuck," I whispered as he parted my cheeks and his tongue slipped between them.

I thrashed so much from all the pleasure that the rope had loosened a little as I pushed my hips up in a desperate need for more.

Sebastian thrust his finger inside my tight opening, and his tongue followed, probing and prodding until he spilled me over the edge.

He let go of me as tiny convulsions spread through my core and my whole body.

While I was still trying to catch my breath, he flipped me over. He got on top of me when he was completely naked, and he squeezed my breasts and pinched my nipples.

He brought his cock closer to my lips, and I lifted my head a little and stuck out my tongue so I could reach him.

A groan slipped out of his throat, and then he shifted and started rubbing his cock up and down the crack between my breasts. He kept squeezing my breasts against his shaft, using them for his pleasure.

He came all over my chest with a cry, and then he lay down on his side next to me, a smile on his face.

A special kind of contentment and pride built up inside me because I could see his smile in his eyes too, and that was something special.

Something I'd helped him achieve.

I stared deep into his eyes and couldn't help but think if maybe, just maybe, there was a chance for us.

A chance for something wonderful.

Something I didn't dare to dream about.

He leaned closer and pressed his lips against mine.

I wanted to ask him if this was just sex for him or if there was something more between us. Because the way I felt when I looked at him didn't feel like it was just lust.

No, I was sure that there was something more, no matter how insane that sounded.

But if I told him how I felt, what if that ruined everything?

What if he was with me just because he didn't have anything better? What if he laughed in my face and told me that I was delusional?

Did I even want a life like this? Just trapped in some house and waiting for the cops or Sebastian's enemies to show up? Did I want to be on the run all the time?

"Do you think you could ever leave all this behind and do something else?" I asked as he moved to untie me. "Something legal?"

"I thought about it a lot, but no, I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"If I left, someone else would take over. And they might run things differently. There might be more bloodshed on the streets too if more than one group fights for my territory. I don't know anyone who could replace me without too much drama, and it's not easy to leave all this behind. It's not just about me. It's about everyone else involved in every aspect of what I do."

"Oh." I hadn't really thought about it like that. "But if it was possible and you could just disappear, what would you do?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'd build a home for kids who don't have anyone to take care of them. Maybe I'd take at least some

of them off the streets.” His face turned pensive and a little solemn.

When he finished untying me, he picked me up in his arms.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” he said with a smile, and carried me to the bathroom.

I held onto him, enjoying his warm embrace.



Chapter 27

Sebastian

I STARED AT THE SCREEN of my phone, trying to remember what the fuck I was supposed to be doing.

Isabella just wouldn't leave my mind, even though I tried to rip her out of it.

If I didn't know myself better, I would think I was in love with her.

But that wasn't actually possible.

It wasn't how things worked in my world either.

People didn't marry for love.

Like my advisor had said to me before I agreed to marry Isabella, people like us only married because it was convenient, and I was not expected to feel anything for my wife.

Actually, it was preferred that I didn't feel anything for her.

If I did, it would be a huge risk.

A weakness.

If my enemies found out that I actually gave a damn about my wife, they'd target her immediately.

I could protect her while I was with her and it was my duty to do so in case of an attack, but it wasn't always going to be that way.

Isabella might be with me right now, but a time would come when I'd have to be on my own and leave her behind. She couldn't always come with me wherever I went.

I wasn't supposed to think about her all the time either or worry if something might happen to her while I was away.

She should never come first to me.

And even if, in some wild dream, what I felt for her was love, it didn't mean she loved me back.

She'd be crazy to fall for someone like me.

I didn't know what I'd have to do to be worthy of someone like her. It was impossible. She was so sweet and so good.

Pure.

Perfect.

She didn't have blood on her hands. She had paint.

But maybe I was an idiot, and she'd played me. She had to know that if she ran away, I'd hunt her down.

But if she convinced me to let her go and give her more freedom, then she'd be safe from me.

I didn't believe that was what she was doing.

Still, I had to show her who I really was and make sure she wouldn't get any wrong ideas.

She and I didn't belong together.

I'd have to forget her.

Drive her out of my mind.

Out of my soul.

Out of my black heart.

She was never going to win against my darkness.

No one was.

Not even me.

In the end, it was going to swallow me.

It was only a matter of time.



Chapter 28

Isabella

AMANDA NEEDED SOME help with her homework, so when she came to ask me if I could do it, I agreed.

It was a good thing I remembered how to solve the math problem in question, and just as I was helping her figure out the last step, I felt like someone was watching me.

I spotted Sebastian at the door.

He was looking at me with an unreadable expression on his face, which meant that he was trying to hide how he was feeling from me for some reason. When our gazes met, he walked away.

“Do you need help with anything else?” I asked Amanda.

“No. Thanks!” She grinned at me. “I only missed a few classes and I already feel lost.”

“Well, then you better not miss any more.” I placed my hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

Once I was out in the hallway, I decided to look for Sebastian. I found him in the living room—one of the living rooms, because this house had one on every floor.

“Hey,” I said from the door.

“Come here.”

I settled next to him on the sofa and he pulled me into his embrace, wrapping his arms tightly around me. “What are you watching?”

There was some kind of show on TV.

“Nothing special,” he said.

“Amanda seems to be doing fine. She looks happy.”

“Thanks for helping her.” He pressed his lips to the top of my head. “She had her first session with a therapist today.”

