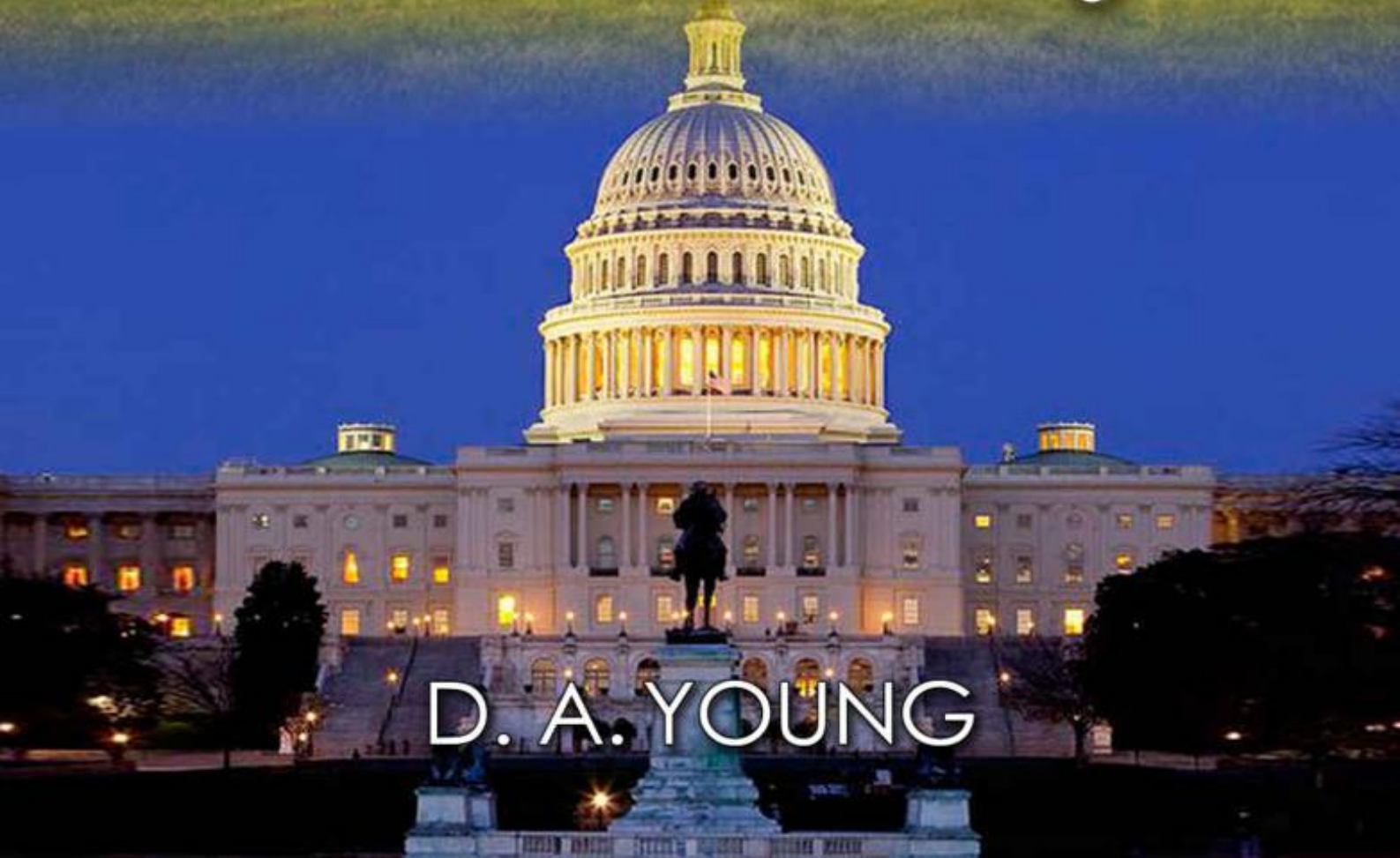




PERFECTLY *Imperfect*  
*Whiskey Row Series*



D. A. YOUNG

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

*TITLE PAGE*

*COPYRIGHT PAGE*

*PLAYLIST PAGE*

*AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

*PROLOGUE*

*CHAPTER ONE*

*CHAPTER TWO*

*CHAPTER THREE*

*CHAPTER FOUR*

*CHAPTER FIVE*

*CHAPTER SIX*

*CHAPTER SEVEN*

*CHAPTER EIGHT*

*CHAPTER NINE*

*CHAPTER TEN*

*CHAPTER ELEVEN*

*CHAPTER TWELVE*

*CHAPTER THIRTEEN*

*CHAPTER FOURTEEN*

*CHAPTER FIFTEEN*

*CHAPTER SIXTEEN*

*CHAPTER SEVENTEEN*

*CHAPTER EIGHTEEN*

*CHAPTER NINETEEN*

*CHAPTER TWENTY*

*CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE*

*CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO*

*CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE*

*CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR*

*CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE*

*CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX*

*CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN*

*CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT*

*EPILOGUE*

*PERFECTLY IMPERFECT*

*BY*

*D. A. YOUNG*

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## **PERFECTLY IMPERFECT PLAYLIST**

*TAKE ON ME – A-HA*

*LOST WITHOUT U – ROBIN THICKE*

*BY YOUR SIDE – SADE*

*TONIGHT YOU'RE PERFECT – NEW POLITICS*

*WE BELONG TOGETHER – MARIAH CAREY*

*ALL AROUND THE WORLD – LISA STANSFIELD*

*AT YOUR BEST (YOU ARE LOVE) – AALIYAH*

*SPEAKERS – SAM HUNT*

*SHOTS – IMAGINE DRAGONS*

*ANSWERING SERVICE – GERALD LEVERT (HEAVY D REMIX)*

*MIRRORS – JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE*

*FAME – SANTIGOLD*

*IRIS – THE GOO GOO DOLLS*

*I CHOOSE YOU – SARAH BAREILLES*

*HOW TO LOVE – LIL WAYNE*

*I LIVED – ONE REPUBLIC*

*PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME – PINK*

*SAY YOU SAY ME – LIONEL RICHIE*

*SWEATER WEATHER – THE NEIGHBORHOOD*

*RIDE – TWENTY-ONE PILOTS*

*THROUGH THE FIRE – CHAKA KHAN*

*NEVER STOP – SAFETYSUIT*

### **AUTHOR'S NOTES**

*Thank you very much for taking the time to read my work. I'm a firm believer in God, doing my best, love, good times, family, friends, romance, HAWT (no that's not a typo) sex, laughter, details and sentence enhancers. All of which I like to share in my writing. If you found that declaration to be offensive, you should probably pass on my books. If you didn't, then enjoy and happy reading!*

*I'd love to hear your thoughts and opinions. Please email me at [day\\_one2015@outlook.com](mailto:day_one2015@outlook.com)*

*To Patrice Harrison and Karen Kunz (or my Glam Squad as I like to think of you ladies ☺ ) there are no words to truly express how incredibly thankful I am for all that you do for me. Thank you very much for sharing your wonderful talents, time and patience with me.*

*To my family and friends, thank you so much for all of your love, support, and encouragement! For always being there for me and supporting my vision. I'm forever indebted and my love for you has no limits.*

*Sincerely,*

*D. A. Young*

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<https://www.facebook.com/D-A-Young-1695356880704195/>

## **BOOKS by D. A. YOUNG**

### **WHISKEY ROW SERIES**

- SWEET OBSESSION
- NEW BEGINNINGS
- THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS
- PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

### **BAYMOOR SERIES**

- THE FARMER & THE BELLE

## Whiskey Row Roster

### **The Sullivans:**

**Patrick and Moira Sullivan:** Parents of Jack, Darby, and Casey Sullivan. Both deceased by way of murder/suicide

- **Jackson (Jack) Sullivan:** Oldest son of Patrick and Moira
  - Married to **Noelle Kramer**
  - Children: Ruby Aileen and Jackson Conall, Jr.
- **Darby Sullivan:** Middle son of Patrick and Moira
  - Married to **Avery Monroe**
  - Children: DJ (Darby, Jr.) Sullivan (Adopted nephew, son of deceased half-brother Nate Sullivan)
- **Casey Sullivan:** Youngest son of Patrick and Moira
  - Girlfriend: **Sidra Barton**

### **The Romankovs:**

**Alexei and Vivienne Romankov:** Best friends of Moira Sullivan and surrogate parents to the Sullivan brothers

- **Katerina (Kat) Romankov:** Daughter and only child of Alexei and Vivienne
  - **Holton Brammer:** Object of Kat's affection and best friend of the Sullivan brothers

### **The Supporting Cast:**

- **Ian Rusnik:** Best friend of Moira Sullivan and The Romankovs, godfather of Noelle
- **Guiles (Guy) Keetoowah-Marquez:** Best friend of the Sullivan brothers, affectionately known as Pippy to his friends
- **Jenny Colloway:** Maternal aunt of DJ Sullivan
- **Odell Pitman:** Jenny's On again/off again boyfriend
- **Dominick Harris:** Indie Rockstar, Sidra Barton's employer



- **Dr. Laura Klaus:** Sullivan family psychiatrist
- **Cruz Merada:** Associate of Holton Brammer and Alexei Romankov

## **Prologue**

*Christmas Eve, 1990*

*Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York*

*It was Donat “Lucky” Zabrosky’s first day on the job with Elite Fleet car service, and it was going to shit. Last week he’d gotten out of prison after doing a five-year stint for selling marijuana, and Lucky had no intentions of going back. It was the straight and narrow for him now, just like he’d sworn to his Grandma Joasia.*

*Apparently, she’d been convinced of his good intentions because she persuaded his Uncle Martyn to find something for him to do at his place of business. Lucky was now a working stiff like everyone else contributing to society. The pay was fucked, and he had to wear a suit that covered all his tattoos. His supervisor Antonio, or ‘The Douche’ as Lucky had christened him, hated his guts and was adamant about not wanting to hire an ex-con. In the end, it came down to Martyn reminding ‘The Douche’ who signed his paychecks.*

*For his first pickup, he’d been given an address and was told to arrive by noon. Lucky was also told that no matter how long it took the client to come out, he was to haul ass to the airport and make sure the man didn’t miss his one-thirty flight. If the*

man missed it, 'The Douche' threatened that Lucky would be out of a job. He'd been standing on the sidewalk, waiting anxiously next to the sleek black town car, outside of a brownstone, for the last fifteen minutes.

With a large population of blacks, Africans, and Latinos, this area was a far cry from his colorless neighborhood in New Jersey. Tall and pasty white, he stuck out like a sore thumb but tried to appear unconcerned as the locals surveyed him with amusement. Clearly, he was failing miserably from the way they laughed and joked about the discomfort he couldn't hide. So he gave up and instead focused on the brownstone as Christmas rap and Latin music blared from mom and pop shops around the neighborhood.

From outside, he could hear an argument escalating to epic proportions between a man and woman inside of the brownstone.

**Woman:** You always have to go! Why can't you realize we're just as important too?!

**Man:** I don't need this shit! I come here to fucking get away from it! If I wanted to hear it, I would have stayed at my house!

Alarmed at the amount of noise they were making, Lucky contemplated calling the police. Judging from the way passersby just shook their heads as they walked past the home, he decided that perhaps this was the norm and tried to relax. The sound of shattering glass from inside along with a woman screaming, "She's your child too!", had him on high alert again. That was followed by, "You bastard! We won't wait for you forever!" He glanced at his watch. Twelve thirty. Okay, still some time.

Lucky jumped when the door was flung open by a tall, beautiful black woman dressed to the nines in a silk dress, fur stole, and lots of sparkling jewelry. Next to her stood a small, well-dressed black girl whom she led to the top step and gently pushed her shoulders down, indicating that she should sit

down. Fluffing up her big curly afro, the woman sternly said, "Don't move from this spot or that'll be your ass, little girl."

Then she went back into the house, and World War III resumed with the woman screaming about the lack of time the man spent at the house and threatening to see other men. The man tried reasoning and pleading with her, but she remained adamant. Lucky glanced down at his watch again and bit his lip nervously. Twelve forty-five. Shit! He really needed this job to work out. He should go get the guy and remind him that he had a flight to catch. That he could fight with this angry broad some other day. With the way she was carrying on, he figured he'd be doing the schmuck a favor. Yup, that's what he would do, Lucky decided as he squared his shoulders and took a step towards the brownstone.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a small voice advised pleasantly.

Wait. What? Lucky looked down and was surprised that he'd been so engrossed with the bullshit going on inside; he'd forgotten the crazy lady had put a child out on her step as if she was a package waiting to be picked up. "Sorry, kid. You say something?"

"I said I wouldn't do that if I were you," the girl repeated slowly, her face expressionless. Lucky took a moment to observe her. She was pretty with her smooth chocolate skin and large almond-shaped eyes framed by long curling lashes. Her features were in perfect proportion to the size of her head, and her black curls were pulled back from her face with a red velvet headband that matched her coat, dress, and shoes. She looked like a perfect little doll, but the look in her eyes said she was wise beyond her years and that he should listen because she could save his ass.

"Okay, kid. If you were me, what would you do?" he challenged with a cocky grin, stepping back to lean against the large sedan. He glanced down at his watch again. 12:50 p.m. Damn.

*Lucky glanced back up to see her assessing him shrewdly.  
“Kid? I ain’t got all day.”*

*Finally, she spoke. “You’re new, so you probably don’t know that when you arrived, you should have fixed a dirty vodka martini with two olives to have waiting for him. Your speakers should be bumping nothing but old school stuff like Al Green. The engine should be kept running because when he’s ready... he’s ready. As soon as this door opens,” she jerked her thumb back towards her front door, “his car door should be opened. Your greeting should be apologetic, something like, “Hello, sir. Sorry for keeping you waiting,” will do.”*

*Lucky gaped at her before scrambling for the back car door. Throwing it open, he jumped inside and saw two small cabinets. The first one he opened was a little fridge and freezer combo. It was filled with cocktail glasses, a shaker, water, and cracked ice. The second cabinet housed different bottles of liquor and condiments, but he didn’t know the first thing about making a goddamn drink! Helplessly, he looked back at the tiny beauty. She was shaking her head at his panicked state. With a long-suffering sigh, she spoke.*

*“If I wasn’t here, you would be so screwed! Get the cocktail shaker and fill it halfway with the cracked ice. You’ll need three ounces of vodka, one ounce of dry vermouth, and a half ounce of olive brine.” She waited for him to gather the bottles before speaking again. “Pour all the ingredients into the shaker and shake well. Strain into one of the chilled cocktail glasses, garnish with two olives, and serve.”*

*Frantically, he did as she instructed, cursing as some of the liquor spilled onto his sleeve. He looked at his watch again. 1:05 p.m. Jesus Freaking Christ! If he lost this job because of some selfish bastard... He would find the motherfucker later and go ape shit on his inconsiderate ass. Finally, the drink was made. He carefully set it on the extended tray, cleaned up his mess, and backed slowly out of the car. Next, he ran to the driver’s side and reached in to turn the car on. Quickly, he found a station playing Roberta Flack. He looked up at her, and she gave him her thumbs up approval. Grinning with*

*relief, he looked back up at her and wiped his sweaty brow.  
“Kid, you’re a lifesaver.”*

*She grinned and flashed that pretty smile again, saying slyly,  
“I’m looking for a little more than a compliment, mister.”*

*Of course she was, he thought with amusement and reached  
into his pocket before pulling out the ten-dollar bill his  
grandmother had given him for lunch that morning. He  
quickly walked up the steps and put it in her outstretched  
hand. Up close, she was even cuter than he originally thought.  
“What’s your name?”*

*She pocketed the money before looking him up and down  
slowly. “Depends...What’d you do time for?”*

*Lucky blinked in surprise. “How the hell did you know I did  
time?”*

*She pointed at his arm. “You look really uncomfortable in your  
getup. Your jacket is way too small, and you’re arms are too  
long. When you hauled ass to get in the car, your sleeves  
raised, and I could see your tattoo on your left wrist. It’s the  
same one and on the same wrist as a couple of guys in the  
neighborhood have. If you’re gonna be in this business, you’ll  
need to be able to know your clients’ needs before they do and  
schmooze them up big time. Doing something like that will  
earn you tips good enough to eventually buy a nicer suit. Plus,  
you keep your back against the car and watch everything  
around you. Being on the inside makes a man paranoid I  
hear.” Ignoring his surprised look, she continued. “Soooo...  
what’d you get popped for?”*

*Impressed by her knowledge, Lucky answered, “Selling  
weed.”*

*She snorted derisively. “Selling weed? I could do that in my  
sleep. Was it your first time or something?”*

*Offended, Lucky retorted defensively, “Hell nah! Pigs changed  
the game and sent in a woman. Shit threw me off my game.”*

*The stare she gave him was a knowing one. “Mister, you got thrown off your game because you wanted to do her. By the time she got to you, she’d already slept with your weak-ass lookout game. That’s how she was able to infiltrate your squad.”*

*Tell him something he didn’t know, Lucky mused, thinking with irritation about the two goons who’d rolled on him. Not knowing how to respond, he said, “Hey, you should really watch your mouth. Little lady like you shouldn’t be speaking about shit-er- stuff like that. It’s inappropriate.”*

*“Inappropriate?! To who? What, because I look all innocent, I’m not supposed to have some smarts? Please, its survival of the fittest in these streets,” she snapped at him. Little Ms. Smarty-pants made a big show of looking around her before discreetly pointing to an older black gentleman sitting on a stoop across the street. Lucky turned to look at the grandfatherly figure, who looked like he wouldn’t hurt a fly, hunched over reading a newspaper. “That man over there is a pimp, and those two young girls dressed in the school girl attire, grabbing chicken wings, are his tricks. He’s got about ten more like them in that house. Underneath that Mr. Rodgers-looking cardigan is a 9mm that he won’t hesitate to use should someone try to run up on him and his.”*

*Lucky could see the slight bulge if he looked hard enough. His teacher continued to school him. “Look over there, at that house three doors down. See those two little boys looking like butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths? They’re runners for their Titi, the neighborhood Cake and Pie Lady. She, along with her two brothers, also happen to run the biggest cockfighting ring in the five boroughs. One works for the mayor’s office and the other is a school principal. That family’s been doing that shit for years and has never gotten popped because of the images they portray. It’s all about perception, my friend. You only see what people want you to see. Got it?”*

*Lucky pulled his eyes away from the angelic-looking boys playing checkers on the porch to the sweet-looking older lady next to them, boxing up cakes next to them, and then back to*

*the little girl speaking to him. "I would never have guessed it. Damn, kiddo, I wish I'd had someone like you on my team when I was in the life."*

*The little girl laughed prettily. "Puuuhlease. If I was in that life, you woulda been working for me. Just not as my lookout!"*

*Lucky scowled but finally gave a smile. She was probably right. He glanced down at his watch. 1:20 p.m. He was so fucking fired! Glancing at the house, he noticed that the couple were no longer yelling at each other. Had they killed each other? He glanced down at her to ask, but she was already looking at him. Her look said for him to wait for it. Right on cue, he heard bedsprings bouncing and then the guy groaning loudly as the woman yelled "Yesss! Yesss! Ooooh, so good!"*

*Lucky felt bad for the kid, who now looked like she wanted the steps to suddenly open up and make her disappear. "Hey, thanks for all the feedback. Maybe I can use it at my next job because I failed the one thing I had to do today, and that was to make sure your dad didn't miss his flight. Judging from the uh...commotion, I don't think he'll be coming out soon."*

*The little girl looked up sharply. "One, don't ever refer to him as my father. Two, what do you mean flight? Do you even know who's in there?"*

*Lucky shook his head slowly, feeling dumber by the minute. "Can't say I do, kiddo. I wasn't given a name. My boss just made me sign non-disclosure and confidentiality agreements stating that I can't talk about the clients with anyone."*

*"Okay, then that should have been your first clue that you were dealing with a big shot and that they don't have flights. These dudes roll in private jets, ya dig?" she grimaced. "I don't know why your boss would want to play you like that, but it certainly explains why you didn't have a clue about anything, rolling up in here, twiddling your thumbs in your ears. You woulda had the biggest complaint waiting on you when you got back to your job. But for now, I suggest you get back in position because here comes Mr. Man."*

*Lucky scrambled down the steps and threw the car door back open. He attempted to fix his suit but kept his eye on the girl. "Kid, you're alright by me. By the way, the name's Donat. My friends call me Lucky, though. What's your name?"*

*She drew herself up proudly and looked him in the eye. "Well, it's not 'Kid'. My name is Sidra."*

*The front door flew open, and Lucky's mouth just about hit the sidewalk when he saw the man who walked out, immediately recognizing him. Holy Shit!!! He watched as the man stooped down close to the little girl and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm sorry I can't stay longer, but I hope you enjoy all the presents I brought you. Be good for your mama, okay?"*

*Sidra nodded and stared at him hard, as if memorizing his features, but otherwise didn't respond. Lucky's heart went out to her. A movement behind her caught his eye. The woman from earlier stood in the doorway, now dressed in a short silk robe. 'Sid the Kid' looked just like her, so he knew when she grew up, she would be just as beautiful, if not more so. Hopefully, her eyes and mouth wouldn't hold the bitterness and sadness that her mother's did as she stared at the man and her daughter.*

*Her eyes met Lucky's for a brief moment, and he could see the heartbreak in them. She blinked, and it was replaced with defiance. "Come on back inside, baby. We don't want to be late for granny's party."*

*The man raised his head and locked eyes with the woman again. Although Lucky didn't hear any words being exchanged, he knew they had played this scene out a thousand times before and would do it a thousand times more before 'Sid the Kid' was grown. Finally, with one last kiss on Sid's forehead, he turned and hurried down the steps and she went back inside the house, leaving the door open for Sidra to follow.*



*As the man approached the car, Lucky was ready. "Hello, sir. Sorry for keeping you waiting."*

*Grunting, the man ignored him and slid into the vehicle. Lucky shut the door behind him. Glancing back up at Sidra, he said "Thanks for everything, 'Sid the Kid'! Hopefully, I'll see you around."*

*She grinned, pleased with his nickname for her. "For sure, Lucky. Hopefully, your boss gets fired soon." Sidra glanced back at the house before whispering loudly, "He sounds like a real d-i-c-k!"*

*Lucky laughed out loud because she didn't even know the half of it. "You got that right, Sid. You got that right."*

*Sidra refused to look back at the passenger section of the car, knowing that HE would be looking at her as the car pulled away. She refused to give him the satisfaction of showing that she felt anything for him. Thanks to him, her mama would be a wreck at the family gathering tonight. It would be up to Sidra to shine brightly, be more charming, sing and talk louder so that she would draw attention away from her mama. It was a trick she used because she knew tonight the gossipy busybodies from other branches of the family would be whispering in corners as they took in her mama's sad state.*

*With a sigh of resignation, she stood up from the steps, wiped her forehead clean and slowly walked into the house, bracing herself for her mama's mood. After HE visited, Lena was always very emotional. She could be very clingy with Sidra, smothering her to death with affection or highly irritated and nothing Sidra did or said could make it right. This would go on for days, and just when things would start to go back to normal, HE would show up again, and the sick pattern would start all over again.*

*She was exhausted already, thinking about the big performance she would have to put on tonight and just wanted to stay home. Her cousins would accuse her of being an attention hog, talk smack about her, and then refuse to play with her. What should have been the most wonderful time of*

*the year had turned to crap for her as usual, and there wasn't a darn thing she could do about it.*

## **Chapter One**

*Washington D.C.*

*Present...*

Casey Sullivan rolled over with his arm flung out in an attempt to pull his woman closer to him, but instead of her lithe, warm body, he got nothing because her side of the bed was empty. Slowly, he opened his eyes as the dawn's early light filled his bedroom. The aroma of his favorite coffee, pecan praline, wafted through his home, and he could hear the shower running. With a yawn, he sat up and looked around, wondering why she was up so early. Casey grinned and shook his head at the scene before him. There were bright articles of clothing and shoes scattered everywhere, as well as his woman's deejaying equipment. He remembered when he bought the condo and paid a pretty penny to have it designed in a sleek, minimal design because he didn't like clutter. That seemed like a lifetime ago before he met the whirling dervish that was Sidra Jane Barton. Now, he couldn't imagine his place without her stuff in it.

He threw the covers back and strolled butt-naked to the bathroom. Casey pushed the door open and was enveloped in the steam from the shower. He relieved himself and flushed, chuckling when she yelped as the water temperature changed and screeched, "So not funny, Sullivan!"

“Sorry, baby,” he called out with a grin as he unscrewed the toothpaste and spread some on his toothbrush. Casey stood in the front of the mirror and brushed his teeth as he enjoyed her silhouette reflection in the shower. He could see that tall, sexy body covered in skin the color of milk chocolate that was so smooth and perfect. She was lean and toned from years of kickboxing but curvy in all the right places. Her breasts were small but plump, fitting his hands perfectly. They were so full, they tipped up and were topped by nipples as dark as blackberries. He couldn’t get enough of them. Her ass was small, round, and full like a tight bubble, and her legs went on for days. The thought of those legs tangled with his as her sweet pussy squeezed him was enough to make his morning wood turn to a concrete block between his legs. Sidra might not know it, but she was about to serve him breakfast early.

He spit and rinsed his mouth out before walking over to the shower and stepping in. “Mornin’, darlin’.”

Sidra was already standing in the corner of the large stall with her hands on her head, clutching her shower cap. Although her eyes sparkled with interest as they slid over his body, her voice was threatening as she warned, “Do not play with me this morning, boy! I have a meeting in two hours, and I have my heart set on rocking this blowout.”

“Uh-huh,” Casey drawled as his eyes roved over her body, and his heart overflowed with love for her. Sidra was sheer perfection, and he never tired of looking at her. From her perfectly-shaped oval face and those large, pretty brown eyes that held flecks of gold to that sassy, sexy mouth that knew him so well, Casey couldn’t get enough of her. “Did you kiss your man this morning?” At her teasing shake of her head, he mock-scowled and crooked his finger, “Get your ass over here, Sid.”

Normally, Sidra would be spewing invitations for a fool to kiss her ass at an order like that, but something about the way her man said it, let her know *she* would be the fool missing out if

she didn't obey, her breath catching as it always did when she looked at him. With his hooded hazel eyes, chiseled jaw covered in five o'clock shadow, deeply tanned skin, and tousled, thick, dirty blonde hair falling across his forehead, Casey was breathtaking, all six foot four inches of him. She moved into his familiar muscular arms and closed her eyes, reveling in his familiar and exciting touch as his firm, supple lips covered hers, and his tongue expertly explored her mouth. Sidra was instantly wet for this man who could set her body on fire with a simple look. Greedily, she pressed her body into his, relishing in the feel of his muscular frame against her body. Her hands slid downward, and she raked her nails across his firm ass. Casey growled into her mouth and bit her bottom lip as his hands moved up, causing her to break the kiss as her hands flew up again to her cap. "I'm not playing with you, babe. You're like Maverick from "Top Gun" requesting the denied fly-by. *Don't you dare take it off!!*"

Casey laughed softly at her. It was true; he loved to get her hair wet and make her crazy enough to pounce on him, and he channeled that psychotic energy into something hotter, deeper, and *wetter*...

"Mmmm, now that's how you say good mornin'," he groaned into her neck, addicted to the feel and *taste* of her as he licked the drops of water from her velvety skin, causing Sidra to clutch at him weakly as his tongue dragged against her sweet spot that really got her going. Casey chuckled as his hands cupped her breasts and plucked her rigid nipples deliciously and she cried out with pleasure. Slowly, he backed her under the water.

"You'd better not, Casey-" Sidra's warning was cut off by his lips as he ruthlessly dominated her mouth and lifted her into his arms, thrusting his swollen cock into her drenched heat. "*Ohhhh, baby!*"

"*That's right, open up for me just like that,*" Casey crooned as he surged into her pussy, and she clenched tightly around him. Sidra mewled in ecstasy, sucking at his bottom lip as his thickness filled her over and over again, torturing her g-spot as she readily received him, the euphoric feeling of an orgasm

building inside of her as she clenched her muscles tightly around him and his face contorted with pleasure. *“My pussy is sooo fuckin’ good! You love it, don’t you, darlin’? Lemme see you take this dick, sugar.”*

*“Casey, I’m gonna cum,”* Sidra moaned desperately into his ear as she frantically moved with him, but he stilled with her words. *“Baby, please!”*

Casey ignored her shrill cry of need as he reached behind her and turned off the shower. Then he carried her out of the stall as she slowly rose and fell on his dick, their ragged breathing filling the room. Casey slowly lifted her off of his glistening shaft and lay her stomach first on the bed. Sidra assumed the position with her ass in the air and wiggled when she didn’t feel him. *“Don’t you dare leave me hanging, Casey! Ohhhh!”*

*“Hush it, Sid, or I’ll give you plenty more of that,”* Casey warned as he leaned down and kissed the hand imprint on her ass before thrusting his cock balls deep inside of her, causing his eyes to roll back ecstatically at the feel of her tight pussy sucking him in. *“You’re lucky we both got shit to do this mornin’ because I feel like givin’ it to you porn style in both holes...”*

He yanked the shower cap and wrap from her head and watched her shoulder-length hair tumble down, before wrapping it in his hand and pulling out of her only to plunge back in deeper and harder, as his thumb rubbed teasingly at her other puckered entrance. Casey tunneled in and out of Sidra’s mons as she clutched frantically at the sheets, loving the way he put it on her. Nothing and no one compared to this woman beneath him, and the urge to watch her lovely face as he fucked her was growing. Casey pulled out and rolled Sidra over, before plunging back in as her long legs circled his waist and trapped him in his own version of heaven. He loved the way her eyes glazed over and grew heavy with desire; she bit her lips trying to fight off her orgasm, and her skin grew damp with perspiration at the effort.

Sidra moaned along with every savage thrust Casey gave as her pussy got slicker and slicker, and he captured a turgid nipple in his mouth. That tongue of his should be outlawed for the way he worked it, swirling around and laving her nipples before drawing them deep into the heat of his warm mouth. *Christ, it was too much!* Sex with this man had her wanting to go to church and testify to how good it was and confess how bad she'd sinned in the same sentence. Her hands slid into his hair and drew his head up, seeking his lips as she felt the pressure of her pending orgasm. *"Baby, cum with me; please don't make me wait! Caaasey!"*

*"Never, love,"* Casey breathed harshly as he too felt it in his balls. Sidra's tongue slid into his mouth, and she clutched him to her tighter and tighter as her sex clamped down on him. He was drawn with her deep into the powerful vortex of their earth-shattering orgasm as they exploded together. *"Holy shiiit!"*

When Sidra could finally catch her breath, she laughed tiredly and bit Casey's shoulder. *"Damn. Now that's how you say good morning!"*

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Sidra wheeled her roll-on luggage out of the bedroom and leaned against the kitchen counter, watching with admiration as Casey reviewed a file. His light gray suit fit him perfectly and was complemented by a white dress shirt and a tan and gray striped tie. His brogues were also light tan, and Sidra thought, not for the first time, that he'd make a great model for Ralph Lauren or J. Crew. He was so clean-cut but sexy at the same time that it drove her crazy. Only Sidra and his family knew how uncomfortable his good looks made him. Women made fools out of themselves to get his attention, and he'd been taunted with the "pretty boy" stigma since he was little. Casey hated any kind of fuss about his looks thanks to his asshole father's verbal abuse and merciless teasing about his appearance.

“What are you reading, babe?” she asked, taking a sip of her coffee and savoring the rich dark brew as she turned the television on to CBS. Ever since they became an official couple, Sidra had given up the frou-frou coffee drinks in lieu of Casey’s darker roast. She found it to be a time saver since due to her busy schedule of touring, Sidra didn’t want to waste a single moment standing in line waiting around for a cup of coffee when she could be snuggled up under him. Plus, he liked to share the cup with her, and they always drank from the same spot.

“I’m just looking over this file again on Nate Sullivan,” Casey said with disgust. “I can’t help it! I still can’t believe he was out there the whole time and never made himself known. But I’m glad he didn’t because he wouldn’t have been welcomed with open arms. Knowin’ Jack, he woulda been run out of town.”

Sidra stiffened at his words and couldn’t help herself from responding in the dead man’s defense. “It’s not really his fault. Did you ever think he might have been kept away deliberately? Judging from how cruel your father was, I don’t think he would have ever allowed his two lives to intersect.”

“Well, what about after Patrick died?” Casey countered coolly, willing himself to not be irritated by her defense of his now deceased half-brother. “All the time he spent bein’ up to no good coulda been used redeemin’ himself, right?”

“Yes, it could have been,” Sidra allowed tightly, “but again, you didn’t know his circumstances or what he was told. It was wrong of him to take advantage of people like he did, but for now, you should probably focus on how exciting it is to have not one but *two* wonderful nephews.”

Casey searched her face. Although she appeared calm, he could sense her agitation in the way she held herself perfectly still and the way her eyes got all squinty. It was her newfound attempt at patience, which he appreciated tremendously. The old Sidra would have flown off the handle to voice her displeasure, but the new and improved Sidra was making an attempt for him and the next generation of Sullivans. There was turbulence lurking in her eyes that she was trying

unsuccessfully to hide. He had the feeling that if he pushed the issue of Nate, the 'old' Sidra would make an appearance and come out swinging. "How about we just agree to disagree on the subject? Besides, you're right, and I do have two wonderful nephews to now spoil silly. If I can ever get close enough to them again."

Relieved, Sidra relaxed and walked over to Casey, offering him the coffee mug as she planted a lingering kiss on his lips. "You know, at first, I was mortified by the whole baby monitor thing, but I think we should now use it to our advantage and keep those over-attentive parents on their toes..."

"Do I even wanna know?" Casey groaned as he took the cup and sipped from their spot before passing it back to her, amusement dancing in his eyes.

Their attention was diverted by a vibrant, older black woman on television passionately arguing with Charlie Rose as Norah O'Donnell and Gayle King's heads swiveled back and forth between them as if watching a tennis match.

*"Listen, Charlie, you can't argue with facts. Men have two heads, but only one brain, and they hardly, if ever, move in sync with each other," she said stubbornly, smoothing her dark feathered shag in place. "Hell, you have a better chance of a leprechaun on a unicorn with a pot of gold in its mouth showing up on your doorstep than THAT happening!"*

*Charlie looked angry by her statement, and his disgusted tone confirmed it. "I hope I speak proudly for all men when I say that I find that kind of rhetoric highly offensive and precariously inflammatory, Ms. Woodrow. What if a man was spouting such idiotic nonsense about women and claiming YOUR sex was the weaker one?"*

*The woman laughed long and hard at the question before daintily wiping her eyes with the tips of her fingernails.*

*"Ooooh boy, that was a good one, Charlie! You keep telling jokes, and I'll keep laughing! But the fact of the matter is, women are far superior to men! We bleed for three to five days every month and GROW people inside of us for nine months and then push said people out of a very, very small opening.*



*Hell, we're so strong that sometimes we don't even need medication to do that. THEN, we make food from our bodies to nourish those people." She smiled superiorly at him and gave Nora and Gail a wink. "A man can't do any of that, let alone take pushing a tiny kidney stone out of his penis! All I'm saying is what I've been saying about men from the beginning. MEN. A-*

Casey turned the television off with an irritated expression and Sidra protested. "Hey, I was watching that!"

"That gibberish is pure bullshit! I understand and respect the first amendment, but sometimes it shouldn't be exercised so recklessly," he said with a scowl. "If she was a man, she wouldn't be allowed to go on and on with that garbage."

"That's funny because Donald Trump gets away with saying outrageous bullshit all the time. What's so wrong with what she was saying?" Sidra smirked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Women *are* the superior sex."

"Well, I definitely think that sex with *you* is far superior to anything else I've ever had," Casey returned as he took the coffee cup out of her hands for another swallow. He gave her a hot look over the rim, loving the way her dark jeans clung to her curves and the coral blazer and white tee that made her skin appear even deeper and richer. "Did I tell you how nice you look, darlin'?"

Sidra smiled at him "Yes, but I never get tired of hearing it, Mr. Sullivan."

"Oh yeah? Even when I say you look especially nice takin' my di-" he taunted, but she quickly placed a manicured finger against his lips as she linked her arm with his, and he grabbed her luggage as they walked towards the front door.

"You need to stop," she scolded, and he grinned before drawing her finger into his mouth and nipping it. "Soooo full of yourself! That's exactly why I didn't do relationships before you. Let a man know how much you're feelin' him, and he thinks he's got all the juice in the relationship."

“So I got the juice, huh?” Casey grinned cockily, as Sidra nibbled on his earlobe.

“Relax yourself, boo. Ruby’s got more in her sippy cup than you do,” she kidded, allowing him to steal another kiss.

“You got everythin’? Don’t forget to call me before you leave the studio. Your flight is at twelve this afternoon. I know how you and *Dick* get in the studio and forget all about the time,” Casey finished sarcastically, frowning at the thought of her boss Dominick Harris and the time she spent with him. It took everything in him not to let Harris know how he really felt about him. If he didn’t respect Sidra and what she did, he would have fucked the fool up a long time ago.

“I won’t forget, babe,” Sidra said happily as he locked the door. The elevator ride down to the lobby was spent exchanging the kind of kisses that had them wishing they could go back upstairs and underneath the sheets.

“Dammit, woman,” Casey said thickly as she subtly stroked him through the fabric of his pants with her back to the camera. “I miss you already.”

“*Mmmm*, is this all for me? I could use another cardio workout,” Sidra whispered suggestively into his ear, loving the way he shuddered when she bit his earlobe and gave him one last caress before the elevator opened. “Don’t forget that after the wedding, Bison Blue is on tour for three weeks. I sent you my itinerary this morning, baby.”

“So, you’re tellin’ me that I need to exercise my right to own your ass before you leave?” Casey drawled, kissing her neck and breathing in her signature apple and floral scent. “Three weeks, huh? Alright then, I’ll have to make do, I guess. I really hate sleepin’ without you, darlin’.”

“I know, and I feel the same way, but we’re only doing major cities in Canada, and then I’m in town for four months,” Sidra smiled winningly at him. Although Casey never voiced any displeasure about their time apart, she tried her best to make it up to him whenever they were together.

Casey walked her to the waiting black town car while the valet retrieved his Jaguar. “Have a nice day, darlin’. I love you and miss you already. Tell the girls hi for me. Safe travels.”

“You too, and I’m going to miss you so much! Go kick some ass in court!” Sidra cheered as she got in the car, and he shut the door and stepped away. The window slid down and her face appeared. Her smile was bright, but her large eyes were troubled. “Casey...”

He made sure his smile remained in place, even though it was killing him. “I know darlin’.”

Then he rapped the top of the car, and it moved away from the curb, but their eyes stayed locked on each other until the car pulled into traffic. With a curse, Casey moved to his own waiting car and got in. He kept telling himself to give her time, but it had been three months since he’d first said it, and she showed no signs of saying it back. Sidra was funny that way. She trusted him with her social security number; he had access to her passwords, apartment, and credit cards, but she would not trust in their love. The next time they’d see each other would be the wedding. They would talk afterward so that he could finally see where they stood. Because Casey wanted certain things, and if Sidra didn’t want those same things, it would be painful but time to move on.

## **Chapter Two**

Nikka Vosta, owner of Vosta Beauty Salon and Spa, nervously watched her longtime client Sidra Barton as she observed her new hairstyle in the handheld mirror, turning it first to the left and then to the right. She had been quiet the entire process as Nikka removed the signature blue and purple streaks from her hair and put layers in her now dark tresses, which was very... *surreal*. Being quiet was so unlike Sidra Barton; that if you knew her, you would know to run and take cover when moments like this occurred.

Clearing her throat, Nikka asked uneasily, “So...do you like it? I did exactly what *you* requested. You said-”

“Nikka, it’s fine. I’m just not used to being without the color, but I like it,” Sidra assured her with a friendly smile. “How’s your family?”

Nikka sighed with relief and then beamed proudly, “Oh, we’re good, girl. Mama and Daddy are on their annual Mexican cruise. My son is going away to college, and-” Nikka took a deep breath and shoved her left hand in Sidra’s face, squealing giddily, “Roland just proposed to me!”

Sidra stared at the pretty diamond engagement ring on her hairstylist’s left hand. She knew for a fact that Nikka and Roland had only been dating for six months but were crazy about each other. Love was definitely in the air. One of her best friend’s, Avery Monroe, was getting married to their other best friend Noelle’s brother-in-law Darby Sullivan in a week. They hadn’t even been a couple for five months, but Avery and Darby were not messing around because according to Avery, “When you know, you *know*”. “Wow...congratulations, Nikka! You’ll have to let me know where you’re registered.”

“Thanks, lady! Enough about me, how are you and that fine-ass man of yours doing? Next, it’ll be you and him right?” Nikka inquired with a friendly smile as she untied the protective cover from Sidra’s neck and shook it off to the side. Then she fluffed the layers of Sidra’s hair while waiting for her response.

Sidra smiled pensively, thinking of the look in Casey’s eyes this morning when she hadn’t returned his words of love. It *killed* her to watch the light in his hazel eyes dim at her lack of response. Casey had said he planned to make her a wife and a mother, but he had yet to meet her parents, so she couldn’t really take him seriously until he did. Just the thought of him meeting Lena made her stomach roll. Her mother was definitely a hard pill to swallow.

“He’s good,” she finally responded, not bothering to address a possible proposal. “Just tying up some loose ends before the

wedding next week. So, I should get going, as I'm keeping the girl's waiting already. What's the damage?"

Nikka told her, and they walked to the front of the salon to settle the bill. They exchanged goodbye hugs, and Sidra caught a cab to *On A Whim's* headquarters and sat back to enjoy the ride through the city. It was a beautiful mid-summer morning in Manhattan but a little too hot for Sidra's liking. There was a time when the hustle and bustle of this city was what she thrived on. But ever since Noelle married Jack Sullivan, and Sidra had been exposed to Whiskey Row, the quaint, picturesque town in Tennessee that both of her best friends now called home, she too had come to think of it that way. It was the one place where all of her private demons and doubts disappeared, not to mention, it was her man's hometown as well. They both worked very hard and loved to spend time with each other and their family and friends whenever they could get the opportunity. There was never a dull moment to be had with all of the different personalities around.

Her phone dinged, and Sidra looked down and noticed it was her reminder that she had her doctor's appointment later this afternoon. She took a selfie and typed Casey a text as she neared her destination.

*Hi babe! Just got my hair done. What do you think? Now meeting the girls for lunch. I miss you and can't wait to see you again!!!*

Sidra added a couple of heart-blowing emojis and sent the text just as the cab pulled up to *On A Whim's* building. She paid the cab driver and stepped out of the cab. Immediately, she noticed Ella Kemp, Avery, and Noelle's office manager, speaking with a tall, muscular, Paul Bunyan-looking guy. With his masculine features and deep blue eyes, Sidra wasn't mad at her for letting him all up in her space. Ella saw her and gave her a nod of greeting before looking not quite at the man, but a point over his shoulder as she spoke. The man never took his intense gaze off of her and appeared to be greatly smitten, Sidra observed.

She gave her a thumbs-up and mouthed, “*You go, girl!*” which Ella rolled her eyes at. Laughingly, Sidra entered the building and caught the elevator to the loft. When it opened, she waved at Kate the receptionist who was on the phone. Kate smiled in return and pointed to the conference room. Sidra headed that way and heard the escalated voices of her besties. Poor Avery. She’d been stressing over the last minute details, but Sidra planned to take her out today and get her totally smashed. Sidra opened the conference room door, and both Avery and Noelle jumped and looked her way with stricken faces as she strolled in.

“Hey, dolls! Sorry, I’m late! What’d I miss?” she asked cheerfully but received no answer. “Wait; first, I just have to know who the sexicle is outside with Ella? Because if my boo wasn’t my boo, *okaaay?*”

*Hmmmm.* Still no answer from either of them. Self-consciously, she touched her hair and defiantly asked, “What, you don’t like my hair?! I blame *you*, Avery! You’re the one who decided to pick coral for the bridesmaid’s dresses. It was going to clash horribly with my blue and purple streaks-”

“No, that’s not it, Sid!” Avery cut her off sharply as she stood up and glanced at Noelle who stood up as well as if to give her moral support. A slither of apprehension went down Sidra’s back, and she just knew she wouldn’t like what was coming next.

“Well then, what exactly is it?” Sidra snapped. “Just say what you have to say and stop beating around the bush. You’re freaking me out, dammit!”

“Darby invited the Santos family to the wedding, and they accepted!” Avery blurted out, and for a moment, time stood still for Sidra. The woman, whom her entire life had a comeback for everything unless she decided you simply

weren't worth her time, was at a loss for words. Her father was coming to the wedding. *They hadn't been in the same room together if she could help it since her high school graduation.* Everything seemed to slow down except her heart rate. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* Her heart was pounding so loud, she was sure that her friends could hear it as they came closer to her, and Noelle guided her into a chair. Avery brought her a glass of cool water and willed her to drink, but Sidra instinctively shoved the glass of liquid away for fear that if she opened her mouth, the bout of queasiness she was feeling would escape. *Her father was coming to the wedding...*

Sidra watched as the water fell from the cup in slow motion and splashed on her new coral-colored Chloe heels and jeans, but she could only stare at the mess as she tried to pull herself together. *Snap out of it!* Sidra ordered herself. *Get your shit together!*

"I'm so sorry about this, babe," Avery said frantically. "We just caught their names on the revised guest list, and I tried to speak to Darby about it, but he explained to me that he had to because they were his security firm's first clients and helped to put him on. I couldn't insist without telling him your story, and that's not my place to tell."

Avery's words were slowly penetrating the protective shield Sidra had instinctively raised at the mention of her father as she continued to stare at the water on the tiled floor. Unfairly, she wanted to lash out and yell out that she should have insisted. That if Avery were in the same position, then Sidra would have done more on her behalf. But it wasn't Avery's fault, and Sidra knew her dear friend was already torn up about it as it was. Clearing her throat, she asked bleakly, "Exactly who is coming?"

“The reservation is for two,” Noelle reported disdainfully. “So, I believe it’s safe to assume who will be attending.”

“Yeah, that’s a safe assumption, given what we now know,” Sidra acknowledged dryly as she opened her purse and pulled out a handkerchief. Quickly she wiped her legs and then the floor. “Sorry about that, Ave. So, where are we going for lunch?”

“Why don’t we check out the new Cuban place around the corner?” Noelle suggested and grabbed her purse. “I’ve got tons of new pics of the babies for you to see.”

Sidra gave a genuine smile at the mention of her godchildren and inwardly sighed with relief that Noelle was willing to let her actually see pics. Ever since Jack snitched about ‘Baby Monitorgate’, Noelle was all over her ass. “Sweet! I’ve been missing them something fierce. Avery?”

“I’ve got D.J.’s latest language quizzes and karate tournament pics for you,” Avery replied dutifully as Sidra nodded approvingly.

“Looks like we’re all set then. Will Jenny and Ella be joining us?” Sidra asked as she stood up and headed for the door.

“Nope; it will just be us like old times,” Noelle said firmly as she hooked arms with her girls, and they walked out together. “Don’t worry, Sid. Everything is going to be fine.”

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Sidra didn't make it back to her place in Morningside Heights until eight in the evening.

After letting herself in, she secured the locks, leaned against the door, and closed her eyes. Today had been the longest day of her life as she put on an Oscar-worthy performance for Noelle and Avery. She'd smiled, laughed, and joked with them, faking the funk as they went to lunch, followed by shopping for Avery's honeymoon at four different department stores. The last thing she wanted to do was put a damper on the wedding vibes and spoil Avery's joy.

Her phone beeped, and she pulled it out. Sidra frowned as she realized she'd forgotten her doctor's appointment. *Crap!* Now it would take her another two months to get another one. Maybe she could bribe her OBGYN with tickets to Dominick's next show along with a bottle of the cabernet he loved so much. *I'll try in the morning*, she thought as her phone rang. It was her mother returning the call she'd made in the restaurant bathroom earlier this afternoon.

"Hey, Mom," she said in greeting, trying to inject cheer into her voice. Lena was like a bloodhound when it came to detecting her daughter's unhappiness.

"Hi, sweetie!!!" Lena Barton trilled, and as always, Sidra had to hold the phone away from her ear at the enthusiastic greeting. "How was your day with the girls? Granny told me you were in town, but unfortunately, I'm out of town and won't be back until the end of the week."

"I'm so sorry I'm going to miss you this time," Sidra said sincerely as she did a happy dance and pumped her fist. *Hell yes*, the gods were on her side, and she could finally be honest with Casey if he mentioned meeting her mother again. Now, her father was a different story...

“We’ll have to get together when I come back to town next month,” Sidra offered.

“You should really branch out on your own! That man you’re working for is a fucking slave driver who keeps my baby too busy to see her own mama.” Lena sucked her teeth so loud that Sidra had to pull the phone away from her ear again. “Ain’t no man worth that much of your time, baby. *Remember that!* Well, at least you’re not out there losing your head over some silly-ass fool like your girlfriends did. But I just want what’s best for you, Sidra.”

“That’s right, Mom. Ain’t nobody got time for relationships,” Sidra lied, crossing her fingers behind her back and mentally asking God *and* Casey for forgiveness. “Well, I have to go take a shower. This humidity has me done in.”

“Yeah, you’re lucky to be small on top because it’s way too hot to be havin’ big titties out here,” Lena readily agreed. “I love you, baby, and give me a call before you leave town. Muah!”

Sidra wanted to tell her mother the horrible news that she’d learned today, but that would only lead to a clusterfuck of epic proportions at Avery’s wedding. *Besides, you’re a big girl and don’t need mommy to hold your hand*, she told herself firmly.

Instead, she simply replied, “I love you too. Goodnight, Mom.”

“Goodnight, Sidra.”

Slowly, Sidra walked into her bathroom to wash her face and froze as she glanced at her reflection. She was shocked by how angry, bitter, and aged she looked. *This* was why she didn't like to talk about and *refused* to deal with her father. It brought out the ugliness and fury that she tried so hard to conceal and bury deep down inside. Her eyes filled with tears, and hating the weakness she saw, Sidra drew back and punched the mirror as hard as she could, closing her eyes and relishing the pain that came with the bits of broken glass piercing her skin.

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Casey Sullivan hung up the phone and threw it into his briefcase when he reached Sidra's voicemail for the sixth time that evening. Closing the case, he picked it up and left his law office after locking up. It was now after nine in the evening, but he'd finally finished his caseload so that he would be able to concentrate on Darby's wedding and spending time with Sidra. It was a warm night in D.C., filled with people socializing, and Casey realized he didn't feel like going back to his condo and wondering about what the hell Sidra was doing that she couldn't call him back. So instead, he hopped in his car and headed to *The Park At Fourteenth*. They made a damn good Chilean sea bass that was calling his name right about now.

As usual, the popular club was packed, but he managed to get a table and ignored the brunette hostess's inviting look when he said, "Just myself tonight."

Sitting down, Casey waved away the menu, "Thanks, but I already know what I want."

Again the hostess tried it with a flirtatious, “Well that makes two of us. I’m Tonya, what’s your name?”

“Hi Tonya, I’m Casey. Should I give my order to you?” he asked politely, and her smile dimmed a little. Casey could see her wheels turning as she tried to figure out exactly what his angle was. Poor girl probably wasn’t used to being turned down with her good looks. Her expression turned crafty, and he sighed, knowing he would now have to be rude to her. It was times like this that he really missed his woman. Sidra could project a vibe that said she would slit your throat without even touching you if she wanted to.

Tonya opened her mouth but was interrupted by a cute blonde who slid into the chair across from Casey. “Surprise! I made it, dear!”

He could only stare in surprise at Anna Dayton as she beamed at him. Tonya flounced off, and Anna cracked a smile at him. “Hi, Casey, and you’re welcome. Long time no see. How’ve you been?”

“Hey, Anna. I’m good and you?” Casey acknowledged and returned her smile with a genuinely friendly one. He hadn’t seen her since she and her father attended the *Take A Stand* foundation’s ball on New Year’s Eve. At one time, the Capital Hill lobbyist had sought more than just friendship from him, but he’d shot down all her efforts and hadn’t seen her since.

“Perfect! I’m meeting some girlfriends here and saw you with Tonya. I thought I’d say hello and rescue you at the same time,” she teased. “Tonya used to hook up with a friend of mine, so I know she comes on strong.” Anna looked around casually, “Where’s ‘Ms. Rock The Runway’ tonight?”

Casey stared at her with hostility until she turned tomato red and shifted uncomfortably in her chair. His voice was ice cold when he finally spoke. “Are you referring to my

girlfriend Sidra? I didn’t think you were that crazy, but if you were, let me give you some advice: My woman is the kind of woman who sizes people up, not because she thinks they’re competition, but because she likes to imagine what kind of weapons she’d like to torture them with and how big a grave she’d have to dig when she’s had her fun. So, I’ll be sure to pass along your comments-”

Turning pale with terror at his words, Anna hastened to reassure him with a simpering laugh, “It was a joke, Casey. *Please don’t repeat that.* What she doesn’t know-”

“Won’t hurt her? Well, if it isn’t Sidra’s man out with a woman who is *clearly* not Sidra!” This time, Anna was interrupted, and it came from behind Casey who’d know that smug-as-shit voice anywhere. He glanced up with a glare as Dominick Harris came into view, with a mocking expression as he looked from Anna to Casey then back again. Anna was silently star-struck, and Casey scowled as she swooned over him. *What the hell did women see in this scumbag?* The lead singer of Bison Blue had been featured in People’s Sexiest Man Alive five times, and the ladies seemed to love his swarthy good looks and black braids. And *his* woman worked in close proximity with the bastard. *Yay.*

“When the cat’s away eh, Sullivan?” Harris sneered, and Casey gritted his teeth to keep his anger in check.