“That’s good.” Being in Sebastian’s warm embrace made me feel content and safe, and I focused on the screen.

The TV show wasn’t all that bad after all.

I had no idea how much time had passed when a knock on the door made us both jump.

“Um, do you have more of those chocolate cookies you gave me?” Amanda asked as she poked her head inside. “I can’t find them.”

“Yeah,” Sebastian said.

I pulled away from him so he could get to his feet. My attention was back on the TV, but a few minutes later, I heard voices in the hallway.

“You two look so in love! So cute!” Amanda said.

“Whatever,” Sebastian said. “Go to bed. You need to get some sleep.”

“Good night, Sebastian.”

“Good night.”

When Sebastian returned, he plopped onto the sofa next to me with a sigh.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“Amanda thinks we’re in love, which makes sense because we’re married, and she doesn’t know the details. But that has to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. It was hard to keep a straight face.” He grinned, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

I tensed. “Why would it be ridiculous?”

“For obvious reasons. You and me, in love?” He raised his eyebrows, his tone mocking. “Come on. Love is for idiots who believe in such things.”

I glared at him. “Do you really believe that?”

“Yeah. Maybe I should tell Amanda the truth about us. She’s going to create some fantasy in her head about us, and she’ll get hurt when she learns how the real world works.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I raised my voice.

“Nothing’s wrong with me. Well, everything is. Maybe I’m just tired of pretending to be someone I’m not. But you’re probably right. She’s too young to understand.”

I got to my feet and stormed out of there before I said something I was going to regret.



Chapter 29

Isabella

I STARED AT THE EMPTY canvas, but I had no desire to paint. After what Sebastian had told me, I started to question my own sanity.

But I didn't believe I'd imagined the connection that had formed between us. Maybe it was crazy and a little scary, but I was sure it existed and that it wasn't just in my head.

I'd thought Sebastian and I were on the same page, but something was up with him, and I wasn't sure what it was.

Maybe he was stressed out because Amanda was here.

Maybe it was something business-related.

Why the fuck was I trying to find an excuse for him?

He was a jerk.

That was what he was, and there was no explanation other than that.

He'd wanted to hurt me.

What if he'd been playing me the whole time? What if he'd found someone else? Someone more interesting than me?

I threw the brush I was holding across the room. It bounced off the wall.

A knock sounded on the door.

I wanted to yell at the person behind it to fuck off, but maybe it was Amanda, even though she was already supposed to have left for school. That poor kid didn't need more trauma just because I wanted to strangle my husband.

Besides, would that asshole actually knock instead of barging in like he had every right in the world to do so?

"Come in," I said, trying to keep my voice as calm and even as possible.

When Sebastian entered, I arched my eyebrows.

Well fuck.

What a surprise.

Except, I wasn't really in the mood to see him.

"Do you need more paint?" he asked.

"*Do I need more paint?*" I barked out a laugh. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"What's wrong?" The expression on his face was neutral.

"Do you really have to ask after what you told me last night?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"I don't get why you're mad at me. I just told you the truth."

"That's bullshit!" I got to my feet. "There's something more going on between us and you know it! You just don't want to admit it."

"No, there isn't."

"So you're just going to pretend that all those moments we shared mean nothing to you? Even if all your actions say otherwise?"

“What do you want me to do, huh? Throw you in a dungeon and leave you there? Would that help you?”

“No!” I curled my fingers into fists. “Don’t deny it. You feel something for me. Maybe you’re not sure what it is, but don’t tell me you don’t feel it.”

“You got confused. Yes, I like to fuck you. And you like it too when I fuck you. But that’s not love. It’s just sex. You can’t love me.”

“Ah, so now you’re going to tell me how I feel too?” I crossed my arms.

“I don’t have to tell you anything. You can’t love me.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Would you even think about being with someone like me if you hadn’t been forced into it?” His eyes bored into mine. “Tell me. Tell me you would’ve agreed to date me if I’d walked up to you in a bar and told you exactly who I was. Go ahead! Say it! Would you have given me a chance? Or would you have run screaming from me?”

“That’s not the same.”

“Can’t you see? I’m right. You wouldn’t be here with me if you had a choice.” His jaw was set, his eyes swirling with emotion, and before I could say anything else, he spun on his heel and strode away from me.

Was he right?

Had I fallen for him just because I was his prisoner? Just because it was the only way my mind could cope with all this?

No, I didn’t believe that.

He was wrong.

He was so fucking wrong.

I’d gotten to meet a different side of him.

His true self that he hid from everyone so well.

But if he didn’t want to see what was right in front of his eyes, then what could I do about it?

I had no clue.



Chapter 30

Sebastian

I WANTED TO PUNCH A hole through the wall.

I'd lied to Isabella.

I'd lied because I'd thought it was best for both of us to end this thing between us while we still could.

But it was too late for that, and it was too late for me to take my words back.

If she didn't hate me before, she sure like hell hated me now.

I'd royally fucked this up, and I had no idea how I was going to fix it. Should I even try to do it?

But how?

I didn't know what to say to her.

How could I explain to her what I felt when it was something I'd never had to do before?

I didn't even know how I felt.

No, that was a lie.

I did know.

I loved her.

It had to be love, because there was no way to explain the pain that I'd felt in my chest when I'd seen the hurt look on Isabella's face.

At that moment, I would've given anything to bring a smile back on her face and make things better for her.

But I hadn't.

Instead, I'd ruined everything.