“Hardly, *Dick.* Is there something I can help you with?” Casey asked with satisfaction as the man’s eyes narrowed in response to Casey’s nickname for him. “If not, you should take your ass home and practice how to carry a tune. On your last album, you sounded like a little bitch,” Casey smiled insincerely at the

other man's glare. "Oops, my bad, I meant you sounded *pitchy*. I'm outta here. Don't forget what I said, Anna."

Casey stood up and nodded at her before shoving past Harris, resisting the urge to beat his ass. He wanted to tell *Dick* that his patience with him had just about run out, but he was a man of action not words. Casey couldn't wait to show him if he foolishly stepped out of line again.

"Hey, don't run off on my account, Sullivan," the other man mockingly called out to him. Casey stopped and turned around. "At least let me buy you a beer?"

"Actually, why don't I treat you?" Casey grinned evilly. "You can use the money I left on your mom's nightstand."

Then feeling not so proud of his short temper, he turned and walked away, all the while willing Harris to come after him, just so he could beat the shit out of him once and for all.

He was halfway toward the entrance when a woman's hand halted his progress. Casey stopped and looked down at the offending hand on his arm before frowning into the beautiful woman's face. Immediately, he relaxed and smiled. "Fancy seein' you here, Nina! How are you doin'?"

"Much better now that I've seen you," she spoke loudly into his ear over the music. "Are you leaving already? I just got here! Why don't you come have a drink with me? I'm meeting some old friend of ours from school. Do you remember Sylvia Rimmel and Jason Stucco?"

"Yeah, I do!" Casey said enthusiastically. "You're meeting them here?"

“Yes, they got married and moved to California after we graduated. They came to visit Sylvia’s parents and are going back tomorrow,” Nina smiled encouragingly at him. “Stay and say hi! It’ll be fun! Just like old times, Case!”

*It would be fun*, Casey thought. He hadn’t seen his old classmates since graduation night. He didn’t have anything going on at the condo with Sidra gone. *Damn, Sid!* He still hadn’t heard from her and wanted to make sure she was okay.

“Sorry, Nina,” he smiled apologetically. “I gotta get goin’ . Take care and please tell Sylvia and Jason I said hi.”

Then he continued towards the entrance, unaware of the malevolent gaze following him.

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He was leaving due to the short leash that BITCH allowed him. *What the hell did he see in HER?* He needed a real woman. Someone who appreciated him and could treat him like a real man. *Someone like...herself*, Nina thought with pleasure. Soon she would have Casey all to herself, and he would recognize, love, and appreciate her the way he was supposed to.

### **Chapter Three**

Sidra eased Casey's arm from around her waist, crept from the bed, and glanced at the nightstand alarm clock: 6:15 a.m. It was the day of the wedding, and there was still a lot to do. She planned on meeting the girls in the lobby in thirty minutes. Quickly she brushed her teeth and tossed on a shirt and shorts with slip-on Vans. Then she tiptoed back over to the bed and placed a kiss on Casey's cheek, smiling when she saw him smile in his sleep. He was so damn scrumptious, especially first thing in the morning when that shadow really darkened his square jaw and those thick lashes lay on his cheeks.

"Where you goin', love?" he mumbled with his eyes still closed and captured her wrist to pull her down on top of him. Slowly, he rubbed his cheek against hers and instinctively, Sidra's body melted into his.

"I'm going to help with the reception set-up," she explained as his hand rubbed her back gently. "I'll be back in time for lunch if you want to eat together? I know you're supposed to be keeping Darby occupied today. I can just grab a salad and eat before freshening up if you're busy."

"I'd love to have lunch with you, but we're goin' to go golfin'. You tryin' to skip out without lovin' on me first, woman?" Casey drawled, slowly opening his eyes, and Sidra found herself trapped in his slumberous hazel gaze.

"Baby, I would love to stay and play, but they will kill me if I'm late," Sidra explained apologetically as she ran her fingers through his hair, her nails raking his scalp. She could feel Casey's response growing underneath her belly and promised, "I'll make it up to you later; okay, boo?"

"Oh, I know you will," Casey snickered as her eyes narrowed on him. "Now gimme some sugar and get out of here."



Sidra leaned forward and kissed him before reluctantly leaving the bed. “So, is it going to be just you and Darby? I know that Jack, Holt, and Guy will be assembling the arch in a little while. Avery better not find out they slipped away for a round of golf.”

She was headed for the door when Casey said, “Actually, it will be the two of us, Max, and Nero Santos, one of my personal idols and professional mentors.”

Sidra halted in her tracks, but Casey didn't notice as he pulled the covers back over his head. “Man, that guy is brilliant! I've read every case he's ever been involved with. He's working that big case now with the award-winning talk show host who's been accused of sexual harassment. Do you know he's never lost a case? The man is a fuckin' legend! I'll never forget the summer I interned for him. As a matter of fact, Nina is his daughter. Remember the lady who stopped by my office, and you asked me who she was? I ran into her when I was leaving *The Park* earlier this week. Funny, she didn't say anythin' about Nero comin' to the weddin'. Oh, and small world, but he actually defended my friend and Georgina's brother, Graham Carlton, when they were kids livin' in Las Vegas. Anyways, I'm ramblin' and holdin' you up. I'll see you later, darlin'.”

“Yeah, later,” Sidra muttered and ran out of the room as if the devil himself was chasing her.

The weather for Darby and Avery's wedding day couldn't have been more perfect than if they'd custom ordered it from Mother Nature. The sun was beaming and the blue sky was cloudless. There was a slight breeze, and the waves rolled gently. This morning, Avery, Ella, Jenny, Noelle, and Sidra ensured the dining area, with the adjacent dance floor, was set

correctly. The women had gone over the guest list and seating arrangements twice as they placed the gold-painted sea animal place cards in their proper places and tied chiffon to the backs of the chairs and pinned it with gold faux seashell and starfish ornaments. Twice, Avery had to pop Sidra when she attempted to place her father and half-sister at the back of the room by the kitchen. The ‘message in a bottle’ wedding favors were placed in the giant seashell filled with sand by the guest sign-in book. After the vow exchange, the small bottles with well wishes would be released into the ocean.

The resort staff was busy setting up the white, foldout guest chairs in the circular pattern Avery and Darby had decided on. Instead of walking down the aisle with people on either side, they wanted to say their vows in a circle, surrounded by their loved ones. Ella and Jenny were in charge of wrapping the coral, pink, blush, and cream chiffon swaths around the arch and attaching the white peonies and roses to each corner to hold them in place. Then they would attach shorter pieces of chiffon at the end of each row with a gold-painted faux starfish at the chair at each end of the row.

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Avery watched with nervous anticipation from her bridal suite window as Jack, Holt, and Guy assembled the Jamaican wood arch on the hotel deck overlooking the beach where she and Darby would be exchanging vows.

She gave a squeal of pleasure and turned to Noelle and Sidra who were busy filling the seashell-encrusted galvanized pails with flower petals for Ruby and her two nieces to toss down the aisle. “The arch is heavenly! I can’t wait to put it in our backyard when we move into our new home. I’m also dying to see the broom Guy created. I just know it’s going to be as gorgeous as yours, Noelle.”

“Jack says he’s gotten quite a few requests for them since making ours. Guy does amazing work, but those brooms are in a league of their own,” Noelle agreed as she watched Sidra discreetly down a glass of champagne. Her eyes locked on her friend’s bandaged hand and she frowned. “Sid, what happened to your hand?”

Sidra looked down at her bandaged hand with a scowl. “Ummm...I didn’t get to my waxing appointment in time and tried to do it myself. The wax spilled and...let’s just say it was an epic fail. Don’t worry, though, I ordered fingerless lace gloves and had them dyed the same color of my bridesmaid dress. I tried them on, and they look great.”

Avery exchanged a concerned look with Noelle, before replying, “Sidra, are you going to be okay? If not, I’ll understand if you need to go...”

Sidra raised an eyebrow at her and snarled, “*Bish! Are you out of your rabid-ass mind?! I wouldn’t miss your wedding for anything. I’ll be damned if I don’t stand up with you today! Am I happy about the situation? Hell no. But I’d choose either of you over anyone else any day.*”

“So, does Casey know anything?” Noelle asked rolling her eyes at Sidra’s negative headshake. “*What. The. Hell?! Why haven’t you said anything???*”

“*Because it’s no one’s business but mine,*” Sidra retorted fiercely. “*I won’t share that with anyone until I’m ready!*”

“You will never be ready!” Noelle shouted, throwing her hands up in frustration. “Exactly how are you preparing

yourself to share? You have a man who adores you but knows nothing of your past because you don't even confide in him!" Noelle got in Sidra's face as she continued, "He is literally going to walk onto a minefield today, and you could give a rat's ass! Tell him something, *anything* before you really fuck it up for yourself!"

"He'll want to know everything, and you're right okay?! I'm not ready!!!" Sidra yelled back at her agitatedly, silently begging her friend to stop, but Noelle wasn't a mind reader and proceeded relentlessly.

"I love you both, but YOU are being very selfish! Casey is a good man and deserves to be treated better. If you're not going to step up, then step out of the way so the next woman can do the job," Noelle snapped back, and Sidra jerked back in shock.

"*Noelle*," Avery said sharply, hating to see her friends go at it like this, but Noelle held a hand up to her as she continued to look at Sidra.

"It needs to be said, Avery," Noelle countered as she pulled her friend close and hugged her stiff body. "Sidra, I love you and will always have your back the same way you have mine, *but You. Need. Help.* You refuse to talk about how your father treated you. You're holding back, and there's no way your relationship with Casey will be able to thrive if you can't give it your all." Noelle released her to look into her eyes again. "I'll drop it, but at some point, you are going to have to stop looking at yourself as a victim because you are not one anymore. You're an accomplice."

Sidra felt like she was suffocating under Noelle's blunt words, but she couldn't deny there was some truth to them. Normally, if her back was to the wall she would start throwing blows, but she felt paralyzed. *And she hated it.*

“That’s enough, ladies,” Avery interjected firmly. “Sid, why don’t you go get some fresh air? The rest of the ladies will gather here in two hours when the hairstylists arrive.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll do that,” Sidra said with a tight smile as she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. “See you guys then.”

When the door closed, Avery gave Noelle a censorious look as she put the rest of the flower petals into the pails. “Was that really necessary today?”

“Yes, it was. *You saw her hand!* Do you really think she tried to wax herself?” Noelle countered as she completed her task. “If this was either one of us, she would have jumped all over our asses to own it. It’s time for her to take a page out of her own book. And did you forget about Casey? You *know* he doesn’t deserve this.”

“I’m not saying that you’re wrong,” Avery cautioned. “But for now, let’s just let that be the end of all the drama, okay? I just want to marry my man and get my honeymoon started. I haven’t seen him in a week, and I just want to tear his clothes off and-”

“TMI, Avery!” Noelle yelled covering her ears, and the bride-to-be chuckled wickedly.

## **Chapter Four**

*It was too much*, Sidra thought furiously as she paced in front of the elevator. She could feel herself spiraling out of control, and Sidra hated that she couldn't reel herself in. *What the hell was taking the elevator so damn long to get here?* Feeling defeated, she put her head down and pressed her forehead to the wall and tried breathing slowly to control her emotions. She didn't even notice when the door closest to the elevator opened and Vivienne Romankov stepped out.

“Chin up, buttercup! Never let them see you weak and vulnerable,” Vivienne lectured, causing Sidra to jerk with surprise before giving a genuine smile. As always, the older woman was immaculately put together. She wore a sleeveless, white summer dress with a full skirt, her black hair pulled up in a high, sleek ponytail, diamond studs in her ears, and a simple diamond pendant around her neck. She was extremely stylish and put together, making Sidra feel like road kill in her worn denim cutoffs and dirty white tee.

“Hey, Viv,” Sidra said as she self-consciously smoothed her hair into place.

“Don't ‘hey’ me, Sidra. What's wrong with you?” Vivienne asked bluntly as she looked at her suspiciously. “You're dressed in something you would never be caught wearing in public and with no accessories or makeup. The Sidra Barton I know wouldn't dare leave her room without being on point.” Vivienne's eyes traveled the length of her body and then stopped at her bandaged hand. “*And what the hell happened to your hand?!*”

“Waxing accident,” Sidra stated defiantly as she shoved her injured hand into her pocket.

“Uh-huh, I’m going down to the café to meet Lex and the babies. We’re keeping them until Noelle’s parents arrive shortly. Come with me,” Vivienne ordered imperiously as the elevator finally opened and they stepped in.

“Oh, so now it’s Lex, huh?” Sidra asked innocently, laughing teasingly as Vivienne smacked her with her brightly colored floral patterned clutch. “How’s *that* going?”

Vivienne smiled at the thought of her not-so-estranged-husband, Alexei. Since accosting her in the shower three months ago, the pair had been inseparable for the most part. They’d attended plays and had lunch and dinner dates. He sent her flowers and chocolates, but there was still no sex, just the merest brush of his lips on her neck or ear as he whispered to her or his hand on her waist while his fingers dipped precariously close to her ass. He was testing her, and it was driving her *crazy*, but Vivienne knew that was his end game. It was another Romankov “lesson” to break a person’s will and take away their power. Only this time, Vivienne was prepared to fight fire with fire. She’d pulled out the big guns in the form of lingerie designer and client Georgina Carlton. Vivienne’s bridal shower gift to Avery was a honeymoon trousseau from *Feminine Intuition*, and Georgina had come to not only attend the shower but to take measurements and orders from the ecstatic bride-to-be. Then Vivienne had pulled Georgina aside and ordered an entire arsenal for herself. She definitely planned on getting some this trip *and* every encounter after.

“It’s actually going very well, thank you,” Vivienne replied demurely but couldn’t contain the big Cheshire cat grin spreading across her face. The elevator opened, and the two ladies exited to the resort’s deluxe café. “Why don’t you get us a table by the window, and I’ll grab us something to eat. Any preferences?”

“I’ll just have a key lime iced tea please and thank you,” Sidra said glancing at the overhead menu before picking a table that overlooked the beach. She sat down and watched as the surfers swam out to sea trying to catch a wave. But thanks to the still waters, their efforts were futile, and Sidra could feel their frustration as they smacked at the water. She knew exactly how they felt, but hers was a dreaded anticipation as she too waited for that wave to come crashing around her. But then a strange thing happened. Sidra could see a wave coming and so could the eager surfers as they prepared to ride it. They caught the wave, moved with it, and controlled it instead of the other way around. They dived in and mastered it with no fear.

“Okay, so tell me what the problem is,” Vivienne coaxed as she placed the requested iced tea in front of Sidra, and then sat down across from her with a serious expression. “I can see you’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, and if you don’t stop, you’ll fall over and collapse from it. Take it from someone who’s been there. Does this have to do with Casey? Are you thinking of leaving my boy?”

“I don’t want to leave Casey,” Sidra replied honestly, “But I’m scared that if I stay, he’ll leave *me*.”

“Chile, that’s about as ass-backwards as it gets! What does that even mean?” Vivienne flung her ponytail over her shoulder and pointed her well-manicured index finger in Sidra’s face. “*Have you learned nothing about the men of Whiskey Row???* They love hard, and for that, I’m incredibly grateful.” Vivienne pressed her hand to her chest as she blinked back tears. “I’ve overdone my fair share of suffering in silence, but no more. Every single day that I was away from Alexei, I *ached* for him. I kept us apart with secrets and my foolish pride instead of trusting in him! *Trust in your man, Sidra*. He and his brothers are a rare breed and will go the distance for their women.”



“You think I don’t want to?!” Sidra fumed. “My mom is NOT like other mothers. She’s...different, and now, I have to deal with the fact that my sorry excuse of a father will be at the wedding with my bitch of a half-sister, and it’s taking *everything* in me not to freak out and lose it on Casey because I can see that he *knows* something is up with me!”

“You’re not one of those inbred babies are you?” Vivienne asked, giving her a suspicious glare as she leaned away from Sidra in her chair. “Because that would certainly explain so many things-”

“Hello, ladies,” Alexei’s smooth deep voice interrupted his wife. The two women looked up to see him walking towards their table, pushing a stroller and holding Ruby’s hand.

“Auntie Sidra!” Ruby cheered and launched herself at Sidra who caught her and smothered her with kisses. “Kiss baby Jack too!”

“Of course, I will, my baby! I missed you so much, love muffin!” Sidra cooed to her and tickled her tummy. Ruby laughed and hugged her tighter. “Hi Alexei; how are you?”

“Hello, Sidra. I’m as well as can be expected when being conned by a toddler,” he said, and on cue, Ruby blinked her large gray eyes at him with a sweet smile as she tightly clutched her shopping bag with the resort’s toy shop logo on it.

“Hi, Nana!” Ruby wiggled down from Sidra’s arms to hug Vivienne who squeezed her tightly as she loud-whispered conspiratorially, “Papa bought you a gift! But it’s a secret! It’s a dress but don’t tell anyone!”

“Oh, did he now?” Vivienne’s voice lowered as she observed Alexei un-strapping baby Jack and carefully picking him up. On too many occasions, she’d thought he was way too damn good-looking for his own good, with his wavy black hair streaked with silver and those deep inky blue eyes. But she was finding the role of grandfather to be extremely hot on him. She watched with lustful eyes as the baby smiled at him, and Alexei’s whole face lit up as he softly tapped the happy baby’s nose. *Mmmmph. Goodness.*

Alexei looked up to find Vivienne watching him and never had he seen her look lovelier as Ruby sat snuggled in her lap. The white dress made her honey skin glow, as those large molasses eyes dared him to finally make a move. He winked at her, and they exchanged a deep intimate smile that was interrupted by Sidra’s snort of disbelief.

“*Wow, so unfair!* The two of you are soooo lucky Jack and Noelle can’t see you!” Sidra cried out, standing up to take baby Jack from Alexei and lavishing him with kisses. “You’re eye-fuc-I mean, making extremely inappropriate goo-goo eyes at each other, and *I’m* the one on probation?!”

She handed the baby back to an amused Alexei and waggled her fingers at Ruby who blew her a kiss. Then picking up her cup of iced tea, she raised it to Vivienne. “Thank you for the pep talk, madam. Rest assured, I now know what to do. Deuces.”

And after one last look at the confident surfers navigating the now turbulent waves, she squared her shoulders and walked away. Noelle and Vivienne were right. She needed to pull her head out of her ass and be upfront with Casey.

“You go, girl!” Vivienne called after her and then added, “And don’t come back with your crazy self!”

“I can hear you!” Sidra tossed over her shoulder.

“You were supposed to!” Vivienne sang, and Alexei laughed as he sat down in the vacated seat.

“She seems a little troubled. Anything we should worry about?” he asked casually as he gave baby Jack his bottle, which the hungry rascal eagerly latched onto.

Vivienne knew this was code for *‘Do we need to teach someone a Romankov lesson?’*

She surveyed his striking face as he watched the baby adoringly and knew with regret that she had brought this side out of him again. When they first met, his comrades had only addressed him as ‘Wolf’, and he’d never corrected them, so she’d made the mistake of asking him if it was short for Wolfgang or something else. Alexei had stared at her for a moment, before throwing back his leonine mane and laughing heartily. Vivienne could still remember his reply...

*“Dear, sweet Vivi, that is not why they call me ‘Wolf’,” he’d whispered throatily against her lips, looking deep into her eyes as he held her face tightly in place. The way he stared held her transfixed; it was so predatory that she broke out in chills, even as her nipples hardened with arousal.*

*Licking her lips nervously, she huskily asked, “Then enlighten me. Why do they call you that?”*

*“Because who doesn’t fear the ‘big bad wolf’?” he asked sinisterly before capturing her lips in a feral kiss.*

“No, she’ll be fine,” Vivienne finally said as she smoothed Ruby’s French braids. “I don’t like to bring this up, especially today...”

“Then don’t,” Alexei commanded, leveling his cool gaze on her. “I don’t want to disclose what was done to get the little information we have. There has been some progress, but this person has covered their tracks extremely well. It makes me wonder-”

Vivienne reached across the table and grasped his large hand in hers and mimicked his words. “*Then don’t*. You’re right. It’s a beautiful day; let’s not spoil it.”

Ruby also reached her hand over and touched Alexei’s much larger one with a beguiling smile. “Ice cream, Papa?”

He looked into her pretty little face even as he rose to his feet, and she scrambled down from Vivienne’s lap as he placed baby Jack in his wife’s arms. Ruby held his hand tightly. “I suppose it’s my lot in life to be surrounded by lovely women that I can’t say no to.”

His eyes locked on Vivienne’s as she placed the well-fed baby against her shoulder and burped him before falling to her soft lips. *Jesus, he was going crazy fighting the urge to take her.* She raised an eyebrow deliberately and purred, “Would you want it any other way?”

Covering Ruby’s ears, he growled, “Hell no, Mrs. Romankov.”

## Chapter Four

Darby Sullivan watched his kid brother shave his jaw in the bathroom mirror and grinned. He and Jack often teased Casey, much to his dismay, that he was born immaculate and popped out camera-ready. “You are too damn good-looking for your own good, you know that?”

Casey scowled. “Don’t start with me, man. So, are you all set for today?”

“Hell yes, I’m ready!” Darby exclaimed proudly. “I can’t wait to see my baby in her dress and then later help her out of it!”

Casey chuckled, “I know you are, brother. Congratulations, D. I can’t tell you enough how happy I am for the two of you. Listen, I know D.J. is stayin’ with Jack and Noelle, but do you mind if I take him once in a while? Especially now that he’s on summer break? I’d like to show him the monuments in D.C. and bond with him. I haven’t really spent that much time with him, and I feel bad about it.”

Darby rubbed his beard, “I’m all for the idea; just run it by his mama. Is your woman gonna be involved? Because if so...”

“Would y’all let up about that?!” Casey howled, causing Darby to hold his hands up in mock surrender.

“Hey, I’m a parent now. Wouldn’t you think the worst of me if I wasn’t bein’ protective?” Darby asked reasonably, enjoying how easy it was to ruffle Casey’s feathers.

“Actually, I thought the worst of you when we stayed with you in Nashville, and I walked into your bedroom to find you in bed with three women,” Casey smiled with satisfaction as his brother sat up with a look of alarm. “Now you know who wouldn’t find that story funny in the least? Ms. Avery and Papa Monroe-”

“Two days, you little shit,” Darby cut him off with a frown. “How’d you get to be such a connivin’ weasel? And are you almost ready?! I told Nero to meet us here in fifteen minutes. You take longer to primp yourself than a beauty queen.”

“Hold your horses; I’m almost ready. I’m a lawyer; don’t get mad that I can present a persuasive argument,” Casey said with a laugh as he rinsed his razor and wiped his face and walked to the sitting area where Darby joined in.

“Man, I wish Ma were here,” Darby said longingly. “She would really like our women, don’t you think?”

Casey sat down across from his brother to put on his shoes. “I definitely think Ma would have liked our women. Especially Sidra’s fiery side, Ms. Avery’s sweetness, and Noelle’s charm and cookin’. We did pretty damn good, D.”

The door to the suite clicked, and they heard Sidra calling, “Babe? You still here?” She smiled at them as she turned the corner, and right away, Casey noticed she seemed a little tweaked as she greeted them. “Hey guys, what are you doing?”

“Nothin’ much, Trouble. Just gettin’ ready to play a few rounds of golf before Ms. Avery makes an honest man outta me,” Darby said cheekily.

“C’mere, baby,” Casey held his hand out to her, and Sidra gratefully reached for it. Already feeling a hundred times better when they touched, she allowed him to tug her into his lap, where she snuggled up close to him, comforted by his familiar scent.

Casey’s arms closed around her, and he rubbed her back soothingly. “What’s the matter, sugar? Talk to me.”

“I need to tell you something,” she confessed determinedly. “It’s pretty important and can’t wait until after the wedding. I should have said something long before now, but I was too caught up in my own feelings. Could we please talk before you go?”

Casey’s heart was racing as he and Darby shared a concerned look. Before he could speak, there was a knock at the door. He watched as his brother went to answer it. “I was on my way to play golf with Darby, but I’ll postpone it, okay? This sounds like something we need to deal with *now*. Why don’t you go into the bedroom while I excuse myself, darlin’?”

“Casey, I just want you to listen to what I have to say, especially in light of our conversation this morning. We don’t have a lot of time, so I need to at least make sure you’re not... blindsided. Can you do that for me?” Sidra asked anxiously as she looked deeply into his concerned eyes.

“I can, but I gotta tell you that you’re kinda freakin’ me out, Sid,” Casey said slowly. “Tell me what’s goin’ on so I can help you.”

They stood up just as Darby came back, followed by an older Hispanic gentleman with a deep olive complexion, and Sidra became immobile as she took him in. He was fairly fit and about six feet tall with close-cropped salt and pepper hair. He wore a pair of pastel plaid slacks and a white polo shirt.

“We ready, Case, or are you stayin’?” Darby asked with a concerned look at Sidra.

The other man spoke in a jovial tone, “Are you kidding me? Surely my protégé isn’t going to hide from me? He owes me a rematch!”

Casey turned back to Sidra with a grin and pulled her forward proudly as he shook the other man’s hand. “Babe, allow me to introduce you to an all-around good guy, and the most brilliant criminal defense attorney the world has ever seen, Nero Santos! Sir, this is my lovely girlfriend, Sidra Barton.”

The room was silent as Sidra and Nero assessed each other. *He looks just the same, except older*, she thought dispassionately. And it seemed no one was immune to his charm, not her mother nor the Sullivan brothers, especially Casey whose voice had been filled with blatant admiration. *Dick-rider*, she thought unfairly of her boyfriend, watching as Nero The Snake preened under the compliments. The thought of it made her sick to her stomach, and she wanted to smack him silly for buying into Nero’s crap.

Casey, watching the interaction and feeling the tension build, pulled Sidra closer to him protectively. “What’s wrong, baby?”

Darby moved closer as well and gave Sidra a look as he nodded towards Nero that she interpreted as ‘*Do I need to fuck him up?*’ She gave him a slight shake of her head.



With a big smile, Nero spoke. “Hello, *mija!* It’s been a long time.”

“Not long enough, Nero,” Sidra replied frigidly, pressing herself closer to Casey. Inside, she was shaking with rage at the sight of the man who’d treated her and her mother so shabbily.

“What’s goin’ on here?” Casey demanded, and Nero turned back to him with a brilliantly confident smile.

“Forgive me, Casey. It would seem that today is not only a splendid day for a wedding but also a family reunion! Clearly, she hasn’t told you, but Sidra is my daughter.”

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The wedding of Darby Sullivan and Avery Monroe was a lavishly beautiful affair to witness. From sassy little Ruby Sullivan, waving and throwing petals at people, instead of on the runner, to the tears appearing in the groom’s eyes as his lovely bride, clad in a mermaid-style strapless, white satin and lace gown with a sweetheart neckline, walked down the aisle on her proud father’s arm. Then there was the exchanging of vows in which they included their son D.J. The crowd cheered uproariously when the preacher announced that Darby could kiss his bride, and he lifted Avery into his arms and she clung to him for an extremely passionate kiss. It went on and on until Henry Monroe stood up and shouted, “Dammit, Sullivan! Save it for tonight!”

After Darby, Avery, and D.J. jumped the broom, it was time for pictures while guests noshed on appetizers of lobster rolls, cheeseburger sliders, and fish and chips. Then it was time for the couple's first dance to Sade's "By Your Side".

*You think I'd leave your side baby  
You know me better than that  
You think I'd leave you down when you're down on your knees  
I wouldn't do that*

*I'll tell you you're right when you want  
And if only you could see into me*

*Oh when you're cold, I'll be there  
Hold you tight to me*

*When you're on the outside baby*

Avery stepped into her husband's arms and felt a euphoric state of bliss that was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. "Helloooo there, husband."

Darby pulled her close as he stared down into her beautiful brown eyes and was overwhelmed with so much emotion, he could barely speak. "Well hello, Mrs. Sullivan. Now doesn't that have a nice ring to it, sugar?"

Avery laughed as he spun her around and dipped her elegantly. "Are you ever going to just call me Avery?"

"Tell you what: if you can get me to holler your name tonight in bed, I'll call you Avery," Darby proposed with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

*When you're on the outside baby and you can't get in  
I will show you, you're so much better than you know  
When you're lost and you're alone and you can't get back again  
I will find you darling and I will bring you home*

*And if you want to cry  
I am here to dry your eyes*

*And in no time, you'll be fine*

“I bet I can get you to holler more than my name in bed,” Avery whispered seductively, smirking as she felt his manhood swell against her stomach. “I love you so much, Darby! Thank you for sharing your life with me. I promise to be the best wife and mother to our children.”

Darby stopped mid-song and kissed his wife gently. It was the kiss of a man who knows how truly blessed he is to have his whole world in his arms to love and cherish for the rest of his life. Slowly, they broke apart and he whispered fiercely, “You already are, Avery Sullivan. I never dreamed I’d be blessed enough to meet a woman like you, and that you’d love me the way you do. You complete and fill all the voids in me that were empty for so long. You will never regret saying yes; that’s MY promise to you!”

*You think I'd leave your side baby  
You know me better than that  
You think I'd leave you down when you're down on your knees  
I wouldn't do that*

*I'll tell you you're right when you want  
And if only you could see into me*

*Oh when you're cold, I'll be there  
Hold you tight to me*

*When you're on the outside baby*

“I wish everyone could be this happy,” Avery declared with a wistful glance around the room, taking in the happy scene in front of her. Everyone was having a good time, except for Nina who was scowling at Sidra as she spoke with Ella and staring at Casey across the room with his back to her as he spoke with friends and family.

Darby followed her gaze and frowned, “I still can’t believe that Nero Santos is Sidra’s father! That’s why you called me

asking about the guest list, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Nero Santos is a narcissistic asshole," Avery hissed, still pissed that his presence was a necessary evil at their wedding. "It's not my story to tell, but he never gave a damn about Sidra or anyone else in his life."

"It's alright, baby. We won't let anything happen to Nero or Nina tonight," Darby said calmly as he rubbed his wife's back comfortingly.

"Say what?" Avery asked with a raised eyebrow, and Darby chuckled at her incredulous expression. "So you're not worried about what *they* could do to my friend?"

"Why would I be worried about Sidra? She can handle herself. Have a little faith in her; she's just a little...free-spirited," he explained with a smile.

"No, she's *crazy*. There's a really fine line between crazy and free-spirited, and she tightrope-walks it with a strong lean towards crazy," Avery said bluntly, and Darby threw his head back and laughed his booming laugh. "And to be honest, with both her father and sister in the same room, I'm terrified they're inspiring her inner serial killer to a "Criminal Minds" type of level."

"Sidra will resolve the manner in the best way she sees fit. Stop worryin'. I love you so much, Mrs. Sullivan," Darby said as he twirled her again.

"As I do you, husband," Avery said tenderly.

## Chapter Five

Casey watched his brother and new sister-in-law cut up the dance floor, pretending not to notice his girlfriend staring at him. But she wasn't the only one. He could also feel Nero's eyes assessing him as he laughed and smoothly mingled with other guests, and that was what really made his blood boil. Between Sidra, her 'father' and Nina smiling up in his face, he didn't know who he wanted to strangle more, hence the distance he was keeping from all three.

While in law school, Casey and some other classmates had spent time at the Santos home and had even eaten dinner there with Nina and Nero. His wife Cecelia was always such a gracious hostess, and on their first visit to their home had offered them a tour. Nowhere in that house could Casey recall ever seeing any pictures of Sidra, nor had she ever been mentioned in any of his countless interviews, articles, and speeches. PURE. BULLSHIT.

He couldn't believe how much he'd worshiped Nero, a self-made man who'd pulled himself out of poverty in Chicago and made it all the way to Harvard. He was a brilliant defense lawyer and had gotten his big break twenty-eight years ago when he defended an NFL quarterback who moonlighted as a drug kingpin. Somehow, he managed to convince the jury that the quarterback was a victim of society who was so overwhelmed by his sudden success, that his fear of failure made him retreat back to what he knew and was comfortable doing. After the quarterback was acquitted, Nero was catapulted into a stratosphere of fame and fortune where he only accepted celebrity clients. Once Nero had told him, "*It's*

*all about perception, my friend. You only show people what you want them to see."*

Like a fangirl, Casey had hung on his every word and then threw himself into his studies while Nina threw herself at him. Sidra's words came back to him, and now he understood what he'd mistakenly misinterpreted as jealousy.

*"Case...the woman in your office...did you sleep with her? Or have an intimate relationship of sorts?"*

Now, he was thanking his lucky stars that he'd never taken Nina up on her offers. His relationship, as fucked up as it was and appeared to be getting by the minute, would never have happened. This afternoon, he'd seen firsthand how dysfunctional Sidra's relationship with Nero, and clearly anyone with the last name Santos, was. *But who wouldn't want Sidra for a daughter???* She was everything you could ask for: smart, beautiful, and kind to the people she cared about. She didn't believe in holding grudges but liked to...store facts. Extremely creative, she'd once offered forty ways to kill someone when they were playing the game Clue with D.J. Sidra was also fluent in English, sarcasm, and profanity. An efficient multi-tasker, she could go from sweetness and light to "hold my purse because I'm about to do some real ignorant shit" in a two-second span. *Hmmmm...okay so maybe he was slightly biased...*

"Don't overthink it, Case," Noelle said gently as she offered him a small plate of appetizers. "She's still the same 'hot-mess' woman you fell in love with before you really found out how hot that mess was."

Casey took the small glass cylinder filled with fish and chips from the plate. He popped a fish stick in his mouth and chewed slowly, savoring the taste while pondering Noelle's

words. No, Sidra wasn't the same and neither was he. She'd refused to trust him, and now *he* couldn't trust her. "I would have used the term 'walkin' disaster' myself. Who's the girl with her?"

"That is my office manager Ella Kemp," Noelle said with such satisfaction that Casey shot her a suspicious look, that she fidgeted under before finally confessing waspishly. "Fine! If you must know, she's running interference in case the Santos family dares to approach her."

"You have someone babysittin' Sidra?" Casey asked with horror. "What did that poor woman ever do to you? Christ, that's a lawsuit waitin' to happen, Noelle!"

"Don't take that tone with me, Casey Sullivan! I didn't know how shit would go down, and couldn't take the chance of the wedding being disrupted," Noelle retorted defensively. "I'm not just here as a guest. Tthis is also an *On A Whim* event that I'm responsible for ensuring runs without a hitch against unforeseen disasters like...oh, I don't know maybe... *murder?!'*"

Jack walked up, holding Ruby's hand with an inquiring look on his face. "Y'all look real cozy. Dare I ask?"

"Nah, man. Just let it go," Casey said grouchily as he stooped down to kiss Ruby's cheek. "Hey, punkin; how's about you and me do a little dancin'?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Ruby agreed, readily taking Casey's hand, and he led her away. But she turned around quickly and ordered, "Daddy dance with Mommy!"

“Yes, ma’am,” Jack said lovingly and held his hand out for his wife, “May I have this dance?”

Noelle set her plate on a nearby table and took his hand eagerly. “Yes, kind sir, you may.” Jack pulled her close, and they danced to Ellie Goulding’s “Love Me Like You Do”

“Why’d you push Sidra off on Ella?” Jack inquired as he pressed his cheek to hers. “Do you not like her or somethin’? She got a death wish?”

“Because Ella and Sidra are very similar to each other,” Noelle answered mysteriously. “She won’t let Sidra get into any trouble. Right now, things are kind of rocky between us, and it’s best if everyone keeps their distance. I said some things to Sid earlier and was kind of rough. I don’t want to make it worse.”

“I see...so two Sidra’s are better than one?” Jack drawled sarcastically. “Darlin’, a scenario like that only works in Game of Thrones. Whatever you are paying her, I suggest you double it.”

“I suppose you’re right—Jack!”

Noelle pulled away from him, and he spun around looking for Ruby who was still dancing with Casey. His eyes next went to baby Jack being held by Kat. “What’s the matter, love?”

“Nina and Sidra are gone!” Noelle said with an alarmed expression, trying to quell her rising panic as she stared at Nina’s empty seat.



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“Stop following me, Ella,” Sidra ordered as she walked to the bathroom. “Contrary to what the homie thinks, I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Time will tell, and I’m not following you. I have to use the facilities as well,” Ella replied as she followed Sidra into the empty ladies’ room.

“Fine. I’ll allow you to follow me if you tell me who that big hunk of burning love you were talking to is,” Sidra conceded, looking at the other woman. There was something about the other woman that seemed familiar, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. Ella’s personality was so calm, that Sidra wondered if Noelle had slipped her Prozac just to get through the day with her. But Sidra could see there was so much more beneath the tranquil surface...

“Sorry, I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Ella countered blandly, and Sidra chuckled to herself. Yeah, she was definitely onto something with this one.

“So, how come Jenny’s not following me? Let me guess: she got ghost when Noelle asked, didn’t she? With her scared ass,” Sidra scoffed, pissed and embarrassed that everyone thought she was so unstable that she needed a sitter. She looked at herself in the mirror and was relieved to find that she still looked normal on the outside, even if her cray-cray was bursting at the seams to get out. The coral-colored chiffon bridesmaid’s dress was a simple sleeveless V-neck that complimented her dark complexion, and her new lobbed hairstyle was styled in sexy beach waves.

“Being scary is looking pretty good right now,” Ella mumbled and went into a stall, and for a brief moment, Sidra contemplated locking her in the bathroom. That would just be so jacked up, though, and Noelle would never forgive her. The door opened again, and in walked her half-sister Nina. Judging from the conniving expression on her face, she’d followed Sidra and Ella here on purpose. *Fan-fucking-tastic*. Today was just getting better and better. Sidra sighed with acceptance of the inevitable when Nina made the mistake of opening her mouth and the venomous words came spilling out.

“I was wondering when your little bulldog would disappear,” she said with a nasty smile. “How are you, Sidra? It’s been such a long time since we got together for a little girl time. Let’s play catch up, shall we? Is my father still screwing your mother?”

Sidra shook her head at Nina’s ridiculousness. The other woman was older by five years and very pretty when she wasn’t being so vicious. They’d never had a civil exchange despite Sidra’s attempt in the beginning. But they were far from the beginning, and Sidra was no longer an excited and cautiously hopeful fourteen-year-old girl finding out she had a sister for the first time. She remembered how scared, anxious, and nervous she’d been hoping they could possibly be friends. Nina had soundly crushed that dream on their first exchange.

“Uh-oh, looks like someone took a bad bitch pill this morning,” Sidra observed mildly. “And just when I was thinking it was a beautiful day to be left alone! Don’t bring your triflin’ ass in here talkin’ shit, Nina,” she cautioned serenely because this was a place she felt comfortable and the one thing she and Lena saw eye-to-eye on. *Nobody was going to disrespect her and get away with it ever again*. “Not unless you can back it up, which we both know you can’t.”

Nina laughed harshly, “What does Casey see in you? You’re so ghetto and classless-”

“Tell you what; I’ll keep it real classy and beat your ass with my heels on if it will make you feel better,” Sidra taunted softly as she walked towards her half-sister. “So, I guess I know what this is about, huh? *You want my man*. Don’t bother denying it; I saw you with my own two eyes, pantin’ after him like a bitch in heat. But he didn’t want you, did he?”

“Now that’s where you’re wrong!” Nina countered maliciously as she tucked her bob behind her ears and looked Sidra up and down contemptuously. “Casey and I were lovers, and he couldn’t get enough of me. I turned him away, and apparently, he settled for slumming-”

Her words were cut off as Sidra’s hands closed around her throat and squeezed tightly. It was killing her injured hand, but she was beyond rationality as she enjoyed the way Nina’s eyes were bulging from her reddening face. “*So, you think you’re just gonna come up in here and lie on my man?! Casey Sullivan is the finest man I have ever met, and I’ll be damned if you disrespect him like that! As a matter of fact, I think you need your lyin’ mouth washed out!*”

Sidra dragged her to the sink and pumped soap into her hand as Nina screeched and wiggled, trying to unsuccessfully evade Sidra who smeared it on her mouth. Then she went back to strangling her as she hissed, “*You feel like talkin’ some more shit?! Answer me!!!*”

The stall opened, and Ella walked out calmly toward the sink, washing her hands as if she didn’t see Sidra choking the life out of Nina who was sliding to the ground as she attempted to

unsuccessfully break the hold. Then she dried her hands and tapped Sidra on the shoulder politely.

“Not now, Ella! Can’t you see I’m busy?!” Sidra growled as Nina flopped around.

“I can see that, but I just want to tell you that if you kill her at your best friend’s wedding, I could lose my job,” Ella pointed out rationally as she watched Nina’s face turning redder and redder. “Your other best friend will fire me. Now, any other day, I’d say a ho gets what a ho deserves if she opens her mouth, but I *really* need this job, Sidra.”

Considering Ella’s words carefully, Sidra reluctantly released Nina, watching dispassionately as the heightened color receded from her sister’s makeup-smearred face. Part of her was elated to get the best of her, but the other part felt nauseous that it had come to this. Breathing heavily, she stepped back. “*Stay the fuck away from me, Nina. I won’t say it again.*”

Sidra walked over to the sink again and washed her hands, keeping her eyes on the other woman who was busy spitting hand soap out and swiping at her face as she struggled to catch her breath and get up. Their eyes met, and Sidra saw the burning hatred for her in Nina’s narrowed eyes. Sidra tossed her used paper towel in the trash and walked around her towards the exit, with Ella following behind her.

“*You’re nothing but a whore, just like your slut of a mother!*” Nina screeched from behind them. “*She couldn’t get a man of her own, so she preyed on my father! You’re the result of their sinning, you bastard-*”

The rest of her speech was cut off when Ella spun around and punched her in the face, knocking her out cold. Nina fell back against the wall with a thud before sliding down and slumping over. “If it’s one thing I hate, it’s a ho with no home trainin’.”

Sidra stared down at Nina lying unconscious and linked her arm with Ella’s. “Nicely done, El! I think this is the beginning of a beautiful relationship! You couldn’t resist joining in on the crazy, could you? It was calling your name. *Ella...come join us, Ella...*”

Ella groaned as she shook her hand. “That’s what I’m afraid of. Get out of here while I take care of the trash. Oh, and do me a favor?”

“Anything, what’s up?” Sidra asked warmly. Ella didn’t know it yet, but she’d earned a friend in Sidra for life.

“I know it’s a stretch, but do your best to behave yourself out there,” Ella pleaded as she hoisted the unconscious woman onto the sofa in the sitting room. She grabbed a plastic cup and filled it with water. “For your friends’ sake.”

“The fact that just keeping my mouth shut is considered a success, I make no promises,” Sidra warned jovially as she left, hearing Nina’s outraged sputters as the water hit her face. The smile left her face as she hit the stairs determinedly. *One down, one to go...*

## **Chapter Six**

The first thing Sidra did when she re-entered the main reception area was head straight for Nero. He saw her coming, correctly read the angry expression on her face, and hastily excused himself from the group he was speaking with to cut her off before she made a scene. He attempted to touch her arm, but the violent look Sidra gave him promised that he would probably draw back a bloody nub if he did. Nero glanced around furtively, but no one seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. His relief was short-lived when in a tone rife with menace she hissed, “*Outside. Now.*”

“Something has upset you, Sidra. Please let’s talk in private,” he urged softly and silently, she led the way to the outdoor deck. Nero was filled with pride at his daughter’s beauty and effortless grace. They walked in charged silence until they were on the beach and far away enough as not to be heard before she turned to face him.

“Why are you here, Nero?” Sidra demanded, watching as he shrugged his powerful shoulders helplessly.

“You refuse my calls and gifts and have rebuffed all of my attempts to get to know you. I just wanted to speak with you and see how you were doing. I thought perhaps we could come together and attempt to start over. Don’t let your inner demons win, *mija*. Please give us a chance. I’ve changed, Sidra. Let me show you,” he finished cajolingly.

Sidra stared at him in disbelief. From the time she met him when she was two until she was fourteen, he’d been in and out of her life, wreaking havoc along the way and giving no fucks about how his visits affected her or Lena. They were always with the promise that he would make it right and leave his wife for them. “Who did you change for Nero?! I hope it wasn’t me because I *still* won’t ever respect or like you! You’ve got everyone fooled, don’t you? The Sullivans,

Cecelia, Lena, and Nina, who by the way is playing a very dangerous game by fucking with me. My point is: I want nothing to do with anyone named Santos. Are we clear? *Nothing*. And FYI: My inner demons and I are besties, so I'm cool in that department, but *you* should be very afraid. Now please go back to whatever rock you crawled from under and hold your breath while you wait for me to be fooled by you again, okay?"

Nero caught her arm firmly as she turned away, and Sidra viciously snatched it back as he pleaded, "I'm sorry I lied and treated you so badly, but please don't take it out on Nina! She's always been a little bit...insecure where you are concerned. Your sister is *not* like you." His voice was filled with admiration. "She's too...emotional and...*weak*. *But not you, Sidra; you are like me*. A fighter by any means necessary who doesn't need her hand held or constant reassurance. Stop wasting your time tinkering around with music and come work with me. *By my side*. I could use someone as driven as you on my team."

"Did you not hear a word I said? Of course, you didn't because everything is all about you, Nero. Thank you again for confirming again exactly why I don't like you! As for Nina, well, *I'm* not the one seeking her out. Since it's your fault she's such a train wreck, you can just reassure her whenever she feels insecure, that *she* is the winner because she had the "wifeable" mommy while I had the "fuckable" one," Sidra finished with a sneer.

"THAT IS ENOUGH!!!" Nero thundered, his face red with anger. "I will not have you disrespecting your mother like that. Lena was the true love of my life, and if things had been different, I would have left Cecelia to marry her, but I could not leave Nina behind-"

“AND WHERE IS THE HONOR IN THAT?!” Sidra shouted at him. “YOU WERE MARRIED! YOU SHOULD NEVER HAVE DONE WHAT YOU DID! HOW DARE YOU USE NINA AS AN EXCUSE! YOU FILLED MY MOTHER’S HEAD WITH LIES-”

“IS THAT TRUE, DADDY?!” Nero and Sidra whirled around to find a devastated Nina standing there with Casey, who wore a furious expression. With a tormented cry, she threw herself into Casey’s arms and clutched at his tux as he steadied her.

“Nina, I don’t give a shit how fucked up your world just got! You are at the top of the V.I.P. list of people I’m handing ass whuppings to, so I suggest you get your scheming ass in your daddy’s arms and out of my man’s,” Sidra warned angrily as she stalked towards her, shaking her head in frustration.

*Bitches never learn...*

Nero wisely rushed forward and grabbed his elder daughter, muttering, “My apologies, Casey. I never meant for this to happen, especially today of all days. Sidra, perhaps when you calm down we can talk further. I know sometimes we regret the things we say in anger-”

“The only thing I regret is not having enough middle fingers to adequately express how I feel about either of you since you refuse to listen to my words,” Sidra said icily. “Last warning: Stay away from me, or I’ll tell the world I’m your *dirty* little secret. If not, then I plan to have a front row seat when karma ass fucks you with a machete dipped in alcohol.”

Casey’s own ass cheeks clenched at the image her words created. OUCH. “Nero, I think it would be best if you and Nina left. NOW. Allow me to escort you out,”



He watched as Nero hastened to do his bidding, leading his sobbing, older daughter away. Casey turned to Sidra and warned her furiously. “*Don’t you dare move from this spot! I’ll be right back.*”

He could feel her eyes on him the entire time that he kept his on the Santos’s. Nero signaled for a cab and then put Nina inside and shutting it before turning to address Casey.

“I’m so sorry you had to witness that, Casey,” Nero said with a solemn expression. “I’m not sure how much you heard, but I am sure it’s obvious to you that Sidra and I are on rocky terms. I thought that if I came here today perhaps she would be swayed by the joyous celebration of love-”

“And succumb to your persuasive argument and dynamic personality?” Casey interrupted with a mocking laugh. “*You really don’t know Sidra at all, do you?* But that’s not surprising to me considering that no one knew you even had another daughter! Now, I’m not a baker, so listen up because I won’t sugarcoat shit for you, motherfucker. I don’t know what you did to make her feel the way she does about you, but whatever it was, there ain’t no comin’ back from it. Sidra may be very unpredictable in some aspects, but in *this*, she’s very predictable and uncompromising.”

Casey slammed Nero against the side of the cab, causing the other man’s head to bounce off of the roof. He doubled over as Casey punched him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. “I also know that just like you do, that there are two sides to every story, and in this case, you’re an asshole in both of them. You came to my brother’s wedding under false pretenses, and I don’t take kindly to that. So, not only did you and Nina upset my woman, but you both mistook Sullivan kindness for weakness. *Stay. Away. From. Sidra.* Or next time I won’t be so nice about it. Understood?”

Casey didn't give him a chance to answer as he opened the passenger side and shoved the gasping man inside. He watched the cab leave before heading back to the beach as Sidra cautiously watched his approach.

It was the two of them alone on the beach, with the setting sun and the cool breeze whipping through their hair. If the situation wasn't so incredibly fucked up, it could have been enchantingly romantic. Casey stared at his enraged girlfriend as her dress swirled around her and that sexy haircut caressed her lovely face. Her chest heaved and her eyes were storm-filled. Sidra looked like a fiercely proud warrior and he knew that she was struggling to keep it together. His eyes dropped down to her stained gloves, and his anger grew. "You need to get a grip, Sidra."

"I know alright! Just bear with me for a moment!" she snapped, before closing her eyes and desperately trying to find her peace. *Fucking Nero and Nina. They always tried to make it all about them. Why couldn't they just leave her alone?! Just let her and her man be. Although she frequently traveled and kept a residence in New York, D.C. was where she spent most of her time because of Casey, and it was big enough to navigate around them. Of course, given that Nero and Casey were both attorneys...yeah it was bound to happen. Shit, shitter, fuckety-fuck!*

"I'm sorry about this, Casey," Sidra said numbly opening her eyes and still trying to control the waves of helpless fury. She closed her eyes, thinking of the surfers from this morning who'd mastered the waves, but now they were looming over her, and instead of trying to navigate them, she wanted to allow herself to get swept away and just forget everything. "I never meant-"

“SHUT. UP.” Casey cut her off sharply, and her eyes widened at his abrasive tone. “You need to be quiet right now and listen! *I’ve been nothin’ but patient with you.* Bendin’ over backward to accommodate your eccentricities because I thought we were on the same page of the same book. I would never have let you walk into a situation that could explode in your face, and judging from the marks around Nina’s neck, her joker-like appearance and the makeup on your gloves turn volatile, especially on your best friend’s wedding day!” Casey shoved his hands in his pants pockets because the urge to shake the shit out of her was growing stronger, and he prayed for the strength not to give in.

“Now pull your ass together because we are goin’ back in there, and we’re gonna pretend that this bullshit didn’t happen and celebrate the blissful union that took place here today like we should have already been doin’. If you can’t do that, then get the fuck out of here right now, and I’ll make excuses for you the same way you’ve obviously been doin’ for yourself! So, you tell me what’s it goin’ to be?” Casey demanded.

Sidra wanted to find a safe hiding place to pull herself together, but she remained transfixed by the look of in her boyfriend’s eyes. It was filled with anger, disgust, and disappointment. It spoke volumes to the state of their relationship right now, and it was all her fault. She raised her hands and pulled off the dirty gloves, allowing him to see the cuts all over her right hand, and he gave a harsh laugh. “*Jesus, Sidra!*”

“I choose to go back with you,” she said quietly, and Casey came forward and gently took her injured hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. And at his touch, the discord in her was soothed just a little. He led them back towards the reception. “For what it’s worth-”

“It’s not worth a damn right now, so put a smile on your face and let’s do this,” Casey said bluntly as they walked back in.

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“What’s up with Casey and the ‘realtor’?” Guy observed, and everyone at the table turned to watch Casey and Sidra reenter the reception area. Dinner was being served, but Casey led her to the dance floor, and they proceeded to dance stiffly. “They both look like they’d rather fuc-er, I mean, hug a cactus than each other.”

“I’m not really sure, but I’m sure they’ll get it worked out,” Kat offered as she bounced a happy baby Jack and made silly faces at him. “I have faith in them.”

Holt, who was sitting next to Kat, smiled warmly at her as he ate a piece of filet mignon. “That’s the kind of optimism I like to hear. Have a little faith, and everythin’ will be okay. Isn’t that right, love?”

“If you say so, Holton,” Kat replied with a cool smile, and Holt wanted to flip the damn table over to vent some of his frustration. Since that day when she’d shown up at his house three months ago, Katerina had pretty much checked out of their relationship. She’d flown to Europe the day after and stayed until he returned to Sweden. Then she flew back home only to leave again when he came back. She’d been home the last two weeks but had hardly left the Romankov estate. Their Skype sessions, as well as her texts, were sparse as she claimed to be busy with work. But what could he say with Alexei’s business taking him out of the country frequently?

Gnashing his teeth in annoyance, he cut a piece of grilled lobster, dipped it in sriracha butter, and offered her a piece.