I'd disappointed her.

Disappointing everyone was just something that was in my DNA, apparently.

Wasn't it pathetic that I'd face my enemy's army and all the cops in the world with just one gun in my hand rather than go talk to Isabella again?

But even if I admitted to her how I felt, I'd still have a problem.

She was still better off hating me than loving me. At least when something happened to me, she wouldn't have to mourn me.

There'd be no tears in her eyes for me.

I needed to keep my head clear and not let any of this get to me.

Isabella would realize soon enough that she'd made a mistake and that she was wrong about us.



Chapter 31

Isabella

I WAS LYING ON MY BED and staring at nothing in particular.

There was a knock on the door, but I ignored it. A few moments later, I heard the door open anyway, but I didn't bother turning around.

I could just tell it was him.

Sebastian.

He climbed on the bed next to me and wound his arms around me from behind.

"I miss you," he whispered into my ear, his hand roaming my body.

"Let go of me," I said, pushing his hand away.

He sighed as he pulled away, and I rolled over to face him.

"Can you forget everything I said?" he asked softly, his eyes searching mine for something.

“So you admit it?” I lifted my chin up. “You admit that you love me.”

“I admit nothing.” He got on top of me, pinning me to the bed.

His hips ground against me, and I hated the heat that was pooling inside me.

Just one more time.

Would it be so bad?

Fuck him and forget him.

His lips hovered so close to mine, and I couldn't take it anymore. I lifted my head, my mouth colliding with his.

His kiss turned passionate, deep, and hungry.

It was like he wanted to drink me up.

A growl formed low in my throat as he caught the hem of my shirt, and I let him pull it over my head.

He kept kissing me as he took the rest of my clothes off.

A soft kiss on my collarbone.

A peck on my neck.

A bite on my earlobe.

A lick around my nipple.

His kisses were a mix of both feral and gentle, as if he wanted to show me that there were more sides to him than just one.

He lowered himself down my body, his mouth going directly to my center.

My body vibrated in response to the licks he gave me, and when his tongue pushed inside me and swirled around my clit, I buried my hand into his hair, my thighs closing around his head and locking him in place.

He fucked me with his tongue, making my moans louder and louder.

When I was on the brink of pleasure, I ground my pussy against his face until my orgasm sizzled through me.

Sebastian tried to lift his head, but I didn't let him.

"Again," I said.

I was angry.

Greedy.

Hungry.

His eyes briefly met mine before his tongue dipped inside me again. He explored my folds, his tongue pressing against my throbbing bud.

When he found just the right spot, he kept flicking his tongue over it, and soon, I was bucking my hips as another release hit me.

While I was trying to catch my breath, Sebastian took off his clothes and got on top of me. He pressed his lips against mine, and I caught his lower lip between my teeth.

I shot him a glare, still clinging to my anger.

Despite all the desire that was coursing through me.

Sebastian rolled over and pulled me on top of him. I straddled him, positioning myself over his thickness.

When I slid myself down on him, I groaned as I stretched around him. I took him deep inside me, and then I started rocking my hips.

He gripped my ass, squeezing, as I rode him.

I threw my head back as he lifted his hips to meet me thrust for thrust. Our bodies merged, becoming one.

I met his gaze as I impaled myself on him over and over again.

He was the man I loved.

And also the man I hated.

But I probably loved him more, even if it didn't make any sense.

I captured his wrists, pulling them away from my hips. Once I pinned him down, I bared my teeth at him, and then I slammed myself down on his thick shaft and clenched around him.

We both cried out.

My orgasm hit me full force and I gave in to the sensation, completely forgetting about everything else.

When I collapsed on top of him, panting for breath, I looked into his eyes.

He smiled at me.

A true, genuine smile.

I shouldn't have done this.

One last fuck didn't quite cover what had just happened between us.

I wanted more.

I wanted all of him.

And I was a hundred percent sure of it.



Chapter 32

Isabella

I RESTED MY HEAD ON Sebastian's chest and traced my finger around his nipple. His arm was around me, and even though I knew I shouldn't be letting him do that, I wanted to have a few peaceful moments before the storm.

But I had to create a storm.

It was inevitable.

And the only way.

I was so done with his bullshit.

Extracting myself from his embrace, I sat up and faced him. He tensed, as if he could tell something was up.

"You need to make a choice," I said.

His brow creased.

"Either you want to be with me. Like really be in a relationship with me. Or you don't." I stared straight into his eyes. "If you want to keep pretending that there's nothing

between us, then so be it. But the next time you come to fuck me, it will be without my consent.”

“Isabella—”

“No, don’t. You can’t have it both ways. You can’t play hot and cold with me. Is being in love really so scary for you? Or do you truly feel nothing?”

“It’s not that. I’m not scared. I just…” He sighed. “I don’t do things like relationships and love. It’s not a part of who I am.”

“Bullshit. There’s nothing stopping you from having those things. It’s only you who’s in the way. You always take whatever the fuck you want, so why not now?”

“Why do you want to be in a relationship with me? We’re married, and I’m sleeping with you. Why do you need more? Are you afraid I’m going to find someone else?”

I scoffed. “Then fucking go find someone else! Because you can’t have me anymore! Not the way you want.”

I started to get up, but he caught my hand and pulled me back.

“Isabella, wait,” he said. “I’m sorry, okay? I don’t know how to do this. I’ve never even seen what a healthy relationship is supposed to look like. I have nothing to offer you. I can’t change who I am or what I do. This isn’t a life for you.”

“And what kind of life is for me? A fake marriage? A cold house I’m trapped in? Being your little fuck toy? I’m not asking you to change who you are. I’m fine with this, and I want to try to make it work. Because why the hell not? What do we have to lose? If you’re not sure how to love me, then maybe I can teach you. Maybe we can both learn something. About each other. About ourselves.”

He opened his mouth and closed it.

I waited, giving him an expectant look.

“You’re right,” he finally said. “I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to lose what we have.”

“A chance. That’s all I want. If it doesn’t work, at least we’ll know that we tried. Do you want the same thing?”

He nodded. “I do.”

“Okay then.” I took a deep breath and settled back in his arms.

Maybe this whole thing wouldn’t work, but we owed it to ourselves to give it a try.

Maybe, just maybe, this time I wouldn’t lose the person I loved like I’d lost my mom and sister. And I wouldn’t end up being just a temporary replacement until something better came along.

When I lifted my head, Sebastian brought his lips down on mine.

I supposed he and I feared the same thing.

That we wouldn’t be good enough.

Or that we simply wouldn’t be enough.

It was time to let go of those fears.

They were only holding us back anyway.



Chapter 33

Isabella

SEBASTIAN WAS SERIOUS about giving us a chance, and I was really glad about it.

We spent more and more time together, and we were actually going out on dates. He always made sure that we'd be safe, and then he'd just take me somewhere nice.

A walk in the park at night.

A sunset on the beach, even if we had to use his private plane to get there.

A coffee in our favorite cafes. First mine, then his.

Then our favorite restaurants.

We even went to see a movie and almost ended up having sex in the middle of the theater.

I wanted to go to a nightclub next, but Sebastian still had his men looking for a safe place.

It was amazing to have so many options and be free to do almost anything I wanted. Well, Sebastian's, ehm, job was getting in the way a little, but so far, it wasn't too much of a trouble.

I could get used to this life, and I was beginning to understand why he didn't want to give it up. Okay, it wasn't all just about the perks, but I was ready to find out more about the things he did and about him.

He was still keeping most of the details about his business secret, but we'd have to talk about it eventually.

When Sebastian took me to a beautiful restaurant at the top of a building, I couldn't stop admiring the view of the city.

The sun was just going down and disappearing behind the buildings, and I took another sip of my wine.

"I love this," I said as I lifted my phone to take a photo of the view.

Sebastian had gifted the phone to me two days ago, and I was sure he wouldn't have done that if he didn't trust me.

I could easily use the phone against him.

Or maybe not.

It was possible he'd set up some kind of security measures so that his men would be alerted first if I tried something.

But I didn't want to think about that, because I didn't want to do anything that would hurt him.

Hell, I could've slipped away from him and his guards for about a hundred times already.

But I hadn't.

Because I trusted him.

Because I believed in him.

In us.

"Would you like to dance?" Sebastian asked when soft music started playing.

“Sure, but give me a moment to freshen up.” I got to my feet.

His lips spread into a smile. “I’ll be waiting.”

I headed to the bathroom.

Just as I was reapplying my red lipstick, I heard the door open. I glanced up.

A dark-haired man stood in the doorway, his dark eyes dangerously narrowed at me.

I stuffed my lipstick in my purse and spun around.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me,” the man said. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

Yeah, I somehow doubted that.

“I’m Detective Sargetti.”

A gasp escaped my throat, but I quickly wiped all emotion off my face.

Just because he was here didn’t mean a thing. He didn’t have anything on Sebastian, or he would’ve already had him arrested.

Sargetti must’ve figured out Sebastian and I were hanging out a lot, and he wanted to find out who I was, if he didn’t know already. He probably thought intimidating me was way easier than intimidating Sebastian.

“You’re Isabella, right?” he asked.

But I could see it in his eyes that he already knew the answer.

“What do you want from me?” I eyed him carefully.

“Just to talk to you. The man you’re with... Your husband. He’s not a good person, and I think you know that too. Judging by the date on your marriage certificate, I’d say you’re the girl he kidnapped from that motel. I understand that you’re afraid of him and that he threatened to do terrible things to you and to the ones you love. But I’m here now. You can tell me everything. I’ll get you out of here without anyone knowing,

including your husband. I'll put you in witness protection, and you'll be safe."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Oh, I think you do. Your husband thinks he's invincible and that he can get away with just about anything, but that's not true. He's probably told you that you can't trust the cops and that if you talk, he's going to find out and make you pay. But it's a lie. We can protect you. We'll give you a new identity, and he'll never be able to find you. I give you my word. All you have to do is give me something so I can put him in prison for the rest of his life."

"Excuse me, but I have to go. I have nothing to say to you." I tried to get past him, but he caught me by the arm and pulled me to him.

I felt the barrel of a gun pressing against the side of my head.

"Let me go!" I said, my heart jumping into my throat. "You're a detective. You're supposed to be one of the good guys!"

"And you're protecting a criminal!" he hissed. "That makes you as bad as him!"

"What are you going to do?" I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

If Sargetti hated Sebastian so much, then what if he just pulled the trigger?

What if he thought that my death was exactly what was needed to push Sebastian over the edge?

To force him to make a mistake?

But was it worth it for Sargetti to ruin his own life?

Unless he planned to blame my death on Sebastian or say it had been an accident.