Kat eyed the succulent morsel warily before opening her mouth and accepting it. She chewed it slowly, enjoying the spices and buttery flavor before turning to Guy. “I’m so happy you found your family! I heard you get the kids two weekends a month?”

A big grin split his face, and his eyes lit up with happiness. “Yeah, this weekend was supposed to be mine, but since I’m here, we switched. Next weekend, D.J. is goin’ with me to Baymoor to pick them up. Think we’ll take a boat tour before headin’ back home.”

“Are we gonna see if Ms. Eliza will let Camille come?” D.J., who was tearing into his surf ‘n’ turf with gusto, piped up from the other side of Jack. “I really want her to meet Mai Ling. Daddy said if she came then we could all go fly fishin’ again. Aunt Noelle and Mama promised to fry up all the fish we catch.”

Guy scoffed, “Pull that crap with someone else, son! I invented that game, except I had a treehouse instead of a boat. If you want Camille to come, then you better ask her Uncle Max over there *and* her Uncle Graham when we get to Baymoor.”

D.J. surveyed the tall man dancing with a pretty petite lady and grinned confidently as he plucked a white rose from the table’s centerpiece. He stood up and smoothed back his hair, causing his uncle Jack to pat him on the back and smile as he proudly proclaimed, “That’s how we do it, nephew!”

The adults watched with amusement as he walked up to the dancing couple and shyly presented the rose to a surprised Georgina. Then he turned to Max and held his hand out. Max shook it and listened to what D.J. was saying before glaring at Jack as Georgina nodded her head approvingly and kissed the little boy's cheek. Everyone at the table laughed as D.J. walked back to them with a victorious expression and threw his fists in the air like a prize fighter.

“That damn Sullivan charm,” Vivienne said fondly as she gave the little boy a hug before he sat down again. “Guy, things are going well with Fern, I take it? I met her when she and Georgina came to take my order, and I liked her a lot. She definitely knows what she's doing.”

Vivienne pretended not to notice the Siberian tiger assessing her when she mentioned her lingerie order and she smiled secretly into her champagne glass. *Oh goody! I see I've got your attention, Romankov!*

Guy beamed with pride at Vivienne's words. Fern was doing so well at *Feminine Intuition* that he couldn't help but be proud of her. Whenever he came to pick up the kids, she asked him a thousand questions about his work and shyly showed him her designs. Guy was relieved and proud of how happy and well-adjusted she and the kids were. He couldn't be more pleased by the way things turned out. From the beginning, Fern was adamant that he be in their lives, and Guy was relieved because he wasn't sure if she wanted anyone else with the last name Keetoowah-Marquez involved in their lives.

“She is excellent at what she does and really loves her job. *Feminine Intuition* is lucky to have her skill set,” he bragged. Everyone at the table turned to look at him, and he found himself turning beet red at their amused expressions. “What? I can't give props where they're due?!”

“Well, well, well. Looks like someone’s been bitten by the love bug,” Holt said, snickering as Guy discreetly gave him the finger.

“Y’all should see him when Ms. Fern comes to pick the kids up. He gets so tongue-tied, and his game is rougher than corn cob. Like I’d really believe he had girls comin’ to his treehouse,” D.J. snorted skeptically, and the adults started laughing.

“I’m just bein’ polite and respectful,” Guy said indignantly. “That’s how you’re supposed to treat ladies.” His expression quickly turned crafty. “Now, freaks on the other hand...”

“That expression is pure ‘fox in a henhouse’,” Vivienne commented. “Somebody get him a muzzle and some shame.”

“Unless you can get one who is both,” Guy mused aloud as he cut his steak and pretended to ponder the theory further. “Say perhaps a lady in the streets, but a-”

“Enough!” Kat groaned, frowning at him. “You have a smart-mouth answer for everything. Can it with the slick talk and innuendos! Kids are present.”

Guy laughed at her. “You’re right. I’ll try my hardest to resist, but it’s going to be *hard*. Oh. So. Very. HARD. Let’s see if I have the STAMINA to go all night-”

The adults groaned at him as a puzzled D.J. shook his head. Ruby laughed too, causing baby Jack to squeal with delight

and smack Kat's arms and she winced, prompting Holt to take him.

"Did you guys hear what the Easton family gave Darby and Avery?" Noelle inquired, changing the subject as she cut Ruby's meat and vegetables.

"Whatever it is, I imagine they spared no expense. The Easton's live quite lavishly," Ian stated and Alexei chimed in.

"They come from very humble beginnings and because of that, do nothing short of extravagant," he said. "Except for one of the younger sons, whom I believe has turned his back on the family business in favor of brewing beer."

"Well, the beer is definitely good; he sent us some," Noelle confirmed, "But apparently the Eastons have bought the newlyweds a condo in the French Quarter of New Orleans! When Darby played hockey, he and Grandfather Easton played poker against each other in a tournament that lasted two days in New Orleans and had a crazy good time. Avery explained that the letter from the Eastons said the condo was so that Darby would always have a piece of New Orleans to remember him by."

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Casey stood to the side with the other guests, watching as Avery prepared herself to throw the bouquet. His eyes narrowed when he noticed Sidra lurking at the very back of the crowd, clearly not making an attempt to be front and center. Since their dance, she'd kept a low-key presence, only



interacting with Ella and the kids. At dinner, she sat stiffly and pushed her food around while he picked up her slack and conversed with everyone. “It’s like she’s tryin’ to drive me outta my right fuckin’ mind.”

“I say cut her some slack,” Guy suggested quietly as he came to stand next to Casey. “Whatever she’s goin’ through can’t be easy. People like her have incredible strength and heart. They’re built from the fire that burned them and will protect all that they love from harm, except themselves. They need a champion whether they know it or not.”

Casey considered his words as he watched Sidra smile at an elderly woman and escort her back to her chair. “She’s thunder and lightnin’ wrapped in a rainbow, and I’d still choose to get lost in her every single time. But I can’t do it if she doesn’t allow me to see what she considers her worst so I can destroy it until she no longer sees it.”

There was a moment of silence before Guy made a gagging noise and teased, “That was so profoundly touchin’ and deep that I just want you to know that you are now my official #MCE-”

“I just want you to know that in my mind I’ve punched you really hard on your forehead six times already, Pip,” Casey said as he watched a radiant Avery place the bouquet in front of her with a huge smile. “Excuse me one second.”

The group of single women was a large one, and they all wore determined expressions that screamed ‘That bouquet is mine!’ as they kicked off their heels and swept their hair back from their faces. It was a foolishly dangerous territory to wade through, but after the way this day was going, it was perfectly fitting. That was the only reason Casey could later give for diving into the intense foray and snatching the bouquet along

with their superstitious dreams out of their reach and placing it into an appalled Sidra's shaking hands.

## Chapter Seven

Nero knocked on the door to Nina's suite and impatiently waited. He'd given her more than enough time to calm down since arriving back at their hotel two hours ago. Upon arrival, she'd stormed out of the cab and into the hotel not bothering to wait for him. Five minutes passed before he called out. "Nina, open the door please."

It was suddenly flung open as she walked away clad in only a towel and hopped back on the masseuse table face down as she prepared for her massage. Nero surveyed the large-boned blonde woman pummeling his daughter's back with distinct precision. "I just came to check on you and to see how you were doing, *mija*."

"How do you think I'm doing?" Nina's voice was surly, and he knew her expression matched. "That bitch attacked me with no provocation! I'm going to press charges against her."

Nero reached into his pants, pulled out his wallet, and handed the masseuse a crisp hundred-dollar bill. "Leave us. Come back in fifteen minutes, please."

With a grateful smile, the silent woman took the money and swiftly left the room. Nero waited for the door's soft click before turning to address Nina. "That was a stupid thing to do. Never discuss our business in front of the help. I'm going to

chalk your carelessness up to the shock of getting your ass kicked by your sister today.”

“SHE IS NOT MY SISTER!” Nina wrapped the towel tightly around her as she jumped off the bed to confront her father. “She is a mistake. YOUR MISTAKE. You just can’t leave well enough alone, can you, Papa? We shouldn’t have gone to that wedding. There was no one of importance to us there.”

“We went to pay our respects. Darby Sullivan is a good man. All the Sullivan men are,” he added gruffly, studying the bruises that were starting to show on her neck. He couldn’t help but be both amused and proud at the sight of them. His older daughter had no doubt instigated the conflict, and his younger one had easily handled her, needing no one to fight her battles, especially her boyfriend who’d threatened him.

Despite the way Casey roughed him up earlier, Nero had the utmost respect for his protégé. Unlike him, the younger man was protective of his woman and stood up for her. It was a trait Nero admired because like Sidra said, he was way too invested in himself to ever love anyone more than himself. Oh, he’d loved Lena as much as he could love anyone, but not enough to give up the fast track his career was on or ruin his stellar reputation to become the dishonorable man who’d left his wife and child for another woman that he’d gotten pregnant. There was also the fact that Lena wouldn’t be controlled, and he *needed* ass kissers around him more than anything else. They soothed the insecurities he had of being born to immigrant parents, something his father-in-law never let him forget along with his darker complexion. His late wife Cecelia had been perfect in that way. A homely girl, she’d been flattered that someone with his charm and good looks had even given her a second look and liked what he saw.

So Nero let her believe that, though the real attraction had been her father's prestigious firm and his money. By the time the supercilious asshole realized what was going on, Cecelia was head over heels in love with him, and he'd deflowered her. A wedding was a foregone conclusion. Children were not high on his wish list, but he knew he'd have to give Cecelia a child in order to continue his cushy lifestyle. Nina was a pretty baby, but like her mother, she demanded all of Nero's time, and their existence was predicated on his approval.

Sidra, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. She wanted nothing to do with him and couldn't care less if he dropped dead tomorrow. Completely independent, never had she asked him for anything, even before she found out how wrong he'd done her. She was perfectly fine with keeping their connection a secret. That was why he loved her most. Because she asked nothing of him and didn't try to stifle him with demands of his time, money, or attention, unlike the soul-sucking weakling in front of him that could easily be bribed with possessions. Nero hated disruptions of any kind to his life and dealt swiftly with them with lasting consequences be it child or adult.

"There was no need for you to provoke her. You've carried all this animosity that you still have toward your sister for far too long. I would like for the both of you to find a way to get along, Nina. I'm not going to live forever and want to make sure that you both are in a good place should anything happen to me," Nero explained patiently.

Nina vehemently shook her head. "Like HELL that will ever happen! She's always been jealous of me and wants everything that I have, including my friends! What Casey sees in her has me stupefied, but she's in for a rude awakening because I'm going to expose her for the gold digger that she is! Now if you'll excuse me, Papa, I need to get back to my massage. My neck is killing me!"

*This was the monster he'd created*, Nero realized bitterly. Just one more mistake in a *long* list of them that he'd made with people to get to where he wanted to be...

Nina watched as her father left and the masseuse reentered her suite. She lowered her neck and put her face back into the appropriate position on the massage table. *Soon, very soon, that slut would get what was due to her*, she vowed. She sighed with pleasure as the pummeling on her back resumed.

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The wedding was over, and the hour was late as Casey opened the door to their suite. Sidra followed behind and quietly closed it. When she faced forward, Casey was there, using both hands to rip the V-neck bodice of her dress as he snatched her to him, causing Avery's bouquet to fall from her hand as his lips crashed down on hers in a punishing kiss as her hands reached for his face. Sidra could feel all of his anger, and she hated that she'd hurt him so bad.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, and he kissed her harder, thrusting his tongue into and dominating her mouth as he steered her toward the bed. Sidra tried to pull back and speak. "I'm so sorry-"

"Stop talking and undress me," Casey ordered as his lips found her neck and his hands yanked her dress down, the sound of it tearing was loud in the room as it fell to the floor. He latched his lips back to hers as her hands divested him of his tux jacket, vest, and then unbuckled his pants. She ripped his

white dress shirt open as he hoisted her by her thighs into his arms and latched onto a plump nipple that quickly pebbled under his teeth and tongue before treating the other one to the same attention.

*“Yessss, baby!”* Sidra moaned as she arched into his mouth, offering more of herself. *“I’m so sorry I hurt you, baby! I never meant to!”*

Casey ignored her as he dropped her on the bed and then bent down and picked up his tie, shrugged out of his shirt, and pulled his boxers off. He was too angry to speak let alone allow her too. He stroked his enlarged shaft, watching as her eyes glazed over and she licked her lips hungrily. “Open up, Sid.”

Eagerly she obeyed and Casey quickly bound the tie around her mouth, effectively gagging her as he came down on her and nestled between her legs. Sidra’s eyes shot fire at him, and he smiled unpleasantly at her, his eyes were burning hot with rage. “I do believe I asked you to stop talking. *I. Don’t. Want. To. Hear. It.* Touch me if you want, but do *not* talk to me.”

Sidra’s heart ached at his words, even as her eyes closed in pleasure as he thrust one of his long, thick fingers into her wetness and proceeded to finger fuck her slowly at first, and then faster as he added another digit. Sidra moaned into the tie and eagerly lifted her hips to meet his fingers as his mouth closed over a distended nipple and suctioned tightly. Her nerves quivered throughout her body, and she became more aroused with each stroke and twirl of his long tongue as he tunneled through her wetness. Casey’s other hand paid homage to her swollen clit, and Sidra thought she would faint under his attention as she thrashed frantically against his tongue while he rubbed her g-spot and button methodically.

Casey laughed mockingly as he watched her face contort with agonizing ecstasy, and he slid down her body and threw her legs over his shoulders to suck her clit into his mouth. He gently bit down, and Sidra's muffled scream filled the room. Pleasure exploded through her body in shudders as the orgasm consumed her, causing her to squirt uncontrollably into his mouth. Her hands gripped his hair, and she ground her center into his face, offering even more of herself as he expertly lapped up all of her juices. Then Casey's hot tongue slid between her puffy, glistening lips and drove into her silken heat as his thumb teased her rosette and slowly pushed in, past her sphincter.

"*Aaaaah!*" Sidra grunted at the fullness as Casey started to move both his tongue and thumb in tandem, and his fingers pinched her oversensitive clit. Another orgasm was building higher and higher, and she tried to twist away from the sensory overload she was experiencing. Suddenly Casey rose up, and with her legs still hooked on his shoulders, rammed his granite hard cock into her. Sidra came in a blinding white hot flash, screaming as he channeled in and out of her sodden pussy. She clung to him, shaking like a junkie in withdrawal and crying out with every powerful thrust he gave as molten pleasure spread through her body. Sweat glistened on their bodies as they came together over and over again. Their guttural sounds of pleasure filled the room, and the air was permeated with the aroma of their lovemaking.

The tingling in his balls and spine signaled his release was imminent, but Casey wouldn't stop as he worked her over thoroughly, leaving no doubt that he owned her and this addicting pussy. But it wasn't enough for him. *He had to make her understand who she belonged to!* He yanked the tie from her mouth and used it to pull her forward as his hips pummeled into her. Sidra cried out as her hands slid down to cup his ass and urge him on as he held her gaze with those blazing hazel eyes she loved so much. Drowning in sensations so sublime they felt surreal, Sidra could no longer deny him

because he owned her body and soul. And it was with relief that she finally admitted to him rawly, *“I love you, Casey Sullivan! Always and forever. There will never be anyone else for me. My love for you is endless. Please forgive me for hurting you. I won’t ever do it again. I would rather die than hurt you.”*

Casey closed his eyes against his hot tears and lowered her legs, allowing her to wrap them around his as he buried his face in her neck, breathing her in as she held him close. Chanting into his ear, “I love you, Casey forever and ever” over and over again until he too came, pouring his heart and soul into her.

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*Meanwhile, throughout the hotel...*

Alexei leaned against Vivienne’s room door and fed her tantalizing kiss after kiss outside of her hotel room until she was clinging helplessly to him as she eagerly received them. Her eyes were dilated and filled with yearning when he finally opened the door behind her. Alexei willed himself not to follow her in smiling regretfully as he huskily stated, “You looked so beautiful in this dress, my dear. I couldn’t stop staring at you.” His lips trailed to her jaw as his hand wound in her hair and held her in place to whisper in her ear. “Never forget who you belong to again. I know my truth, and you should never have forgotten yours. Goodnight, Vivi.”



It was with great reluctance that he released her from his hold and they stared at each other with restrained longing. Alexei was glad Vivienne didn't realize the extent he would go to protect her, and he prayed she never had to find out. Someone wanted to keep him and his wife separated and would do whatever they needed to make it happen. The amount of effort they'd gone to make that happen was nothing compared to the effort he was now making to find them. He could not wait to introduce them to 'The Wolf'.

"Oh, just one second. I wanted to give you something," she whispered back and disappeared into the room. Fifteen seconds later she came back, and his mouth dried at the sight of her clad only in a sheer red lace bodysuit and the gilded stilettos she'd worn to the wedding as she handed him the seafoam green dress she'd just been wearing. "It was a lovely dress. Thank you for buying it for me," she smiled seductively at him as she caressed his jaw. "Goodnight, Alexei."

Vivienne attempted to close the door, but he pushed it open and followed her in, kicking it shut behind him as he pulled her closer for another sizzling kiss and palmed her ass. "Indeed, it will be, Mrs. Romankov. Indeed, it will be."

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Noelle quietly let herself into her suite so as not to wake the babies when she was suddenly yanked in and pulled against her husband's muscular body. Jack's lips covered hers as his hands worked the zipper of her dress until it fell around her feet. She moaned softly into his mouth as one arm slid involuntarily around his neck and the other to his tumescent erection for a long stroke as he delved deep into the recesses

of her mouth. Then remembering, she suddenly pulled away, hissing, “*Jack! You’re naked! Where are the kids???*”

Jack quickly removed her strapless bra, sighing in appreciation at the reveal of her large breasts and curvy hips. Motherhood had given her more curves for him to love, and he couldn’t get enough of them. “Kat has the kids tonight, love.”

Relaxing, Noelle grinned wickedly. “Well then what are we waiting for?”

“My thoughts exactly, darlin’,” he growled as he scooped her up and led her to the bathroom where she gasped in delight. The floor was covered in red rose petals. He had a bottle of champagne chilling, and the huge tub was filled with a fragrant bubble bath.

“I love you, husband,” Noelle sighed happily as he gently placed her in the warm water and then got in across from her.

Jack beckoned to her with his finger and a heart-stopping smile. “Come show me how much, darlin’.”

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Kat tucked the blanket around a sleeping D.J. and kissed his cheek before going to double-check on a sleeping Ruby and baby Jack. Silently, she gave thanks for being three for three.

Her phone buzzed, and she knew it was Holt. She contemplated ignoring it but knew he would just come knocking at her door. Since that day when he'd shut her out and hurt her feelings, Kat had been distancing herself from him. How foolish she'd been to come hauling ass back to The Row only for him to ignore her. She wasn't one to sit around waiting for a man to pay attention to her, so she threw herself back into work and finishing upcoming collections for her jewelry line *Vixen*.

But she found herself curious about what he would be doing in Sweden so soon and decided to visit. After getting the address from her father's ever-efficient secretary Magda, she'd given it to the driver, and they'd pulled up to an estate so big and lavish that it made her family home look like a clubhouse. Immediately, she'd called Magda to see if she'd made a mistake, and the older woman was adamant that she had not.

*Kat was just about to instruct the driver to leave when the ornate front doors opened to reveal a group of elegantly dressed men and women that included Holton Brammer, carpenter extraordinaire. Only- he didn't look like her Holt. Gone was the simple man of tee-shirts and jeans, shoulder-length blonde hair, and scruffy beard. In his place was a super sleek European dressed in a slim-cut charcoal gray suit, and his thick blonde hair was pulled into a sleek bun atop his head. Even his beard was different and trimmed to a point three inches below his chin. The expensive Rolex gleaming on his wrist was easily fifty thousand dollars, and he wore it with such normalcy that it scared her how easily he'd morphed into another person.*

*Desperate for reassurance, she'd texted him:*

*I miss you. How are you doing?*

*Kat watched as he pulled his phone out and glanced at it briefly before putting it back into his suit pocket without replying to her. Devastated, she'd instructed the driver to leave. It was only hours later that she'd received a text:*

*Sorry, I was out hunting with my cousins. Call me back.*

Since receiving that text, she'd avoided him as much as she could, even going so far as having a child in her lap all night tonight to avoid his nearness. If he was aware of what she was doing, he gave no indication as he patiently helped her with the children. Although, she was a bit peeved that he hadn't insisted she partake in the bouquet throwing. When he asked, she just shrugged her shoulders. "I've already caught one once, there's no need to do it again."

In the end, she was glad that she hadn't participated in that fiasco as Casey proved how suicidal he was. With a sigh of regret, she looked at her phone and read his text.

*I'd like to see you. Can I come to you?*

Kat worried her bottom lip before taking a picture of the three sleeping children. She sent him the pic with a text.

*Sorry, not tonight.*

Then she turned her phone off and slipped into bed. Ever since she was a teenager, she'd been hyper-aware of Holt. He was just as good-looking as her brothers and Guy, but her feelings were anything but brotherly when he looked at her with his smoldering blue gaze, causing a slow heat to rise in her stomach and her throat to close up. It wasn't until two and a half years ago that Holt had given any indication that he felt remotely the same. But after his treatment of her and what

she'd seen in Sweden, they were clearly not on the same page, so it was best to keep it moving.

## Chapter Eight

The next morning, Sidra opened her bleary eyes and blinked at the bright sunlight coming through the large bay windows of the suite. The balcony doors were open, and a cool breeze was coming through the bedroom. She sat up slowly, pulling the sheet with her to cover her nakedness and winced at the ache in her back and the tenderness between her legs. Casey was in beast mode and had shown no mercy last night as he took her over and over again, making her scream her love for him. But not once had he said the words back.

She yawned and swiped her matted hair from her face, gasping as she came away with a black streak. Crap, she'd gone to sleep with her makeup on. She'd been too tired to move, but he had been so worth it. There was a knock on the door, and Sidra looked to her left, but Casey was no longer in bed. A sound by the patio caught her attention, and a moment later, he appeared looking fresh, recharged and insanely handsome in a pair of cargo khakis and a blue linen shirt. She looked down at the black streak on her hand and shuddered, imagining what she looked like.

“*Gaaah!* Do you ever turn it off?” she growled sourly as he passed by the bed to answer the door.

“Turn what off?” he asked curiously, reaching for his wallet and staring at her matted hair and bite marks on her shoulder with primal satisfaction. Sidra looked like a woman who'd been thoroughly loved.

“Your golden-boy attractiveness,” she grumbled and he grinned smugly.

“Nope, sorry there’s no off switch. Besides, not all of us are auditioning to be the next Hamburglar like yourself. I ordered us breakfast, so you should get out of bed and make yourself... presentable.” He eyed her hair, and when he kept walking, she stuck her tongue out behind his back.

Once he disappeared from her sight, she staggered to the bathroom and gave a small cry of dismay. She had love marks on her breasts, thighs, and...yep, her ass too. Her cute hairstyle was no more, and it looked like a rat had fallen asleep on her head. *What a jerk!*

Sidra brushed her teeth and then took a quick shower. Her hair was a jumble of curls, but there was nothing she could do about it, so she left it that way. As she slathered on olive butter body lotion, she wondered what would happen now between her and Casey. Whatever happened next, she needed to make sure he knew all of her crazy. There was no other way to do that except to introduce him to it and let him see for himself. As Sidra made up her mind to do just that, there was a niggling sense that something was escaping her, but she just couldn’t put her finger on it...

Casey pounded on the door. “Let’s go, ‘Grumpy Cat’! Breakfast is gettin’ cold!”

“Yes, sir, drill sergeant,” she called back to him and quickly threw on her silk robe before opening the door. She walked out onto the patio, and Casey stood up and pulled her chair out, making sure she was situated before sitting down again. It killed Sidra to think that little things like that she’d taken for granted. Sidra looked at the table and saw he’d ordered her favorites: avocado egg toast, a bowl of fresh fruit, granola, and

yogurt. For himself, Casey ordered bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs, and French toast.

“Hungry much?” she teased, picking up a slice of toast and taking a bite. He gave her a roguish wink before digging in.

“Starvin’ after the night I had,” Casey countered, enjoying the way she flushed and lowered her eyes with embarrassment. “You ready to talk because I’m ready to listen, and it’s a one-time offer.”

Sidra slowly chewed her food as she looked out at the ocean. “My mother Lena was a receptionist at the firm Nero first worked for in D.C. According to my mother, it was love at first sight for him. He took one look at her and was smitten, but he was already married to his boss’s daughter Cecelia. His father-in-law Mauricio, an aristocratic Spaniard, disliked him for not only daring to court his daughter but because he was also a ‘lowly’ Dominican. My mother, who soon became his personal secretary, was always adamant that Mauricio was an elitist and talked crap behind his son-in-law’s back. She felt bad for Nero because she could see how hard he was trying to win Mauricio’s approval but to no avail. Soon, Lena was consoling him; one thing led to another, and they started sleeping together. My mother claims she tried to break it off because she needed her job, but Nero always managed to change her mind.

He said that he would leave his wife when he made it on his own. That Mauricio would destroy him if he left Cecelia right now. The year that he won his ‘infamous’ case, Cecelia became pregnant so he ‘had to’ stay with her. My mother left the firm and moved back to New York. She got another receptionist job and struggled until she ‘accidentally’,” Sidra’s voice turned bitter as she used air quotations and continued, “ran into Nero again at a lawyer’s convention.”



“Why do you say it like that?” Casey asked softly, wishing he could ease the tension and bitterness from her expression. He knew this was hard for her, but she would feel so much better when she was done. He could still remember his stomach heaving when he spoke to “Doc” for the first time about his parents.

“At the time, Lena Barton didn’t do anything that she would not benefit from or be inconvenienced by,” Sidra said harshly. “Plus, one of my cousins spitefully spilled the beans at a holiday gathering.”

*She was nine, and it had been another bad start to the holiday as Lena wailed and argued with Nero about leaving her. She’d yelled at Sidra the whole way to Granny’s house about being cuter and more engaging so “Daddy” would want to stay longer. As usual, when they entered the house, Lena went to repair her makeup. The adults exchanged knowing looks and then came the whispers. Sidra squared her shoulders and marched right into the crowd and started tap dancing to divert their attention. Then she told joke after joke until Lena reappeared cool, calm, and collected. Her cousins rolled their eyes at her as the adults praised her. It was later in the kitchen that they ganged up on her with Tanya leading the way.*

*“You always comin’ over here and showin’ your behind, Sidra! My mama says your mama is nothing but a skeezin’ ho, and that’s how she got your daddy,” Tanya sneered.*

*Sidra saw red as she jumped on her older cousin and took her along with the table that held their Thanksgiving dinner to the floor. Tanya got her ass whapped twice. Once by Sidra and then by their granny Evie. Sidra also got the switch from Evie and a blistering lecture from Lena for “embarrassing” her.*

“Anyways, they ran into each other and yadda, yadda, yadda. He’s back in her bed, and nine months later, I entered the world. Nero had set her up in our brownstone and was paying all the bills. I never lacked for anything, and Lena stayed ready for Nero’s bi-weekly visits. By then, she was starting to get attention from other men, and she threatened Nero’s hand with them. She wanted him to leave Cecelia and Nina for us, but he kept putting her off. She got really mental with each visit until she offered him an ultimatum, and he chose his family. So, she cut him off and didn’t allow him to see me for a couple of years.”