"He'll come for you," Sargetti said, dragging me with him to the door.

"Why are you doing this?"

“Someone has to stop that son of a bitch.”

“Why? What do you think he did to you?” I couldn’t find a way to free myself as Sargetti pulled me into the hallway.

Sebastian was going to wonder where I was.

He was going to come check.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to do it or not. If Sargetti caught him by surprise...

“Do you know how many people died just so he could be where he is today?” Sargetti shouted into my ear, making me flinch.

I didn’t say anything.

He could have something on him and record everything I said. Maybe it was a trap. If I didn’t want to talk willingly, then maybe he expected me to do it under duress.

“Let go of her!” Sebastian had his gun out and pointed at Sargetti, and me, as soon as he rounded the corner.

I supposed it was just impossible to surprise him.

“Confess! Confess everything that you did. Tell me what you really are, and I’ll let her go,” Sargetti said.

There definitely was some kind of recording device somewhere.

“Let. Her. Go.” Sebastian’s face was serious, his eyes flashing with a warning and a promise of violence.

“Stop hiding who you really are,” Sargetti spat out. “I know what kind of lowlife trash you really are. That’s what you’ve always been. You ruined this pretty, innocent girl too. You kidnapped her and warped her mind, so she’s even willing to protect you. What kind of monster are you?”

“You will be a monster if you don’t let me go,” I said to Sargetti.

Sebastian’s gaze briefly met mine.

“No,” Sargetti said. “Whatever I need to do to expose the real monster here, I’ll do it. It’s my destiny. I wish there was

another way, but there's not."

"Let her go, and then we can discuss this," Sebastian said.

"You won't trick me!" Sargetti jabbed the gun harder into my head. "Why don't we start from the beginning? You're the reason why my partner is dead!"

"What?" Confusion flitted across Sebastian's face.

"She was there. At the hospital. When you were a child. She wanted to save you from your mother, so she went looking for your father in hopes that he would be able to take you in."

Sebastian stared at him in shock.

"But you see, your father was trash, just like you. When he saw her, he thought she came for him and his little drug operation. So he killed her."

"How is any of that Sebastian's fault?" I asked, not following his logic at all. "He was just a kid! A kid who needed help!"

If anyone was to blame here, it was Sebastian's father. Sargetti should've gone after him.

"What happened with my father?" Sebastian asked.

"The bastard ran away. Mexico, probably. Or who knows? No one's ever been able to track him down. I watched you grow, and I know you're exactly like him. You've killed people. You've destroyed lives. If I can't take him down, I'll destroy you, his spawn. Now put your gun down or your pretty wife gets a bullet."

"All right," Sebastian said.

"No!" I yelled. "Don't!"

Sargetti was crazy.

He could kill Sebastian.

I didn't want that to happen.

"Let her go and you can have me," Sebastian said. "I'll say whatever you want me to say."

Sargetti's arm slipped away from me, but his gun was still pointed at my head. If I moved, his finger could slip and he could kill me.

Sargetti tossed a pair of cuffs at Sebastian. "Put your gun down and put these on."

Sebastian slowly lowered his gun to the floor, his eyes constantly on Sargetti and me. Then he picked up the cuffs and locked them around his wrists.

"Now let her go," he said.

Sargetti pulled me with him, and then he shoved me to the floor. I fell down, my knees scraping against the cold tiles.

When I looked up, Sargetti was approaching Sebastian with his gun pointed at him.

"Maybe I should just kill you. So your lawyers can't get you out," Sargetti said. "The world would thank me and it would be worth it, even if it was the last thing I did."

He aimed at Sebastian's head, and I screamed.

Sargetti jerked back a little, probably distracted by my scream.

Sebastian moved. Even with his hands cuffed, he jumped on Sargetti, wrestling the gun out of his hand.

Sargetti ended up on the floor, and Sebastian pointed the gun at him.

"It's you who should die," Sebastian said through his teeth.

"No! Wait!" I pushed myself up and raced toward him. "No! Sebastian, don't!"

"What are you waiting for, boy?" Sargetti grinned. "Do it."

"Don't. Please," I said. "We're going to call the cops and tie him up. Let them take care of him."

If he killed Sargetti now, we'd have a huge problem. He had to be aware of that.

"Do it, you piece of shit!" Sargetti yelled.

“Call my guards,” Sebastian said to me. “We’ll call the cops after that. We don’t want him to escape.”

I nodded.

Too bad the guards had stayed downstairs and hadn’t expected our enemy would be able to sneak inside. But then again, no one could’ve known what Sargetti had planned to pull.

My shoulders were still tense, and I knew I wouldn’t relax until Sargetti was far, far away from us.



Chapter 34

Sebastian

NOT PUTTING A BULLET in Sargetti had to be one of the hardest things I'd ever done. But the look on Isabella's face was everything I needed to stop myself from making a huge mistake.

Because killing Sargetti would've been a mistake.

There was no doubt about that.

A dead detective wasn't the same as a dead drug dealer or a dead thief.

Calling the cops and handing the detective over to them was the right thing to do, and not just because it made me look perfectly innocent in everyone's eyes.

Sargetti had been recording our conversation, and after Isabella and I listened it over, we'd decided it was only incriminating the detective and not me. I couldn't believe he'd blamed me for something I'd had no control over at all.

But he'd been desperate and angry. And he'd had to direct his anger somewhere or it would've driven him crazy.

I was just the easiest and closest target.

"Are you okay?" Isabella asked, looking at me with her big, concerned eyes.

"I should be the one asking you that." I was impressed that she hadn't been completely freaking out, even with a gun pointed at her head.

"Why?" She cocked her head at me. "You're allowed not to be okay too."

I watched her for a few long moments, and I knew there was something I had to do that couldn't wait.

I'd been wrong.

Not putting a bullet in Sargetti was easy compared to what I was about to do.

"You're free to go," I said.

She blinked at me, as if she couldn't understand what I was saying. "What do you mean?"

"I'm letting you go. You deserve better than all this."

"Oh, come on. We've been through that before. You deserve nice things too. Don't let Sargetti get in your head."

"It's not about Sargetti. It's everything. We tried and it didn't work. We're not a good match. If something happened to you because of me, I'd never forgive myself. If Sargetti figured it out, then someone else will too. I can't give you everything you need and deserve without putting your life in danger."

It was a lie.

Partly, anyway.

What she was feeling for me wasn't real.

It couldn't be.

She'd been through a lot of trauma because of what I'd done to her. I'd kidnapped her and held her captive. If she

stayed with me, she was never even going to know the truth.

That was why I had to let her go.

For her own good.

Once she was truly free, away from me, she'd be able to move on.

It might hurt her now, but she'd get over it.

She was strong.

She'd be fine.

“Can we postpone this conversation for some other time? A lot has happened today, and we're just not able to think clearly,” she said.

“No. My mind is clear. Crystal clear.”

She sighed. “Why are you doing this to me again? Why are you doing it to yourself? You know it's not about my safety. I was fine. Yes, Sargetti slipped through, but that doesn't mean someone else will.”

I pulled out my wallet and handed her one of my credit cards. “Take this. There's enough money on it for you to buy whatever you want. I'll call a taxi for you, and you'll go home.”

“But I don't want to go to my apartment. My home is with you.” She reached out for me.

“It's not. It never will be.” I walked away from her, because if I didn't, I would probably change my mind.

That weird sensation in my chest was back again.

Only, this time it hurt a thousand times worse.

I barely registered getting in the car, and when I got back to my empty, cold room, I let out a roar of anger.

With a swipe of my hand, I brought everything on my nightstand crashing to the floor.

I ripped the sheets off the bed.

I punched a hole through the closet door.

And when I sat down on the floor, looking at the blood on my knuckles, I knew I'd made the right decision, even if it destroyed me.

Isabella's place would never be with a man like me.



Chapter 35

Isabella

I HATED HIM.

I hated him so much that I'd ripped all my paintings into pieces.

Being back in my old apartment didn't fill me with joy. Yeah, I was free, but I missed him, and pretty much everything reminded me of him or the things we'd done together.

I tried painting, but I didn't have any inspiration. The world had lost its color, and now everything was just gray.

I should be glad.

I should celebrate that I'd gotten away from him alive and more or less fine.

But I couldn't do it.

Moving on sounded completely impossible. But I'd have to do it eventually, wouldn't I? What choice did I have?

Sebastian certainly hadn't left me any.

I needed something to occupy my mind so I wouldn't think about him, but nothing was interesting or made me happy.

It was as if I'd fallen through a black hole and couldn't find my way out.

It was stupid.

Sebastian probably didn't even think about me. He'd gotten rid of me so easily. I'd been a fool. He must've been toying with me after all.

But why hadn't he killed me then?

I knew some stuff that could hurt him if I talked to someone.

A part of me wanted to go to the cops, just to get a little bit of revenge, even if the whole thing would only be a small inconvenience for him.

But that wasn't how I was going to forget about him, was it?

I needed to find a way to let go.

I just didn't know how to do it yet.



Isabella

WEEKS HAD GONE BY, but I wasn't getting any better. I'd gotten a job as a waitress, but even when I got home exhausted, I still thought about him.

He must've found someone better than me by now. I'd never be anyone's first and only choice.

Closing my eyes, I leaned my head against my pillow.

There was a tiny spark of hope inside me that wanted me to believe that Sebastian missed me too and hadn't moved on either.

That he was pining for me.

Maybe I should extinguish that spark for good, and I had an idea on how to do it.

Sebastian was supposed to attend a business party. I'd found out about it by accident. It was related to the legal part of his business. One of his many fronts, I supposed.

If he had a girlfriend or a new wife, maybe he'd bring her with him. It would only prove that he'd lied when he'd said he couldn't keep me safe.

Or, if he didn't want a serious relationship, he'd hook up with one of the hot women there.

My plan was entirely stupid, but I knew I had to do it, so I got dressed and went out.

Maybe I'd finally get some closure that I desperately needed.

I found the restaurant where the party was held, and I immediately spotted Sebastian's guards close by.

Getting inside shouldn't be a problem, since it wasn't a private party and it was open to everyone, and anyone wearing formal attire could get in.

My black dress was good enough because the guy at the door didn't even bat an eyelash when I passed him by. I supposed no one really wanted to crash boring business parties.

Now I needed to make sure Sebastian didn't see me, but I had to be able to see him. I found a table in the corner of the room.

A group of people was in the way, which was good because it would be harder for Sebastian to spot me, especially when he didn't expect to see me here.

If he figured me out anyway, I'd come up with some stupid excuse or just tell him it was none of his fucking business what I did.

I craned my neck and took a quick peek through the crowd.