“So, what did Nero do then?” Casey asked harshly. If he had a child, nothing and no one in the world would keep him out of their life, fuck a crazy baby mama. Judging from what he *hadn’t* seen at the Santos home, Nero didn’t feel the same way

“What he always does,” Sidra replied tiredly. “He did HIM. Nero loves no one more than Nero, and he couldn’t stand Lena’s rejection of him. So, he chased her around and she played keep away. What was he going to do? Take her to court and fight for custody?? NO ONE KNEW ABOUT ME. Do you know how I found out I had a sister???”

Casey shook his head wordlessly, and Sidra laughed a hard ugly laugh that chilled him to the bone. He hated to see and feel her pain like this but knew she had to keep going.

“I was twelve the first time Lena sent me to visit him in Virginia for two weeks....”

*Nero had met her on the tarmac with balloons and a small pink rose bouquet. Standing next to him was an older Hispanic woman in a simple black shirtdress. The woman’s features were severe looking, from her beady eyes to her pointy chin, but when she smiled, her face radiated warmth.*

*“There’s my princess!” Nero shouted with a big grin, and Sidra nodded at him while keeping her eyes on the woman. “How’s Daddy’s little girl? I missed you so much, mija! Give me a hug!”*

*Reluctantly, Sidra gave him a hug, but if he noticed her stiff demeanor, he wasn’t fazed by it as he squeezed her tightly and kissed her cheek. “Sidra, I’d like you to meet my aunt. This is your Tia Rocio. She’s come to stay with us and is going to watch you while I work.”*

*“But I thought you were taking time off,” Sidra said accusingly as she continued to eye Tia Rocio suspiciously. “You told Mommy that you were.”*

*Nero cupped her chin and looked into her eyes, “I’m sorry, but I’m working an important case. So Tia will stay with you okay? But I promise you we will have fun.”*

*He drove them to a small but nice home in an expensive neighborhood that had tons of big houses and told her this was his home.*

*“I thought your home would be bigger,” Sidra observed with a frown as she looked around, noticing the houses on either side of this one were enormous. “Why did they allow this small house to be built in this neighborhood?”*

*Nero laughed at her question, but Tia Rocio remained silent, and Sidra could feel the other woman’s disapproving vibes as he said with pride, “Didn’t I tell you she was smart? That’s MY daughter!”*

*The inside of the home was twice as big as the one Sidra shared with her mother but very simple. She walked around as Nero brought her bags in, and then he took her by the hand and showed Sidra her bedroom. “This is your room, baby! Do you like it?”*

*Sidra could only stare with distaste at the pink explosion that she would sleep in. It was frilly and pink on pink on pink. So over the top girly that she wondered why Nero thought she would like it. “It’s awful. Who likes this much pink?! No, thank you. I’ll sleep on the sofa in the living room.”*

*This seemed to make Nero incredibly happy as he shared a look with Rocio. “So, you are not an over the top girly-girl, eh?”*

*That night for dinner, they ate Dominican Locrio De Pollo, a savory chicken and rice dish with olives and capers, and Nero beamed with pride as Sidra had a second helping. “Yes, eat some more, mija! You should embrace your Dominican roots. For dessert, we will have tres leches cake.”*

*And that’s how Sidra’s visit went. She ate plenty of Dominican food, and Tia Rocio would take her to the pool, the movies, and the library. Nero would be home in time to say goodnight to her. The second week of her visit, Nero apologized for working so much and flew Sidra and Tia Rocio to Disneyworld. Sidra didn’t really mind; she actually preferred the elderly lady’s quiet demeanor to Nero’s over-attentive one, which he smothered her to death with. From Disneyworld, she was flown back home to New York. Lena grilled her incessantly about her visit, and to placate her mother and shut her up, Sidra insisted that she had an amazing time with her father. Only Noelle and Avery knew different.*

*The next year passed uneventfully. Nero was still busy courting her mother, trying to get back into her good graces and her bed while Lena just strung him along, holding out for divorce. Sidra visited Nero again, and they resumed the same routine from before. Except this visit, Tia Rocio seemed agitated by Sidra's indifference to Nero. She insisted that Sidra demand more of his time. Sidra tried to explain that she preferred it when he wasn't around, but this upset Tia Rocio greatly.*

*"You have to demand your due, Sidrina!" She would explain in her heavy accent. "Do not just be accepting of what is. YOU MUST ALWAYS QUESTION WHAT IS TOLD TO YOU!!! A dog hangs his head when shamed, but a snake will always look you in the eye no matter their behavior! KNOW YOUR WORTH. Do you understand me???"*

*"Yes, Tia," Sidra would say automatically, eager to drop the subject. "Now can we go to the library?"*

*It would be only a year later that Sidra would wish she'd paid more attention to Tia Rocio's words.*

*The next year, Sidra turned fourteen and Tia Rocio fell ill. Nero was freaking out because she couldn't take Sidra out of the house, but she insisted it wasn't a big deal. Nero insisted that she not go outside by herself because security did heavy racial profiling. Sidra promised she wouldn't. So she cared for Tia and just enjoyed the peace and quiet. There was no fawning from Nero and "I bet this is the year he leaves Cecelia for me" from Lena.*

*By the next day, Sidra was bored out of her mind. Nero had already left for the day, and she'd fed Tia Rocio breakfast. After straightening the kitchen and watching three episodes of Judge Judy in a row, she was going stir crazy. She decided to check out the backyard. Quietly, Sidra let herself out and sat*

*down at the patio table in the small yard. Suddenly, she heard a splash from the house on the right side of her followed by a bunch of people laughing. Curiously, she walked between the huge bushes and saw a gate. On the other side of the gate were a group of older teenage girls laying out by a huge pool. On the low diving board was a tall, pretty Hispanic girl with dark hair in a minuscule bikini. She posed for her friends and laughed before calling, "Papa, you're not watching me! Pay attention!"*

*"Attention whore much?" Sidra snorted to herself then froze as a man's familiar voice replied.*

*"Yes, I'm watching you, Nina! Show us how it's done!" Sidra followed the voice, and there was Nero lying on a lounge chair, wearing swim trunks as he talked on the phone and waved his cigar for "Nina" to proceed. Numbly, Sidra watched as the older girl, HER SISTER, executed a perfect dive into the water as her friends applauded her. She appeared by the end of the pool closest to Sidra who forgot to hide as Nina saw her and screamed.*

*"Daddy! Some nigger broke into the guest house! Call the cops!" she shrieked, causing Nero and her friends to jump up.*

*Sidra's eyes met Nero's, and he seemed angry...AT HER. Completely numb, she turned away and walked back into the house. Once inside, she called her mother and told her everything. Lena was furious and told her daughter to pack her things and that she would call her back. Sidra obeyed and went to say goodbye to Tia Rocio who looked sad about her departure.*

*"I'm so sorry, Sidrina. Nero made me swear not to tell you, or he wouldn't send money back to his other aunts and uncles," she said sorrowfully as she clasped Sidra's hands tightly.*

*“Never let anyone take advantage of your kindness again!  
ALWAYS KNOW YOUR WORTH!”*

*“Take care of yourself, Tia Rocio,” Sidra said tearfully, knowing this day would be the last that she had any contact with Nero or anyone associated with him. Then Lena called back and told her to wait outside for the cab that would take her to the airport. Sidra listened to her mother’s furious voice and wrote down the flight information before going outside to wait.*

*Sidra was sitting in the grass waiting when Nina stormed up to her. Sidra stood up to meet her and immediately felt awkward and gangly next to the beautiful girl. Nina reached her and tossed her black curls over her shoulder as she imperiously demanded “What the fuck are you still doing here? Get your black ass out of here!”*

*“Slow your roll before I fast forward your beat down,” Sidra warned, and Nina gasped in outrage. “I’m here because my father flew me out here like he has for the last three years. Do you understand that? I’ve spent two weeks of my summers in this house for the last THREE. YEARS.”*

*When Nina shook her head in denial, Sidra tried a different tactic. “Look, it’s obvious neither one of us knew about the other, so there’s no need to be hostile alright? Let’s just start over. I’m Sidra Jane Barton, and I live in Bed-Stuy, New York.”*

*But Nina wasn’t trying to hear it. “Are you trying to accuse MY daddy Nero Santos of being YOUR father as well?!” Nina fumed as her hands formed claws. Sidra shifted and braced herself for the diva’s first move. “What would my father be doing slumming with some black puta when he has my beautiful mother?!”*

*Lena may have been many questionable things to Sidra, but she wasn't some "black puta". But she was the woman who'd shown her daughter how to throw a mean right hook, which Sidra proudly demonstrated as she caught Nina in her jaw, watching with satisfaction as the older girl spun around and landed flat on her ass. "Clearly, your "beautiful mother" just sat around looking beautiful instead of teaching you some life skills. Don't ever disrespect my mother again, bitch."*

*Nero saw the whole thing as he was walking up and so did the cab driver who arrived at the same time. "Sidra! Why would you do such a thing?! Nina, are you okay?"*

*"I want to press charges against her, Daddy!" Nina cried as she stumbled to her feet. Sidra smiled with satisfaction at Nina's jaw. She would definitely be needing an ice pack.*

*"I did that to her because she had it coming," Sidra said sweetly. "Go to hell, Nero and make it a one-way trip for all of our sakes."*

*"That sorry motherfucker," Casey growled and Sidra glanced at him in surprise. She'd almost forgotten he was there as she spoke about her past out loud.*

*"That was the last I saw of him until I was eighteen. He attended my high school*

*graduation under the guise of making a donation to my school. Supposedly, he and my*

*mother have made peace, but I'm not built like that."*

*Sidra said ruefully. "I'm more of a*

*'you're dead to me and keep it moving'. I briefly entertained the thought of possibly*



having a relationship with Nina, but she's fucked on a whole other level. I'm not even sure Cecelia ever knew about me or my mother. Knowing Nero, he manipulated Nina in some way. But I don't care. I just want to be Santos-free forever. So now you know. I'm the illegitimate daughter of a man that is so consumed by himself he doesn't give a damn about the destruction he leaves in his wake."

## **Chapter Nine**

Casey leaned against the balcony railing, still trying to absorb Sidra's story. Nero hid his daughter away in his guest house for three summers. It was like a modern day "Flowers In The Attic" unbeknownst to her. It explained so much of her personality and her efforts to never expose her pain or weakness. When he looked at her sitting so still in her chair, Casey could easily picture her as a little girl craving some normalcy in her home life. But this wasn't everything, he could tell. Nero had nothing to do with him loving her and vice versa. As crazy as this story was, he knew he hadn't heard all of it, and they wouldn't be leaving the room until they did.

"I'm really sorry that all of that happened to you, darlin'. If I could take your pain away, I would. I just need you to finish the rest of your story because I feel like the real reason you won't share yourself the way you want to still hasn't been revealed completely to me." Casey said shrewdly.

Sidra smiled wanly. “Oh, you know me so well, Sullivan?”

“Inside and out, Sid,” Casey replied confidently, as she stood up and walked over to him while he enjoyed the view of the white satin robe clinging to her curves as the wind blew her curls around. She reached him, and he enveloped her in his arms. Casey loved the way she stood on her tiptoes to wrap her arms around his neck, eager to reach him. They fit together perfectly, and this is where they both felt most complete. *“I. Know. You. And I’ve got you as long as you believe in me and us.”*

“That’s good because today is Sunday, and if you don’t have any other plans, I’d like us to pack up now and take a drive. I can show you better than I can tell you,” Sidra said softly and kissed his lips. Of course, one kiss was never enough, and their tongues were soon melding together as Casey untied her robe and opened it. He licked his lips in anticipation as her beautiful milk chocolate body was revealed in the morning sun. Sidra fluttered her lashes at him as her hands slid underneath his shirt and touched his abdomen. She smiled as his breath caught in response, and she unbuckled his shorts and pulled those as well as his briefs down. His long thick erection sprung into her palms.

Casey covered her lips with his as her hands gently stroked him. Against her lips, he questioned, “What are you doin’, love?”

Sidra nipped his bottom lip. “I’m *still* hungry, baby.”

“Then take me just how I like it,” he ordered thickly, shuddering in her hands as she lightly cupped his balls. “Let me see you work that pretty mouth.”

Sidra sank to her knees, and she was eye level with his cock and whimpered, silently marveling at the flawlessness of her man's dick. She would easily categorize it as a wonder of the world. Thick and long, the head was coated in precum. Sidra wrapped both hands around the base and started to stroke up and down. Casey shoved his hands into her curls to hold her in place. She looked at his face and found him watching her in pained concentration. Teasingly, she stroked him and blew on the large mushroomed head, smiling as he jerked in response.

“Don't fuck around with me, Sid,” Casey hissed as those skilled hands drew more liquid from his cock. “Open your mouth and take your dick.”

Sidra licked the oozing liquid from the head and closed her eyes, relishing the taste of his excitement as the fingers in her hair tightened. He tasted so good, and she couldn't get enough of him. Casey was her nirvana, the perfect combination of happiness and horniness for her. “Damn, baby, you like it, huh?” she asked throatily, opening her eyes to meet his hooded gaze again.

“Hell yes.” Casey's admission was guttural as the breeze cooled the sweat forming on his back.

“Then let me see you work my dick,” she demanded with a sultry gaze as she closed her lips over him until he hit the back of her throat. Casey gave a shout and then bit his lips as he tried to restrain himself from thrusting his dick all the way down her throat. *Goddamn, Sidra was driving him out of his mind as she worked that magic mouth*, he thought, feeling her skilled fingers lovingly caressing his balls while sliding her lips and tongue up and down on his dick, deep-throating him as far as she could, her tongue swirling round and round as she stroked him feverishly. Casey groaned, feeling the pressure building inside of him as he frantically fucked her mouth.

Sidra stayed with him, slurping, licking, and fondling him; her eyes locked with his until he could bear it no more. The pull of her talented lips, skilled tongue, and fingers were driving him to the brink with a cringe-worthy tempo. When that time came, he threw his head back, eyes closed in ecstasy, shouting her name hoarsely as he exploded into her mouth. Sidra swallowed every drop, but he remained hard. She rose to her feet and dropped her robe because she knew what was coming next. Her man was just getting started as he dragged her to a lounge chair, lay down, and pulled her on top of him. They groaned in unison as she sank her constricted, dripping pussy onto his swollen cock and her hands slid into his thick hair. She lowered her upper body, and their lips met in a passionate kiss before they broke away and gazed into each other's eyes lovingly. Without words, they were able to convey how important they were to each other.

“I believe it's *my* turn to see you work your dick,” Casey rasped as he surged his hips up and Sidra's came down. Soon they were swept away again in the stormy passion of their lovemaking that could only be found with one another.

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The drive back to New York was filled with heavy traffic, yet it was a relaxing one for the couple. Before hitting the road, they stopped at a little country market store, and Sidra filled their picnic basket with Casey's favorite strawberry Italian soda, water, lemon sugar cookies, and prosciutto, turkey, and provolone with pesto paninis.

Casey drove and held her hand as they talked and listened to the radio. He was happy they were making progress and were

now on their way to her grandmother's house. "Are you nervous?"

Sidra smiled calmly but kept her gaze ahead. "No, but you're going to be the only white person there, so don't say I didn't warn you."

"Does that bother you?" Casey glanced at her warily before putting his eyes back on the road.

"Boy, why would that bother me?" Sidra laughed heartily. "Is it because you're supposed to be my 'dirty white secret' that I'm too ashamed to acknowledge?"

Casey could feel the heat creeping up his face and his jaw ticked. "Well, if this whole thing hadn't happened with Nero, would this surprise meeting even be happenin'?"

Sidra hated to admit it, but she wanted to show him now more than ever how important he was to her. Taking a deep breath, she slowly exhaled and answered, "Honestly? No. I love you and am so proud to be your girlfriend, but I could have gone my whole life avoiding this meeting. Just know that it has nothing to do with you as a person, and you will be sorely tested."

"I hate how you keep saying that," Casey snapped, pulling his hand away to navigate a turn. "Let's not talk about it anymore."

"Fine, let's talk about how I didn't appreciate being gagged last night, 'Christian Cray'," she snapped back and Casey laughed at her. "I'd say turnabout is fair play. So when you

wake up bound and gagged with that *special toy* you like to use on me in *your as-*”

He turned the radio up loudly, deliberately cutting her off, and Dominick Harris’s voice filled the car as he softly sang Bison Blue’s latest hit “Breakaway”. *Fucking great*, Casey thought bitterly as Sidra squealed with excitement.

“It’s our song!” She started snapping her fingers in time to the beat and sang along.

***Baby, can you break away!***

***I can’t bear not seein’ your pretty face.***

***I need you in my space; oh, say you’ll stay!***

“Is this the one you worked on, baby? It sounds great. I don’t care for the lyrics, but I love the beat you created,” Casey offered magnanimously. “The lyrics sound like the schmuck is conspirin’ to take what doesn’t belong to him.”

“Thanks, boo! Dom has been really great about giving me time to feel out the music before presenting it to him. I’ve learned so much in the time we’ve been working together, and he’s incredibly supportive,” Sidra gushed.

“I’m glad it’s all workin’ out, love,” Casey ground out as the song ended, and the female deejay spoke up.

*“I’m Kate the Creeper and that was the latest from Bison Blue called “Breakaway”! We’re so lucky that my man Dominick Harris stopped by to introduce it! Dom, always a pleasure to have you on the show; any shout outs you’d like to give before sign-off?”*

*Dominick's smooth voice filled the car, and Casey fought the urge to turn the channel as Sidra leaned forward to listen. "Yeah, I'd like to give a shout out to my band members, all my fans for supporting us, and our lovely resident deejay Sidra Barton."*

*"How ARE things with your deejay? She's quite the looker, and there've been rumors plaguing you for a while now that you're hooking up. Any of them true?" Kate The Creeper asked eagerly.*

*Dominick laughed before replying in a lowered voice, "Seriously, Kate? I could definitely think of worse rumors than being linked to a woman as beautiful as Sidra..."*

*"She is very sexy," Kate agreed and added with a bawdy laugh, "Hell, I'd do her too!"*

*Then she and Dominick shared a conspiratorial laugh.*

Seeing red, Casey turned the radio off and continued to drive, his mind made up. As soon as he saw that little motherfucker again, he was going to *stomp* his bitch-ass into the ground.

Sidra cleared her throat and covered his fist with her hand. "He doesn't mean anything by it, baby. I'll address it as soon as I see him."

"He means exactly what he says, and I will be the one to address it with him, darlin'." Casey's menacing tone promised violence that he would ensure was carried out.

“Dominick is just play-” Sidra tried to explain, but the look Casey gave her was pure savagery.

“You really gonna try and defend him to me? Because if so, I’ll put your ass out right now, and he can come get you,” Casey offered unpleasantly and Sidra bristled.

“Then fucking put me out because correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t it just yesterday you allowed my sister to snuggle up in your arms?” Sidra snarled, and Casey shook his head in denial.

“She *threw* herself at me,” Casey said defensively. “What did you want me to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know...maybe move to the side and let the bitch eat dust?” Sidra suggested sweetly. “You know good and well ain’t shit going on between me and Dominick! Find a spot; we’re here.”

They pulled up to a large, sprawling ranch style house, found a parking spot amongst the numerous cars already there, and silently got out of the car. Casey snatched her hand up, and she viciously pinched his. Inwardly, he winced and cursed his jealousy. They reached the house, and there were six young girls in the front yard playing. They stopped when Sidra greeted them, still holding Casey’s hand, and they just stared at him. Sidra introduced them, but they barely said a word when he greeted them. *That was weird*, he thought to himself as Sidra led him up the expansive porch where four older girl teenagers were talking. One by one, they too stopped talking and stared at him. Casey smiled charmingly, but they also barely spoke when introductions were made. *Okaaay*.



Sidra shot them a look and they moved away and resumed their business, but still, Casey could feel their eye on him as he followed Sidra to the double-doored entrance. She knocked once and then opened one of them.

Inside the parlor, it was the same reaction from the seven older women watching “Power”. Casey was growing alarmed at all the staring he was receiving as he realized Sidra was indeed right; he *was* the only white person so far. But somehow it didn’t seem to be about that...

Sidra sucked her teeth at them. “Damn, I can expect rudeness from the kids but not you grown-ass women! Come on, Casey.”

As she led the way to the location where all the aromatic smells were coming from, Sidra kept glancing at him, and he realized she was waiting on him. For what, he didn’t know as they reached the large kitchen where nine women were prepping Sunday dinner. He was introduced and passed around from cousin to cousin until he got to a small older woman with long salt and pepper curls and a pretty smile.

“Well, you must be Sidra’s man. I’m Evie Barton, her grandmother,” she said with a regal nod to her head as she held her hand out. “Are you husband material?”

“Yes, ma’am. My name is Casey Sullivan, and I am very serious about marryin’ her, hopefully, sooner rather than later,” Casey said firmly as a collective breath was drawn at his announcement.

“Is this true, Sidra?” It came from cousin Tonya, a hairstylist and the antagonist from Sidra’s childhood. Casey could already see her trying to compete with Sidra as a child. As

soon as Sidra walked in, Tonya and two of the other cousins had shared an eye roll.

Casey didn't give Sidra a chance to answer because he chose to do so instead. "I'm a man of my word, and I meant what I told Ms. Evie."

"Then Mister, you either have a strong will or are looking for a nice place to retire and hang your balls up," Tonya said seriously, shaking her head as she went back to stirring a pot of black-eyed peas.

It occurred to Casey that he should shut her down until he realized something. Mentally, he rewound back to entering the yard until he reached the kitchen. Twenty-six. He turned to look at Sidra and wasn't surprised to see her patiently waiting for him to catch up. He couldn't help himself as he blurted out, "What the hell did y'all do to all the men?"

## **Chapter Ten**

When Casey was a young boy, he had the biggest crush on Wonder Woman and dreamed of marrying her and living on Paradise Island, surrounded by beautiful women. His brothers and friends had laughed at him for wishing for something like that. Casey now had the last laugh because as he looked around, Granny Evie's house really was a Paradise Island filled with beautiful women. Sunday dinner at the Barton house was truly the craziest thing he'd ever experienced, aside from falling in love with the wack-a-doo sitting at the end of the table.

There was not an ugly one among them— child, teenager, or woman. The Barton women were the epitome of Black Girl Magic. Their beauty ranged from cute to stunning, and their complexions from golden to dark chocolate. Their hair was a broad spectrum of textures and lengths from teeny weeny afros to twist-outs to Goddess braids to long and straight or short and wavy. All of the adult women were gainfully employed, smart, and charming. *So, why did none of them have men???* It wasn't like a woman needed a man to complete or validate her, but when he'd opened his mouth and stuck his foot in it by asking where all the men were, the women's expressions had ranged the gamut from amused to sad, to angry and pissed, but not one of them had actually answered him.

Instead, they'd crowded around him, oohing and aahing as if he were a stray puppy until fed up, Granny Evie finally said, "Now, y'all leave him alone! Sidra, why don't you and your nice young man set the tables."

"Yes, Granny," Sidra said in the most respectful tone Casey had ever heard come out of her ordinarily smart-ass mouth as she went to do her grandmother's bidding while he followed along behind her to the large dining room.

"That was quite impressive. I don't think I ever want to leave this house," Casey said in amazement, and Sidra gave him a murderous glare.

"I'd watch it if I were you. You're on my turf now, and with some assistance from my family, I can make you disappear", she hissed. He laughed and it was the grating confident laugh of a man who knows how charming he is and her family couldn't resist him, which annoyed her even more. They reached a large china cabinet, and Casey accepted the dinnerware Sidra handed him while she retrieved a case filled with polished silverware.

“So, are you gonna tell me what the deal is?” he whispered. “I’ve never seen so many pretty women in all shapes, sizes, and complexions. I feel confident in sayin’ there’s no way a man could come into this house and not find his perfect woman. Or a harem! He could have a date every day of the week if he mixed and matched-”

“Did you take a ‘slow as fuck’ pill this morning? This isn’t a ‘build the perfect chick’ workshop, Casey,” Sidra rolled her eyes at him. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“Will everyone fit in here?” he dubiously questioned as he followed her pattern of setting the massive oak table.

“No; the kids and teenagers will eat in the kitchen. It gets a little rowdy between the grownups. Don’t say I never warned you. We are an un-medicated bunch,” Sidra said cheerfully. “And we don’t play nice once you get us going or if we’ve had a few drinks.”

“That makes me feel so warm, fuzzy and secure that I think I’ll take 911 off my speed dial and put my bullet proof vest back in the car,” Casey joked as he stood back to admire his handiwork. “Damn, I’m good! I just set seven settings in under a minute. So...how long does it normally take Tanya to start in on you?”

Sidra looked up in surprise. “How did you know that?”

“Because I do,” he said noncommittally.

“I don’t really blame her too much for feeling a certain way about me,” Sidra admitted softly as she stared down at the table and fidgeted with the silverware. “When I was growing up, I used to try and sidetrack everyone from my mom’s emotional state by showing out. I’m sure I was a big pain in the ass to my cousins with my dramatic antics.”

“I bet it was pretty exhausting,” Casey agreed coming up behind her to drop a kiss on the back of her neck. “But your mama is now grown and so are you. So how about we work on mendin’ some fences tonight?”

Sidra tilted her head back, and their lips met softly as Casey pulled her towards him, and she angled her head for more of him. His tongue traced the seam of her lips, and she parted them so he could slide in. Her hand reached back to cup his face as she fervently sought more of him. Casey closed his eyes at the taste of her. Sidra was an intoxicating blend of strength, wildness, and vulnerability that he was hopelessly addicted to. His tongue swept in to access her sweetness, and he pressed himself closer to her as his hand slid from her stomach up towards her breast—

Giggles interrupted from behind them, and they slowly broke apart to find the group of little girls from the front yard standing in the doorway. Sidra smoothed her hair and hid her smile as Casey smiled and winked at them as he went back to setting the table.

They took off laughing, and one of them called back, “Ooooooh I’m telling!”

“Great; now I’m gonna be on dishwashing duty, jerk,” Sidra mumbled good-naturedly.