The moment I saw *him*, a shot of electricity rushed through me.

Dammit.

I still felt about him the way I had weeks ago.

And he was still his annoying, handsome self.

But there were no women with him. I had to duck my head so he wouldn't see me. A beautiful blonde made her way to him, swaying her hips.

I watched them as she leaned closer to him, whispering something to him, her hand lowering to his leg.

I gritted my teeth so hard I thought they might crack.

But Sebastian caught her hand and pushed it away. He said something to her, and she left with an angry expression on her face.

She wasn't his type.

That was all.

But a few moments later, another woman showed up. She wasn't all over him, and she seemed somewhat nice and innocent.

I waited for him to make a move, but he didn't.

She left too.

He stared down at his glass, his face serious. When some guy approached him and greeted him, Sebastian smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Shit.

Once he headed for the exit, I followed him as carefully as I could.

I didn't think he'd seen me.

It was dark outside when we got onto the street. A woman in a short, tight pink dress strolled toward him.

"Hey, handsome," she said. "Want to have some fun?"

"Leave me the fuck alone," he snapped.

"Asshole!" she shouted after him.

I watched him as he went to his car, and then he drove away.

Huh.

Maybe he wasn't happy either.

But that didn't mean it was because of me.

Something else could've happened.

I let out a groan.

I was never really going to be free of him, was I?



Chapter 36

Sebastian

SHE WASN'T HAPPY.

Every time Vico gave me a report on what Isabella was doing, it didn't sound like she was fine. The few photos of her that I'd seen horrified me.

She never smiled in any of them. Her eyes weren't full of joy anymore. It was as if she didn't give a damn, and she only moved through life because she had to.

She could have anything she wanted, but she never even touched the card I'd given her. Instead, she had a job that she didn't seem to like.

Why Isabella?

Why?

What had I done?

I couldn't say that I was happy either. Not that it mattered what I felt like.

But I couldn't stop thinking about her. I thought that, after some time, I'd be able to get back to the way I'd been before I met her.

But it was impossible.

No woman could capture my attention or make me want her. Even one-night stands were out of the question. I didn't want to touch someone else and pretend that it was her.

And it wasn't just sex that I missed.

Far from it.

I missed everything about her.

I missed her.

It was lonely without her. And cold without her fire.

I'd made a mistake again. One that was hard to fix.

But if there was one thing I was sure of now, it was that I loved her.

I loved her more than I could've possibly imagined.

And I'd never thought she'd love me back.

Not truly.

But maybe she did.

If only I could go back and change everything.



Chapter 37

Isabella

I WAS ABOUT TO CLOSE the curtains when I spotted someone standing outside and looking up at my window.

Sebastian.

It was definitely him, but I had to be hallucinating because there was no reason for him to be here. I blinked, but he didn't disappear.

He was real.

What was he doing here?

I pulled away from the window, unsure what to do.

A few moments later, my doorbell rang. My pulse sped up, and I looked down at myself.

Shit! I was wearing a pair of old pants and an old sweater, and I probably looked like a mess.

But I couldn't have known I'd be having a guest, and I didn't even know why he was here. Maybe he'd finally come

to take his credit card back.

I ran my fingers through my hair and took a deep breath. When I opened the door, my heart was thudding loudly in my chest.

“Hey,” Sebastian said softly, his hands in the pockets of his black leather jacket that looked so damn good on him. “Can I come in?”

“Um, yeah.” I stepped away from the door, letting him inside.

He looked around, taking in every little detail.

“What do you want?” I crossed my arms.

His credit card was in my wallet, so I’d have to go find it.

“I have a gift for you,” he said.

My eyebrows shot up. “I don’t need any gifts from you.”

“I know, but I want you to have this.” He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and offered it to me.

I furrowed my brow. “What is that?”

“Remember that place you mentioned? The one where you wanted to have your little gallery? I got it for you.”

My jaw hit the floor.

“I thought you’d have some of your paintings on the walls,” he said before I could ask him what the hell he was doing.

“Well, I did, but I tore them all down. Someone killed my joy and inspiration. It’s just not the same anymore.”

“Maybe focusing on your gallery will help.” He offered me a small smile.

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

“Because I made a mistake. The truth is, I can’t live without you. I love you, Isabella.” He reached for my hand and took it in his. “I’ve always loved you, even when I didn’t know what it was and when I refused to believe it.”

I just stared at him, my mouth opening, but words weren't coming out.

"I know it's too late, and it's taken me ages to figure this out," he said, caressing my hand. "Believe me, I tried denying how I felt about you over and over again. I just thought that there was no way you'd want me. But maybe you did. Maybe you still do."

"Of course I do, you idiot." Tears filled the corners of my eyes as I smacked him lightly on the shoulder. "But you hurt me so much. I don't know if I can do this again. If I give you a second chance, will you pull the same shit eventually and send me away?"

"I'm sorry, but I needed to be sure. You were my prisoner. If I hadn't let you go, I would've never known if it was all real or not."

"Well, it *is* real, because I love you too."

His eyes widened slightly, as if he couldn't believe what I'd said. "I just want you to be happy, whether it's with me or without me. It's up to you."

I threw myself at him, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck. Just breathing in his scent made me feel a tiny bit better.

When I looked into his eyes, they were brimming with emotion. His lips were so close to mine, and then we couldn't hold back anymore.

Our lips came together as if they'd never parted. Our kiss was hungry and desperate, and I melted into it.