“Well, that’s what you get for temptin’ a man and makin’ him lose his head,” Casey replied cheerfully. “I meant what I said about tonight, Sid.”

“Case, you don’t know everything about-” she said, and Casey held his hand up.

“Then make me understand. Stop stallin’ and make me understand,” he demanded sharply. I am here in this house, surrounded by all these good-lookin’ women but not a man in sight. Is that by choice or not?”

“You’ll see,” she said simply, and Casey stared at her in confusion. “The last man that was here was Tonya’s fiancé. They dated for four years before she finally brought him home for Thanksgiving. By the next week, he’d dumped her. Me, personally, I always thought she could do better, but she’s been especially bitter since it happened. He told her how to dress, what to wear, and who to see. Sampson was an asshole in my opinion.”

“Well, there’s one in every relationship,” Casey shrugged it off and went back to setting the table and then noticed Sidra wasn’t following suit. He raised an eyebrow at her inquisitively and she pursed her lips in annoyance.

“*Oh really?* Well, who’s the asshole in ours?” she asked sweetly.

“You’re joking right?” Casey questioned with surprise. “You *really* have to ask?”

Casey looked her up and down and laughed so hard and long that Sidra mouthed ‘fuck off’ to him.

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After the table was finally set and the children situated, the women started to bring in dishes and platters of food. Casey's mouth watered at the sight of ham, black-eyed peas, hot water corn bread, rice, garden salad, and fried catfish. "Dear God, I have truly died and gone to heaven."

Granny Evie cackled while her daughters and nieces preened as she took his offered arm and allowed him to escort her to one end of the table. "I like a man who appreciates good food. It shows how well he'll love his woman. You, come sit next to me."

Sidra sat at the other end of the table between her Aunt Pat and her Aunt Wanda who said grace. Afterward, everyone started filling their plates as they chatted with one another. All conversation stopped when Sidra and Casey got up and exchanged half-filled plates. Everyone watched as they exchanged thank you's and then went back to their seats and continued to fill their plates. It was something so mundane and ordinary, that they thought nothing of it as Granny Evie looked on in approval.

It was silent as everyone enjoyed the food when suddenly Tonya cleared her throat noisily. All eyes were on her as she turned to address Casey. "Did you know that Sidra was the captain of her volleyball team all four years of high school? She made the dean's list every quarter for her outstanding GPA. Oh, and Sidra also saved a drowning child at the YMCA when the lifeguard went to the bathroom without telling anyone."

Sidra was frozen in place as she listened to her older cousin brag about her. Thanks to Sidra's antics, they'd never been close, but she could see that her family wanted her and Casey to work out and was on her side for once.

Before Casey could respond, Gwen chimed in, "I remember when my big wheel was stolen by Scooter Wade, the neighborhood bully, and he wouldn't give it back. Sidra took her whiffle bat down the street and showed him what time it really was! She's always been real hood-I mean fearless like that."

Aunt Bonita volunteered proudly, "During the summer, she used to pass out cold water bottles to the homeless. And at Christmas, she always gave more than half of what she received to the children at the hospital. My niece has a big heart."

"And don't forget that she can change a car tire in under two minutes," Aunt Jessica added. "She's also very resourceful and thinks of the most creative ways to kill someone. She even has a cookie recipe with needles in it!"

"Aunty!" Everyone protested, and Jessica slapped her hand over her mouth as Casey shook with silent laughter.

"And you ladies were doing so well. Now *that*, I did know. Everything else is just icing on the cake," Casey teased as he winked at his blushing girlfriend. Everyone resumed talking, and he was pleased to see Sidra and Tonya engaging with one another as dinner progressed.

"You love my grandbaby, Casey Sullivan?" Evie inquired quietly as she watched her family with loving eyes.



“With my entire heart, ma’am,” Casey responded readily, and Evie nodded her head slowly. Taking that as a positive sign, he pressed on, “What would you say if I told you I came to ask for her hand in marriage?”

The older woman smiled faintly. “I would say that you definitely have my blessing. I’ve never seen my girl so happy. She’s a hard egg to crack. Growing up, she had some... challenges, but her heart is a good one. I’ll be honest with you, she’s normally very leery of relationships with men due to her past exposure to them, so she might try you, but hang in there. I’ll definitely say a prayer for the two of you.”

“Actually, you can do a little more than that,” Casey said gently as he took her frail hand in his bigger one and looked into her wise brown eyes. “You can have faith, believe in our love, and stick around for a very long time to watch your grandbaby get married and pop out four great-grands for you to spoil silly.” Casey mixed his diced ham into his black-eyed peas and put a forkful in his mouth. The beans had heat to them, and he eagerly scooped up another forkful as Evie watched with pleasure. “Scotch Bonnet pepper?”

“Yes, sir,” she beamed with pride. “It’s the only way to do it.”

They smiled at each other and continued to eat. Five minutes passed before Evie whispered with glee. “*Four* great-grand babies? You really think she’ll go for that?”

Casey blinked and smiled at her slowly. Evie blushed, bringing her hand to her heated cheek as she *pfffted* him. The gall of this whippersnapper and those dreamy eyes of his! *But he sure was a cutie...*

“She won’t really have a choice, ma’am,” he said politely, and they shared a conspiratorial laugh as everyone else wondered what was so funny.

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“I like your young man, Sidra. He’s very good to you,” Evie remarked as she and Sidra put the china and silverware away. The rest of her family was on the back porch enjoying her granny’s strawberry shortcake and hanging onto Casey’s every word. It was almost sickening watching them hover around him like vultures over a carcass. The dinner had been an enjoyable success and ended with Sidra and her cousins making tentative plans to get together next month. Casey had already committed them to one family dinner a month, but they would have to see how the rest of the night went first...

“He’s a keeper for sure, Granny” Sidra assured her and waited to see if she would reveal what she and Casey had giggled about at dinner.

“Does he know about your past? Or how ‘extra’ you can get?” Evie teased.

“Yes, ma’am, he does, and loves my little bit of ‘extra’ too,” Sidra joked, causing Evie to pinch her cheek and laugh. “We’re on our way to go see Mom when we leave.”

“I love all my kids, grands, and great-grands, but you, my dear, have always held a special place in my heart,” Evie said affectionately. “I prayed you would find forgiveness in your parents, a bright future, and a good, strong man to share it all

with. Two out of three ain't bad, Sidra dear. Let me know if you need me to smooth things over with your mama."

"Thank you, Granny, but it'll be fine," Sidra reassured as she crossed her fingers behind her back and wished she were as confident as she sounded.

"I can't wait to see you walk down the aisle and say I do," Evie declared, slipping an arm around her much taller granddaughter as they went to join the others. "How many little ones can I expect?"

"One is my limit! I'm not a baby factory, Granny. Why are you laughing, Granny?" Sidra questioned as Evie fell out laughing hysterically. "Granny! Answer me, please! What's so funny?!"

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Soon after, Casey and Sidra were saying their goodbyes, and there was even talk of dinner again in two weeks, to which he gladly accepted on their behalf. They were just leaving when a shadow moved from the side of the house. Casey stiffened as a massive, red-nosed pit bull trotted towards them with its tongue lolling out. Sidra didn't seem to notice his stillness as she bent down to pet the friendly dog. "Hi, Mabel-baby! There's a good girl! How's Granny Evie's baby?"

The dog wagged its stubbed tail, and Sidra laughed as she attempted to lick her face. "Boo, this is Mabel. Granny's had her since she was practically a newborn."

“I’ll be in the car, Sid,” Casey said abruptly and then after giving Mabel a cautionary glance, he slowly walked out of the fenced in yard.

Inside of the car, he pulled the seat back and attempted to take slow, deep breaths as he started sweating profusely. The passenger door opened, and Sidra got inside and rubbed his back, concern lacing her voice as she attempted to comfort him. “Tell me what’s wrong, babe. How can I help you?”

Casey could hear the anxiousness in her voice and struggled to reassure her as he placed a clammy hand on her knee and patted it. “I’m good, darlin’. I’m just not too fond of...certain dogs.”

Sidra gently wiped his damp face with a tissue, making a *tsking* noise. “Mabel is an absolute sweetheart. She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Sure, she wouldn’t,” Casey muttered as he sat up and started the car.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Sidra’s directions brought them to a large nondescript warehouse. Although the lights weren’t on, the parking lot was packed, and there was a line wrapped around the block. There was a heavy presence of undercover security patrolling the block. Heavily- muscled women wearing black berets, short sleeve black tee-shirts, camouflage pants, and serious expressions looked like they wouldn’t hesitate to put two slugs

in a fool's ass for just breathing on them. Casey had to admit the sight was quite unnerving. Sidra directed him to an underground parking garage, and after Sidra waved at them, they were allowed in.

They got out of the car, and Casey looked around uneasily. He walked over to his passenger side of the car, intending to go into his glove compartment, but Sidra placed her hand on his arm to restrain him. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you, Case. But just remember YOU wanted to know about my family. I've shown you the parent who treated me wrong. Now, I'm going to show you the parent who supposedly has their shit 'together'. I want to tell you that her bark is worse than her bite, but I'd be lying. Are you still with me?"

Casey pushed Sidra up against the car and gripped her waist tightly, "*Until the end of time, Sid.*" His mouth plundered hers, and she melted under the pleasurable onslaught of his kiss, drawing on his tongue. "Try and keep me away, love."

Weak-kneed, she led the way up the stairs and to the back entrance. Casey sensed the disapproval of the female guard who allowed them access, but he was unconcerned as long as they kept their hands to themselves and didn't disrespect his woman. Finally, they reached the top level of stairs, and Sidra led him to an empty balcony that was sealed off with boxes. They moved the heavy boxes to the side and squeezed in to view the darkened stage below. All around them, Casey could hear the buzz of the unseen crowd. Suddenly, bright white arena lights came on, and certain parts of Beyoncé's "Formation" song began to play over and over. The crowd went wild.

*Okay, okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, cause I slay*  
*Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, cause I slay*  
*Prove to me you got some coordination, cause I slay*

*Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard)  
Get what's mine (take what's mine), I'm a star (I'm a star)  
Cause I slay (slay), I slay (hey), I slay (okay), I slay (okay)  
All day (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay)  
We gon' slay (slay), gon' slay (okay), we slay (okay), I slay (okay)  
I slay (okay), okay (okay), I slay (okay), okay, okay, okay, okay*

Teenage girls started to appear in a long row, wearing white tee-shirts and camouflage pants with white sneakers. Once they were all present, they began to step in time to the song. The crowd went berserk at the sight of the talented girls fluidly moving together in unity. Casey observed his surroundings and noticed the large crowd of easily three hundred people were women of all races and walks of life, breaking color lines and economic status to come together for this event. Suddenly, the music stopped and the girls split into two groups as they continued to dance their way off the stage.

Then a woman wearing silver aviator sunglasses took the stage in a compact, one-person chariot being pulled by two extremely muscular men clad only in loincloths as they brought the chariot as close to the microphone on the podium. With her hands on her hips, she projected a confidence that touched each person in the arena, clad in a white tank top and camouflage pants as her long black box braids flowed down her back. Once she arrived at her destination, the men lifted her by each arm, and she preened as they set her in front of the podium. She rewarded them each with a smack on the ass with a flogger as she waved them off. It was meant to be degrading, dismissive, and empowering. And it worked, whipping the crowd of women into such a chaotic frenzy that Casey was pretty sure caused some of them to orgasm on the spot.

The woman whom Sidra had been avidly watching on television earlier this week was none other than “Angela Woodrow”, the dynamically controversial motivational speaker and international best-selling author who traveled with a barrage of guards due to her inflammatory views and remarks about the male species that had earned her death threats from all over the world. Angela was also famous for

hacking faux genitals off of male mannequins and placing them in a designer bag before prancing around the stage as she shouted for women to take back the control in their lives. She grabbed the microphone and tossed her long braids over her shoulders as she walked to the edge of the stage. Casey knew what she was going to say before she said it and braced himself. It wasn't enough to soften the verbal blows, and he still flinched as if shot when Angela gave a mega-bright smile that shone in her heavily made-up face, whipped off her sunglasses, and roared her signature phrase:

**“MEN. AIN’T. SHIIIIIT!!!!”**

Sidra smiled proudly at the stage, even as she placed a comforting hand on Casey's clenched fist. With a sympathetic smile, she cheerfully said, “Welcome to the family, babe.”

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“Baby!” Sidra smiled as her mother squealed with joy. “I didn't know you were coming tonight. I would have reserved a front row seat for you!”

“Hey, Mom,” Sidra returned her exuberant hug and then kissed her cheek. “Great turnout tonight. You were amazing as always. We missed you at dinner.”

Lena leaned against her dressing room vanity and suspiciously appraised Casey from head to toe. “And who is this? Does he work for the government? Sir, do you work for the government?!” She asked Casey sharply as she frowned up in his face. “He betta not work for the government, Sidra Jane! I

don't need Uncle Sam's spies infiltrating my space and dabbling all in my shit, little girl!"

Even though she was filled with dread and apprehension, Sidra managed to laugh at her mother's warning as she grabbed Casey's hand and pulled him forward. "Relax, Mom. I want you to meet someone very special to me." She gazed into Casey's eyes and felt all of his love, making her proud and confident enough to say the next words. "This is my boyfriend, Casey Sullivan. We're very much in love and plan on getting married in the next two or three years--"

"Actually the end of the year," Casey corrected her with a wink, and Lena glared at him.

"MARRIED???" *The hell you are!* Ummm, excuse me, but did you just disrespect my baby by correcting her like she doesn't know her own mind???" Lena demanded, and Sidra's eyes squeezed shut for a moment because she knew what was coming next. "*Oh. Hell. No.* Baby, don't take that shit from him! Especially after all of Nero's bullshit that we've been through. You've come too far to be disrespected by some fool who looks like a door-to-door salesman!"

"Mom, enough! That's not what he was doing," Sidra corrected her firmly and gave Casey an apologetic look. "Sorry about that. It takes her a while to come down from her 'stage high'."

Casey mumbled to her, "Are you sure it's not another kind of high?" before he turned back to her mother, "My apologies, Ms. Barton, that wasn't at all what I was tryin' to do. I'm just eager for Sidra and I to move to the next stage of our relationship, that's all."



“Yeah, well, “no” means *no*; got that?” Lena grilled him threateningly, and Casey gave her a tight smile.

“I am very aware of the definition of the word no, Ms. Barton,” he assured her through gritted teeth. *So, this is where Sidra got the chip from.* They’d certainly come a long way from those days, thank goodness.

“Good, because let me tell you something, young man. I built my empire from the ground up from my hatred and anger of myself for being left weak-willed and weak-spirited by a man who never deserved an iota of mine or my daughter’s love. I’ll be damned if I let you come in here and destroy what Sidra and I have managed to build from that fire. *I don’t trust any damn man!* Y’all can’t do shit for a woman but give her kids, heartaches, diseases, and heartbreaks. There ain’t a man alive who is worthy of her in my opinion, and I don’t approve of nor endorse this relationship. You need to know I’m not going any damn where and will be all up in your business to the point that I’ll know when you need to take a shit. Got it?!”

“Got it,” Casey said coolly as Sidra squeezed his hand tightly, and as pissed as he was, he squeezed hers right back. *Who the fuck did this woman think she was???*

“So, what do you do for a living?” Lena demanded brusquely, and Sidra spoke before Casey could answer.

“He’s a drug dealer,” she said, and Lena gave Casey another once-over with approval. “He’s damn good at it and turns a really good profit.”

“*Hmmm.* I can see him working the college crowd and exercising his white privilege. Posing as a teacher’s assistant

and moving weight. Getting over on good old Uncle Sam,” Lena cackled. “Heeey now!”

“What the hell is wrong with the two of you?!” Casey wondered aloud in disbelief. “I’m not a damn drug dealer! I’m a lawyer, dammit, and proud of it!”

*“A LAWYER?! Oh, Lawdy, Lawdy, the child is slipping into the light!”* Lena hollered out in distress as she grabbed a lighter and lit the incense, waving it around Casey and Sidra. *“Devil, you won’t take my child today! Get thee behind us, Satan! Out I say! Out! You won’t take my baby! Black Jesus be a fence and protect her!”*

“If she starts with “look into the light, Carol Anne!” I am so out of here,” Casey whispered out of the corner of his mouth to Sidra who looked pained at her mother’s ridiculousness. Calmly, he plucked the incense stick from Lena’s waving hand and amidst her protests, took it into the bathroom where he turned on the sink faucet and doused it underneath the running water. He came back out and placed the stick on the vanity.

“Now, who would have thought bein’ a drug dealer would be worse than bein’ a lawyer?” Casey asked in wonder. “Listen, Ms. Barton, there’s a couple of things you need to know about me. I’m a lawyer, yes, but I’m a man first. A damn good man who loves your daughter with every breath and bone in my body. I’d marry her tomorrow if I could. I’m a law-abidin’ citizen and love my family with all I’ve got. Soon, I’m goin’ to marry your daughter, and when that time comes, I’ll hope that I’ve erased all your doubts of me, the institution of marriage, and your personal issues to want her happiness first and foremost. Now, if you will excuse me, I think I need some fresh air; this damn patchouli incense and your bitterness are killin’ me.”

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“So, how was the wedding? I bet Avery was a beautiful bride,” Lena stated as she removed her makeup with cotton balls. It was like peeling off layers of dead skin and revealing a new person who greatly resembled Sidra. Her heavy makeup, which she was never seen publicly without, was meant to somewhat disguise her features and allow her to enjoy anonymity every now and then.

“It was perfect if you disregard the fact that Nero and Nina showed up,” Sidra made a disapproving face at her mother in the mirror as she wrapped her braids in a flowered head wrap.

“Get the fuck outta here!” Lena’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Tell me his bitch of a daughter took a spoonful of ‘act right’ before she came.”

“No, Mom, she sure as hell didn’t,” Sidra replied grimly. “I had to administer that shit in the bathroom and then talk to Nero. Normally, I wouldn’t go there, especially on my friend’s big day, but she left me no choice.”

“Ummph, I could never understand why Nero could never get his ass up from the punk bitch section he’s been sitting in and insist her uppity ass have several seats. Who goes to a wedding and thinks ‘This is a good day to act a fool and get my ass beat’? Is this whole thing contained baby, or do I need to get involved?” Lena raised an eyebrow at her daughter.

After Lena cut Nero off, they negotiated a deal where he paid her a ‘comfortable’ sum to keep her mouth shut because he

was so worried about tarnishing his precious reputation. Lena shed her 'ready, willing, and waiting for her man' persona and changed overnight. She took the money and built her M.A.S. empire with it, using an alias because of her controversial views. She held pep rallies where she talked to single mothers and abused women about how a man shouldn't mistreat his queen and how he wasn't about shit if he did. These rallies of five turned into fifty, then two hundred, and eventually, in the thousands. She'd been on Oprah, Good Morning America, CNN, Howard Stern, and Wendy Williams as she projected her voice. Soon, she was an international figure who was banned in the Middle East, China, and Russia.

Although she was proud of her mother's three-sixty turn from doormat to dominant, it could be extremely draining on the female family members who were interested in dating. There was high turnover rate of boyfriends after they met Lena, and she broke them down one by one with her scathing looks, commentary, and observations about how awful men were. She took pride in it. Even Tonya's ex, Sampson, an extremely successful real estate magnate with millions in his bank account and women throwing themselves at him left and right, had broken down like a baby after he tried to compliment Lena on her outfit. Sidra had been scared shitless that Casey would take one look at Lena and drive away forever. She'd seen it happen time and time again in her family. Every time "Angela" was on television, he always had something to say in response to her combative verbiage. Sidra knew from the storm clouds gathering in his eyes that he'd really wanted to lay into Lena, on her outrageous behavior. Now he had to think about her being his mother-in-law and judging from the vicious gleam in Lena's eyes, she planned on giving it her all in driving him off. Sidra could only pray that he didn't change his mind about them on the way to her place.

"No, you don't. But may I ask what was so special about *him*, Mom? I just don't see his appeal as a man or even as a *human being*. Did you ever try with anyone else?" Sidra asked

curiously, watching as her mother's face took on a faraway expression.

“Chile, Nero is so charismatic, people are just drawn to him. He has a way of looking at you and making you feel like you're the only person that matters. I liked the way he was with *me*. He couldn't get enough of me, and he used to tell me about his hopes, dreams, and fears. All the things he couldn't tell Cecelia.” She ran a hand over her face tiredly but reached back to clasp Sidra's hand. “It was wrong of me to take up with a married man and I regret everything, except for *you*. I was young, arrogant, and cocky, thinking diamonds fell out of my pussy whenever I opened my thighs. I told myself that it was a good thing *I* wasn't his wife because I would've run his ass ragged. But I was just fooling myself. Your daddy's number one priority, as much as it kills me to say it, is himself. You have to know that I would never have sent you to visit him if I knew he was acting so foul.”

“Yeah, well I've never been blind to him the way you and Nina have been,” Sidra said seriously. “When people show you who they are, you should always believe them; otherwise, you're just disappointing yourself, Mom.”

“I stopped messing around with him after that,” Lena confessed, laughing at Sidra's skeptical look. “I really did! Haven't been back for a taste since. Craved it once or twice because a woman has needs, but nope. Not since he did you dirty.”

“Ewwwww!” Sidra exclaimed with a horrified laugh. Laughingly, Lena covered her face and peeked at her through her fingers. The laughter faded as they stared at each other, glad to know they'd been able to move past their anger and hurt. It had been touch and go for a while, but they'd survived it with a newfound appreciation and love for each other.

“Real talk, Sid. I couldn’t be with a man who hurt and disrespected my child that bad,” Lena said softly. “But let’s not talk about that anymore. How’s work going?”

“It’s going good. I love being in the studio and learning new things with Dominick,” Sidra made a face. “Casey’s not too crazy about him, though. He thinks my boss wants me for himself.”

“And does he?” Lena asked idly. “You’re a very beautiful woman, Sidra, and the two of you have a lot in common. Is the theory so far-fetched?”

“Yes! I don’t want anyone but that man sitting outside,” Sidra vowed, blushing as her mother looked at her with appraising eyes. “I know what I have at home and I am not trying to fuck that up. Though, I have been thinking of expanding to corporate deejaying. I have a meeting with Ian, Noelle’s godfather, about branding myself with his firm, and I’m going to do it. The last year and a half has been fun traveling, but now I want to travel with Casey and see it through his eyes as well. What about you?”

“Things are going...well,” Lena hedged and squeezed her daughter’s hands lovingly. “All that matters is that you’re happy, Sidra. It’s all I ever wanted.”

“Then you need to understand that Casey makes me insanely, Mary freakin’ Poppins happy, Mom,” Sidra stared intently at her mother. “I am going to be his wife. Don’t stand in our way when the time comes. Please just accept it gracefully, okay?”

“Baby, I don’t approve at all and have no qualms about saying so. You can do bad all by yourself. You lied to me about being in a relationship, which you’ve never done. What else are you willing to do for him? And that man carries so much pain, I’m surprised you can’t smell his infected wounds,” Lena warned. “It will make or break you if it’s not addressed. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

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Lena waved at Sidra and her man as they drove off. She could honestly say that if her daughter had to go and get herself a man, one who looked at you like the sun rose and set on your ass wasn’t a bad choice. But Casey Sullivan made her nervous. That man watched Sidra with an intensity that made her uneasy. He might have fooled everyone else with his model looks and southern charm, but not her. Casey would destroy anyone that got between him and Sidra, and Lena didn’t know whether to be relieved that Sidra had someone like that in her corner or to file a restraining order against him on her daughter’s behalf.

She walked back into her dressing and room and grabbed her phone, dialing a number she never thought she would again.

“Hola, Lena,” Nero’s lowered voice was still as smooth as velvet and apparently he thought it still worked on her. Lena rolled her eyes at his vanity.

“Nero,” she replied curtly. “How are you?”

“I’m well. I take it you’ve seen our daughter, and she’s told you of our meeting?” Nero inquired.

“The only thing mentioned was a confrontation with your oldest daughter ending in results that even Stevie Wonder could have seen coming,” Lena snapped. “Keep her on a short leash before I come pay her a visit. *And I won’t be as nice as my baby.* Did you try to talk to Sidra?”

“I tried but got nowhere. I would like to get to know her if she’ll let me,” Nero said cautiously. “Maybe *you* could set something up? I could come to you...”

“Let me guess, in the dark of night? Same old Nero,” Lena bit out. “Still too worried about what others think to publicly acknowledge your child.” She gave him a chance to deny her observation, but he said nothing, and for a moment, her heart hurt for her daughter but knew she was better off not being contaminated by him. “When are you gonna realize all things done in the dark come to light? *Sidra is fine.* If she wanted anything from you, she would’ve asked you herself. In her silence, you’ve found her answer regarding having a relationship with you. So just let it be.”

“I can’t, Lena! She is everything I ever wanted in a child: strong, smart and vibrant. She is no one’s pushover!” he exclaimed passionately. “I see so much of YOU in her.” His voice lowered several decibels. “Do you ever miss-”

Lena cut him off abruptly. “No, I don’t. Everything happened the way it was supposed to. Life’s too short for regrets, Nero.”

“I don’t believe you, Lena,” he boldly stated. “You are too passionate a woman to have remained celibate, despite your dedication to your *cause.*”



The last part was said with so much derision that Lena had to count backward to refrain from cursing him out. Nero couldn't stand that she'd taken up such a powerful crusade, which would make him a laughing stock if Lena were foolish enough to go back to him. And image was more important to Nero than anything.

"My passions and causes are no longer *your* concern," she informed him frostily.

Nero pounced on her statement, "So someone *is* taking care of those-"

"Be blessed, Nero," Lena said sweetly and disconnected the call. "Motherfuckers never learn..."

## **Chapter Twelve**

Casey rifled through the large cardboard box on Sidra's living room floor. He pulled white tee-shirts out and rolling his eyes at each logo he read. *Men. Ain't. Shit!!! Don't ever say what your man won't do because he'll do it with a smile. Make America Great Again: Give men lobotomies AND vasectomies.* "I can't believe you hid all of this stuff from me."

"'Hid' is such a strong word," Sidra replied. "I think I like 'selective house cleaning' much better."

He snorted at a coffee mug that read: *Love a man if you want to be disrespected for the rest of your life.* “In the time that we’ve been dating, I’ve been here *six* times. I think I would have recalled seeing any of these items displayed proudly. Do you believe this stuff?”

“I think that my mother believes her truth,” Sidra shrugged as she glanced at him. “It’s what got her through a very hard time in her life, and there’s some truth to her words. She’s given a lot of hurt women something to believe in and focus on that’s kept them moving one foot in front of another. No one is forced to attend her rallies.”