Sebastian slipped the keys back into his pocket, and his hands roamed up and down my back. The fire inside me ignited in an instant.

"Are you sure?" he whispered between the kisses.

"Yeah." I grasped the lapels of his jacket and tugged him to my bedroom.

Nothing else mattered anymore.

We basically ripped each other's clothes off, and when Sebastian laid me on the bed and lowered his mouth to my breast, I was burning up already.

He toyed with my nipples, pinching and sucking, and then he went lower, his tongue tracing a path down my stomach.

I spread my legs wide for him, and his fingers parted my folds, slipping into my wetness as his mouth glided over my inner thigh.

He flattened his tongue, sliding it over my opening, and I arched my back.

Always needing more.

When his tongue danced across my slit, his fingers pumped into me. His tongue found its way to my clit, and he licked and sucked until I was crying out with every touch.

It didn't take him long to take me over the edge, and I let out a loud moan.

He didn't wait for me to recover. Instead, he flipped me onto my stomach, catching my wrists and pinning them behind me.

My hips were pushed up, and he rubbed his hard cock against my ass.

I groaned, my arousal hitting me again with even more force than before.

"What do you want?" he asked, giving my bottom a few quick, sharp smacks, which only added to the fire burning inside me.

His thickness slid up and down my ass crack.

"I asked you a question." He slapped my ass again.

"Fuck me, Sebastian," I choked out. "Please fuck me."

He pushed himself inside me, inch by inch, and then he almost pulled out all the way before shoving himself back inside me.

I cried out as he stretched me, burying himself deep inside me as his thrusts became harder and faster. His hips slammed into me, and he smacked my ass a few times as he fucked me.

The tension between my legs was closer and closer to the breaking point as he kept thrusting into me, his grip on my wrists tightening.

I'd missed him so damn much.

I'd missed this too.

It was like everything was back right where it should be.

Including his cock.

He gripped my hair, tugging my head back as he rammed into me.

"Say you're only mine," he said.

"I'm only yours," I breathed, a moment before my release shattered me.

My body quivered with pleasure as he came inside me with a grunt.

His body pressed against mine, enveloping me.

At that moment, I felt happy again.

Content.

Satisfied.

Sebastian rolled off me and pulled me into his arms. His lips collided with mine.

"I still can't believe this is real," he said softly.

"It better be."

Because there was absolutely nothing I wanted more than him.

And now I could finally have him.

He was mine.

Only mine.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not.

“Wait, are we still married?” I asked.

“Yeah, we are.”

“Good.” I nestled into his arms.

Being married wasn't so terrible after all.



Epilogue

Isabella

EVEN SIX YEARS LATER, I was glad about the choice I'd made. Sebastian and I had made our relationship work, especially once we'd let go of the things that had been holding us back.

Now I knew that he wasn't going to leave me.

Ever.

Not if he could do anything about it.

And we were happier than ever.

I locked the door of my little art gallery.

It was a huge success. People seemed to like something about its simplicity. It just had something. A special charm that big galleries didn't have.

With a smile on my face, I got in the car. Getting back home—to the house Sebastian and I had bought about two years ago—was a little bit complicated, but it was absolutely worth it.

To make sure that we were safe, I had to take a longer route back and switch to another car with the help of Sebastian's men.

Once I parked the car in the small parking lot behind the house, I barely had enough time to get out before the front door opened.

Sebastian was in the doorway with a smile on his face as six kids rushed to greet me. After I hugged and kissed each one of them, they ran back to the house.

We'd had to make a few adjustments so that the kids wouldn't find out about Sebastian's crime empire. The whole neighborhood belonged to us, and our guards were our neighbors.

Sebastian had used my father's connections to secure his rule and ensure that no one would dare attack him.

We also had a very good system that would alert us of any potential trouble, but the past few years had been super calm and I hoped that wouldn't change.

"Hey," I said to Sebastian, and he pressed his lips against mine.

"How was today?" he asked.

"Wonderful. I wish you could've been there with me."

"We'll have to wait for next time. If the nanny hadn't canceled—"

"Yeah, I know. Don't worry about it." I grinned. "It's not like you haven't been there with me plenty of times before."

"There's something I have to ask you," he said.

"What?"

"Vico found another kid. I think we have space for another one. But if you think six is already plenty—"

"Of course there's enough space." I wound my arms around him.

We were fostering six kids already, and it was working out just fine. We could handle one more. It was better for the kid to be with us than on the streets.

Sebastian kissed me again. “Okay. Then we’ll set everything up. But I have to warn you. The boy reminds me of me. He might be a handful.”

“Nonsense. We’ll figure it out.”

“I’ve never thought we could have it all. All this,” he said. “Especially considering who I am.”

“I know. Me either. But it’s you who’s made this possible, and if you were someone else, none of this would’ve happened. You just know how to get through to the kids who need our help.”

“I guess. And you know how to show them what love is.”

“You know it too.” I brushed my lips against his again. “I love you, Sebastian.”

“I love you too.” His eyes sparkled with happiness.

We went inside. Sebastian’s arm was around me, and as we entered a full living room that was brimming with voices and happy faces, I knew that I finally had a family of my own.

I was no longer afraid of anything.

And when Sebastian’s gaze met mine, I knew that I was his one and only.

Now we finally both knew what it was like to be in love and not have it taken away from us.

I pressed myself close to him.

Our love would last forever.

I was sure of it.



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