“True, but the message she is sending is a dangerous one,” Casey cautioned. “Someone could sue her if anyone gets harmed; surely you recognize that fact. I respect that your mother is a self-made woman and turned her life around, but I plan on marryin’ you, and I’m not lettin’ *anyone* stand in our way. If your mama wants to be all up in my business like she promised, you should let her know I’m not as nice as a ‘catalog salesman’.”

Sidra pulled the shirts out of his hands and crawled into his lap until he was forced to lie back on the floor with her stretched out on top of him. She leaned on her elbow and smiled down at him sexily. “Mom was just playing. Gawd, babe, I *wish* you were a salesman who showed up on my door with your sexy ass, tryna sell me somethin’...I’m buyin’ errything *you* got...”

Casey smiled at her, the words soothing a little of the sting of rejection he’d felt at her mother’s comments. “So, are you still spooked about where we’re goin’ with this? I met your crazy-ass mama and am aware of your daddy’s and sister’s state of fucktivity, but I’m still here lovin’ you, sound good?”

Sidra stared down into his strikingly handsome face. She'd memorized every one of his perfect features when she first laid eyes on him. The stern mouth that brought her so much pleasure with its touch and smile. She couldn't imagine ever kissing another mouth. Those rich hazel eyes that burned fire when angered, or smoldered when aroused. It still boggled her mind and would for the rest of her life that he loved her as much as she loved him. The thought of life without him would be an unbearable life sentence... "She might not come around, Case." She hastened to reassure him as a storm gathered in his expression. "I don't want to lie to you, and especially with you being a lawyer...well, to her, you're her worst nightmare come true. Like history might repeat itself. I made it clear tonight that I am going to be with you, so if you're good, I'm good. You just don't get to change your mind."

Sidra allowed the hand cupping her nape to draw her down gently and their lips touched briefly. "Can I tell you something?"

"Tell me your secrets, and I'll tell you no lies, Sidra Jane," he whispered enticingly, encircling both arms around her, loving how perfectly they fit together.

"I never in my life knew I could be this happy," she whispered back. "I always thought that in order for a relationship to work, you had to constantly fight, scream, and play mind games with each other. That's how couples communicated with one another. That you *couldn't* be in love unless you were constantly crying over the other person, do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, babe, I think I do. That's what it was like for you?" Casey's heart ached at her wistful smile.

“Nero and Lena had me all kinds of fucked up for sure. I felt like love sucked big, hairy unwashed balls,” Sidra confirmed, laying her head on his chest with contentment, his strong heartbeat was music to her ears. “But you changed that for me because this right here, *us*, I sure as hell never saw coming, and I can easily say that you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. People are so damned concerned about your feelings, but I don’t think they realize how vulnerable I am as well because you own my heart, body, and soul, boo. Stopping Earth from revolving around the sun would be easier than stopping my love for you from growing, Casey Sullivan.”

Casey was too overwhelmed to speak. He tried to push past the boulder-sized lump in his throat but couldn’t, so he squeezed her tighter. They lay there content to savor the moment of their hearts beating in sync. Fifteen minutes passed, and he could feel her body getting heavy as she drifted off to sleep. He tested his throat and found he could finally speak in a somewhat normal voice. “I want that in writing. Big, bold, black writing and in a card-sized version too, so the next time you feel like gettin’ above your britches wherever we’re at-”

“Boy, bye! Hush up and take your woman to bed,” she laughed sleepily as he readily complied.

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*Past...*

*He was running, heart about to explode and terrified out of his mind. He cut through bushes, and low branches hit him in the face, but he couldn't stop. Thwack! Thwack! The sting made him want to cry out, but he couldn't make a sound for fear of giving himself away. Where was mama, Jackie, and Darby? He wanted to scream for them but dared not make a sound. He could hear them gaining on him and found a new level of speed in his terror-filled escape. Up ahead, he could see the cabin. Not that much farther. If he could just reach the porch, he would be home free! That was the deal, right? Reach the porch and nothing happens. He could still hear them, so close and gaining ground. A whistle was heard. Fifty feet...forty feet...twenty feet...ten feet...yes! He was going to-*

*Sharp teeth latched onto the back of his sweatshirt, and he was lifted from the ground and he shook relentlessly. The foul breath of the beast made him want to throw up. Terrified, he cried out helplessly, "Lemme go! Lemme go!"*

*For his efforts, he was shook again as the beast's comrades came closer and breathed their foul stench into his face. Fangs glistening with drool, their eyes promising a bloody death if their master gave the word...*

*A whistle rang out, and he was automatically flung to the cold, wet ground as his adversaries breathed over him, reminding him of his loss. Then three sets of footsteps could be heard crunching through the leaves and coming towards him.*

*"Yer boy's got some speed on 'im," Dipper Fontaine crowed. "He almost made it to the porch this time."*

*"Had them dogs dead to rights," Patrick Sullivan argued. "Ya gave the order for them to speed up. That wasn't part of the agreement, Dipper. Ya didn't say a damn thing about it!"*

*“Didn’t think I had to, ass wipe,” Dipper countered. “They’re huntin’ dogs who were huntin’. Seems kinda self-explanatory to me.”*

*“Now, calm yer britches, the both of ya!” Ludie Van der Kemp injected. “Yer both right.”*

*“I want a chance to win my money back,” Patrick snarled.*

*“Yer already in twenty bucks with me,” Dipper argued. “I want my money. Yer the one who was braggin’ about the boy’s speed. You really thought he was gonna win against my prized bloodhound, pit bull, and mountain cur?! Pay up or I’ll reward my dogs with his scrawny hide.”*

*Slowly, Casey rolled over, and the dogs growled louder, making his stomach hurt with fear, and he almost ruined his sweatpants. His eyes met Patrick’s green contempt-filled ones, and he longed to show his hatred of the man. What kind of sonofabitch bets his five-year-old against trained hunting dogs?*

*“Three outta five,” Patrick offered, pulling a twenty out of his pocket and waving it under the other man’s nose. “I’ll double the bet.”*

*Dipper looked at the money with greedy eyes. “Hell, what do I care? I ain’t the one who’s gotta explain it to his mama if he comes home in pieces. I’ll take your bet.”*

*He walked off with Ludie following behind and gave another whistle. In an instant, the dogs were gone, and it was just him*

*and Patrick. His father walked over, reached down, and snatched him up by his sweatshirt.*

*“Ya little shit! How dare ya embarrass me in front of my friends?!” He slapped Casey’s face, but the boy stayed silent despite the ringing in his ears. “Yer gonna win me back my twenty because if you don’t, I have no problem lettin’ the dogs have your runty little ass!!!”*

*“I won’t! Ya can’t make me!!” Casey cried out rebelliously and hit Patrick in the nose with his small fist.*

*Patrick’s eyes filled with rage, and he raised his arm up and swung his meaty fist down-*

“Nooooooooo!” Casey came awake with a yell. Gasping for air, he looked around wildly, slowly coming to his senses and realizing he was in Sidra’s apartment and in her bed. He felt her silky-smooth arms come around him, and she pressed a kiss to his shoulder.

“You’re okay! Sssssh, tell me about it, Case,” she urged gently and pulled him back to her. He shifted so that he lay against her soft bosom, and her arms cradled him close. Slowly, she ran her fingers through his hair, and Casey slowly relaxed, though his heart was still racing as he breathed in her familiar floral and green apple scent. “You’re okay. It’s you and me, baby. Isn’t that what you always tell me? I’m here for you, Casey.”

It was silent in the room, save his ragged breathing, and Casey closed his eyes against the rage roiling inside of him. *Tell me about it. What good would it do?* The person he really wanted to hurt was dead. The coward killed himself before his sons could grow older and exact their revenge. There was no point

in talking about shit. He turned his head and captured her nipple in his mouth, loving the way it pebbled under his tongue as he teased it just the way she liked. Sidra's fingers clenched in his hair as she sighed, arching her back, and urging him to take more of her as she tried to form a coherent sentence. "Casey...I want to talk about... you..."

"Hush, sugar. Can't you see I'm busy?" Casey shoved her legs apart and nestled between them. He switched his lips to her other breast and suckled harder. "*I can smell my pussy. It's nice and wet for me, isn't it?*"

*"Always for you, baby. Always. But I don't want to do this... oooh...we need to talk..."* Sidra said feebly as she weakly turned away from his seeking lips. He was making her feel sooo good, but they shouldn't... Casey bit her shoulder, and Sidra's body shook under his dominating nature. His hands slid under her and palmed the globes of her ass as he bit her neck, clavicle, and jaw. She stiffened and then relaxed in anticipation as his fingers rubbed her French star slowly, catching the moisture dripping from her pussy and slowly penetrating her. *Yassss.*

"There's nothing to talk about, Sidra," he hissed in her ear and she knew he believed that. "*Right now, I want this ass. Are you gonna give it to me, darlin?*"

His finger was moving in out of her deliciously slow as his mouth found hers. Sidra's arms circled his neck as she explored his mouth, and they exchanged breaths while Casey added another finger threading them in and out of her ass with ease.

"So tight, I can't wait to take you," Casey murmured triumphantly against her lips, and Sidra froze.



“No!” She pushed at him, and he slowly withdrew his fingers from her and sat back. *“Who the fuck do you think you are?!”*

“What’s the problem, Sidra?” Casey asked impatiently, and her eyes fell to the thick, rigid cock laying against his thigh, the swollen head glistening with precum. “Don’t act like you don’t want this as much as I do!”

Sidra sat up and pulled the bedsheet around her as she glared at him. *“You’re the damn problem! Stop distracting me! I don’t want to have sex with you right now. I want to talk! Isn’t that what you’re always all over me about?!”* She mimicked his voice, *“Talk to me, Sidra Jane! Let’s talk about your feelings, Sid. But when it comes to you, it’s like pulling teeth! Just talk to me and tell me what’s wrong!”*

*“What do you want to know?!”* Casey roared in her face, unable to help himself. Hot shame at how helpless he’d been and *still* felt held him paralyzed. All he wanted to do was just forget about it and have her drop it. *“I already told you there’s nothing to talk about! Why can’t you just shut the fuck up about it?!”*

*CRACK!* His head jerked back with the stinging slap she gave him, and he closed his eyes and counted to ten. When Casey opened his eyes, Sidra was staring at his clenched fists as a letter opener clenched tightly in hers. Those pretty eyes said that she would show him how they’d barely skimmed the surface of crazy if he made a move. Slowly, he relaxed his fists. She watched but didn’t change her stance. He was filled with shock, horror, and agony. *“Baby, I’m sorry!!! I would never-”*

*“Leave,”* she whispered, and when he didn’t move, ***NOW!***

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*Whiskey Row*

*Three weeks later...*

“Uncle Casey, go deep!” D.J. shouted as he wiggled away from Guy and Holt and threw the football as far as he could.

Casey kept his eyes on the ball and caught it with ease and then began the process of evading Guy and Holt to make it to the end zone. Holt was fast, but Jack was able to block them. Guy was even faster but unfortunately for him, he’d never had the pleasure of being chased by trained bloodthirsty beasts as Casey had. He lunged into the zone with ease as Ruby threw her arms up and shrieked, “Tuuuusshhdown! Good job, Uncle Casey!”

Casey picked Ruby up and bussed her cheek loudly. “Thanks, Punkin!”

Ruby scratched her face. “Beard itchy. Cut please.”

Casey rubbed his scruff-covered jawline and grimaced. Since leaving Sidra, he hadn’t heard from her. He’d said he was sorry a thousand times, but she wasn’t budging. There was no returning his calls or emails, and while he knew she was touring with *Dick*, she could at least give him a call even if it was just to tell him to fuck off. Dammit, he missed her! He couldn’t sleep or eat unless he was here because this was the

next best thing to being with her. Noelle and Avery were making it their mission to fatten him up as they fussed over him, much to their husbands' dismay.

Ruby placed her tiny fingers on his face and squeezed his cheek. "Where Auntie Sidieeee? I want Auntie!"

"So do I, Punkin," Casey agreed morosely as he held the little girl close, and they sat down in the grass together. He spied a ladybug and plucked it up, letting her see it crawling around his palm. Fascinated, Ruby's eyes were huge as she practically shoved her face into his hand, and the startled ladybug flew away as Ruby shouted, "Bye-bye!"

"What are you guys talkin' about?" D.J. asked as he came and plopped down next to them, tossing the football in the air. "Is Aunt Sidra comin' this week? I Skyped with her the last two weeks, but she hasn't shown up here. I miss her."

"Nah, she's not comin'," Casey snapped and then snatched the football from his nephew.

"Sounds like you screwed up really bad. I've given your situation some thought, and I think you mighta been put in the friend zone and didn't get the memo," D.J. observed thoughtfully. "You know...like you're no longer a boyfriend. Just a boy who's a friend. If you want...I can give you some pointers?"

Casey bristled indignantly, "I don't need pointers from you! I can get my woman back all on my own."

D.J. laughed, "How? Right now, you're as useless as a back-pocket on a t-shirt! But you're not alone. Seems to me that

Holt is now in the same zone. See for yourself.”

Casey turned around in time to see Kat shaking her head and slowly pulling away from Holt. He could certainly identify with the frustration on his childhood friend’s face.

“The good news is you both are still kinda young and have all your teeth,” D.J. finished optimistically.

“Shut. It,” Casey growled as he stood up and then helped his nephew up as well. He set Ruby on the ground, and she ran straight for Jack who picked her up and put her on his shoulders. “Let’s go eat. I’m starvin’.”

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Holt was so mad, he could barely breathe. Carefully, he internalized his anger to conceal it from his friends. Katerina Romankov wanted to call things off. He could feel it in her third rejection of his attempt to spend time together. She could sense things were different between them, that *he* was different, and the fear of the unknown made her resolve that much stronger. Holt watched her walk away, her posture ramrod straight as the sun kissed her reddish brown curls. He felt he was being watched and turned to find Alexei’s laser-like stare on him. Holt indicated that he should follow him and left without Alexei’s confirmation.

He rounded the house and landed on Jack and Noelle’s front steps. His wait was not a long one. “So, now I’m being summoned, eh?”

“Yeah, you are, Romankov,” Holt declared as he stared out at the Smoky Mountains. “I have a big problem with how this blackmailin’ operation is goin’. You want me to shake a few cages, and there have been casualties, but all we are gettin’ are *bare results*. I know you’re waitin’ for the blackmailer to make a move first, but that’s not how I work. You’re sendin’ me on wild goose chases for nothin’, and it’s puttin’ a strain on my relationship with Kat.” Holt stood up to face Alexei. Yes, “The Wolf” was feared in their circles, but “The Woodsman’s” reputation wasn’t just handed to him on his day of birth. *He’d earned it.*

“Do you know she came to my family’s estate in Sweden two months ago? Her car was parked across the street, and she watched me get in my fancy car, with my fancy folks, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it!” Holt tugged on his beard and scowled menacingly at Alexei. “My cousins and I spent the entire night huntin’ for your ‘lead’, which turned out to be another dead end. I don’t like lyin’ to my woman, Romankov. Now, I’m sure as her daddy, you couldn’t care less about my happiness, but I do. So I’m tellin’ you to get outta my way and let me do what I do best. I don’t shake cages. *I burn them.* If you want my help, then step aside. If not, I’m done playing peek-a-boo for you.”

Holt stepped away and walked around him. “I’m givin’ you seventy-two hours to let me know how you’d like to proceed.”

## **Chapter Thirteen**

“It’s too bad Ian and Vivienne had to finish up with clients today,” Noelle said as she checked the corn. “Ian said they would be driving down tomorrow, though. I hope everything is okay with Alexei; he looked pretty worried when he left so abruptly.”

When Jack didn’t respond, Noelle looked up to see her husband watching his youngest brother playing with his phone for the fifth time by his car.

“He looks fucked up,” Jack said worriedly as he opened the grill and flipped the chicken.

Noelle removed the parmesan-grilled corn on the cob and placed the shrimp kabobs in its place. “*Mmmm*. The coleslaw and baked beans are good. How’s the chicken coming along?”

“The chicken is fine,” Jack replied as he glanced at his wife’s stiff back and shut the grill. “Is that all you’re gonna say on the subject?”

“No. I’ve got the steaks warming in the oven. Let me know when to have Avery pull them out,” she added before turning the outdoor radio on and Imagine Dragons “Shots”

filled the air. Noelle reached into the cooler and pulled out a bottle of Easton Brewery’s ale labeled “Squid Ink”. She shook the bottle at Jack. “Wyatt is certainly creative. This one has actual squid ink and sea salt. Want to try?”

Jack surveyed his wife and, as usual, felt the stirrings of arousal underneath his overwhelming love for her. Due to the Tennessee heat, she was clad in denim cutoffs and a black short-sleeved tee-shirt. He admired her long legs and the black

espadrille wedges on her feet. He raised his eyes to meet her gray gaze. “Why are you avoidin’ my comment, darlin’?”

Noelle took the bottle opener and calmly opened the bottle. She took a sip of the salty-sweet alcoholic beverage and eyed him over the top. Seriously, why was Jack so...*everything*???. His black curls were pulled back into a ponytail and his beard was recently trimmed. The white v-neck tee-shirt set off his tanned, freckled skin perfectly, and she eyed his muscular arms that bulged when he crossed them. His faded jeans clung to his muscled thighs and ass, and he wore flip-flops on his feet. Christ, even his feet were sexy, his toenails all nice and trimmed. *Mmmmph...now what was he saying? Oh yes, Casey.*

“It sounds like he might have fucked up,” Noelle said bluntly. “But at least he’s owning up to it. I just don’t know how he thought it would go down after that. Sidra’s mother is *very* different, Jack. She finally allowed him to see firsthand, and her mother warned her about him. *Then he got in her face?! I* wouldn’t be surprised if she doesn’t feel that this is *supposed* to be happening. Avery and I have both tried calling her, but she’s just responding via text.”

Jack walked up to her, grabbed the bottle out of her hands, and took a long swallow. He set it down on the patio table and pulled his wife to him by her front belt loops. They slid their hands into each other’s back pockets as Jack leaned down to kiss his wife. Their lips clung to each other, and their tongues meshed erotically, tasting of the ale and sea salt.

Noelle purred as Jack’s lips nibbled at hers and his beard caressed her chin. She could feel her panties growing damp with her arousal. Jack pulled her tighter to him and pressed her against his heavy erection that could be felt even through their clothing.

His wife was absolutely flawless, and he often felt like a madman because he couldn't get enough of Noelle...mind, body and soul, as well as her fucking taste. Whether it was these plump lips or the ones between her legs, he *craved* her. "Would *you* accept it?"

"*Hell no,*" she breathed against his lips. "*Never, Jack! You and our family are my EVERYTHING.*"

Jack reluctantly pulled away to kiss her forehead. "Likewise; so let's have a little faith in them. I remember how lost I was when I screwed up with you, so I know what he's kind of goin' through."

Noelle kissed him again. "If you say so, my love. And I hope you're right. Nothing would please me more than for them to get it together."

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"The kids napping?" Avery inquired with a warm smile as Darby entered the kitchen and leaned against the counter next to her. Carefully, she arranged the rustic peach and strawberry galette on a low cake platter before putting the glass dome cover on.

Darby leaned down and captured her lips in a lingering kiss. "Out for the count until it's time to eat, Ms.- I mean...Avery."

Guy walked into the kitchen and grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on Noelle's kitchen counter. "*The hell? Avery?!*"



*Since when???*”

She smiled and wiped her lipstick from her hubby’s lips.  
“Since we made a wager on our wedding night...”

Guy looked from his friend’s flaming red face to Avery’s smug one and took a bite of his apple. Chewing, he slowly processed what *wasn’t* being said. “So it’s safe to say that the honeymoon was pretty lit, huh?”

“And then some,” Avery said with a bawdy wink as she grabbed Darby’s hand and twined their fingers together. “But if it’s alright with my husband, I’d like for him to go back to calling me ‘Ms.’. My own name feels *wrong* to me without it.”

“Like he’s callin’ you a ho or somethin’?” Guy asked innocently, but the devilish gleam in his eyes betrayed him, and Avery laughed while Darby glowered at him.

“Beat it, Pip,” he growled as he drew his wife into his arms, hoping for some alone time.

“That’s all I ever do, brother,” Guy said mournfully as Kat walked into the room and opened the freezer. “I’m about to go blind from jackin’ off.”

“*Groooooossss! What is wrong with you?*” she asked indignantly as she pulled a small carton of ice cream out and crossed her eyes at him. Kat grabbed a spoon, pulled up a chair to the counter, and opened the container. “Fern giving you a *hard* time?”

Guy chuckled and tossed his braids back. “You don’t want to go there, princess. It would be fun to talk shit, but I know for a fact that ‘Thor’, your daddy, and brothers would beat the fuck outta me.”

“I doubt ‘Thor’ even cares,” Kat said sarcastically, rolling her eyes as she scooped out a big spoonful of ice cream.

Darby groaned aloud in exasperation at the both of them. “Hey now, we were here first. Scram!”

“No way! Jack and Noelle’s house is neutral territory,” Kat insisted stubbornly. “You can’t make out in the kitchen. Your new house is right down the road; take it over there, buddy.”

Darby raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t *you* and Holt make out in this very kitchen?”

“I know not what you speak of,” Kat said primly And then glared down into the ice cream carton. Guy reached over and ruffled her curls, chuckling as she ducked his hand.

“Do we even wanna know what’s goin’ on with you? Also, how do you know we didn’t want some of that ice cream?” he asked trying to look into the carton then howled in outrage. “It’s Noelle’s blueberry pie ice cream! You can’t just come in here and eat it all!”

“Quiet or you’ll wake the kids! Word of advice, sir: when a woman eats ice cream straight from the carton, you should just pretend like you don’t exist and let her proceed,” Avery advised him sagely. “I happen to know that Noelle made it just for her, as a thank you for babysitting at the wedding.”

Guy stared at her and then slowly turned to look at Kat. “You watched the babies the ENTIRE weddin’ night?”

Kat scooped up some more ice cream and ate it. “Yup. They didn’t come to claim the babies until check out time.”

Everyone looked at each other with dawning realization - before reaching into their pockets. Money hit the counter in the forms of twenties, tens, and fives. Guy looked at them speculatively, “What’s the wager?”

“That it actually happens?” Kat suggested and everyone snorted with disbelief.

“Boy or girl?” Avery offered, tapping her chin. “Or more than one? It *could* happen...”

“How long before they tell us?” Darby proposed as Holt walked in carrying baby Jack, followed by Casey. “Y’all want in on this? Jack and Noelle were left unsupervised at the weddin’ for more than twelve hours.”

Holt winced as baby Jack tugged on his beard, and he smoothed the little boy’s thick black curls back. “Put me in for fifty dollars. I’ll grab my wallet from the truck as soon as this little one settles down. “Anyone call ‘evident signs of morning sickness? If not, I want that.”

“I’ve got fifty dollars on her *not* bein’ pregnant,” Casey said adamantly, and they all turned to look at him with raised eyebrows. “Sorry, I just don’t see it this time. I think they learned their lesson from *their* wedding night and honeymoon.

Besides, windin' up pregnant from a wedding night is so predictable and corny."

"I wouldn't mind a weddin' night just to see for myself," Guy joked, wagging his eyebrows, and Kat nudged his shoulder with hers. "Oh, and I'd also like for Morgan Freeman to narrate it, please.

From outside, Jack called, "Food's up! Let's eat!"

"I definitely pity the poor woman who has to deal with you," Kat said sorrowfully to Guy, who smiled back at her enigmatically. "Let's go eat!"

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Guy hummed along to Tim McGraw as he drove his vintage Chevy truck home later that night. Although cooler in the mountains, the temperature today at ninety-two degrees had been one of the hottest on record. The kids, full from dinner and sticky from sweets, had quickly fallen asleep after Guy had finished lighting sparklers with them. He smiled as he remembered D.J.'s earnest request to ask Fern if the kids could come down for a whole week.

He pulled into his driveway and parked in front of the large, two-story wooden house overlooking the lake that he'd built with help from Holt and his father Rudii. The outside was painted in black, except the snow-white door, but the inside was light and airy and painted entirely in an off-white color. Guy preferred it that way to show off his Native American art collection displayed throughout the house, although that would

soon be changing as his niece and nephew were pleading to paint their rooms, and he was such a sucker for their cute faces that he couldn't resist.

Grabbing the to-go boxes Noelle always ensured he took home with him, Guy turned off the engine and slipped out of the car. Inside the house was quiet, save the hum of the air conditioner. He smiled because that didn't mean anything, and his point was soon proven when he opened the fridge and placed the leftovers inside. When he straightened up, slender arms encircled him from behind and began unbuttoning his lightweight denim shirt. "Hey there. Thought you'd be sleep by now. You hungry?"

"I'm starving, just not for food," she said alluringly as she removed his shirt to reveal his sleekly-muscled physique and placed tiny moist kisses along his tattooed back. Guy turned around and pulled the naked tempting package that was Pearl Mignon into his arms. He kissed her moist lips slowly until her hands clenched desperately to his long black braids and pulled tightly, even as she sought more of his mouth. *"Please, hurry!"*

Guy laughed quietly as he scooped her into his arms and headed for the stairs. Pearl pressed kisses all over his face and hit the light switches on the way up as he teased her with neck kisses and nipped at her collar bones. She sighed with restless pleasure and asked, "How was time with the family?"

"You'd know if you just decided to come," he taunted her softly, but she remained mum on the subject. "You're the only one concerned about your age, Pearl. No one else would be thinking about it."

"I would be," she said stubbornly, and Guy growled with frustration as they reached the bedroom, and he dropped her

on the bed unceremoniously. She scowled at him but quickly scrambled to her knees in front of him and undid his jeans. He brushed her long brown hair away from her face and noticed it was highlighted more than usual with dark blonde highlights, most likely to cover the increasing gray hair that she complained about. Guy had tried to dissolve Pearl's insecurities by worshipping her body every chance they got. They would go for hours, and he loved the way she gave herself over to what they were doing.

They'd started the clandestine affair eight months ago when she walked into *Americana Traditions* to order customized barstools for her restaurant The Pink Champagne. Guy had the details of her order as well as the Creole beauty's personal ones: five feet eight, 34-28-34. Their attraction had been instantaneous, but he could see she was reluctant to pursue anything between them due to their fifteen-year age gap, so Guy had made the first move, snatching her into his arms as she walked him to the door. It was after hours so the restaurant was closed up for the night, allowing him to fuck her on the newly laid wooden floor. And they'd loved every minute of it. A widow, Pearl had married a man twenty-five years her senior who'd died of natural causes, and after burying him moved back to Whiskey Row. This affair suited both of them because, for all of his shit talking, Guy was a private man and Pearl was too embarrassed to be seen carousing with a hot *younger* man. But they both had needs and desires, which up until four months ago had suited both parties just fine.

They had an understanding that this was a no strings attached, casual affair. If either found a better deal elsewhere, it was farewell with the best of luck. Guy hadn't found a better deal; he'd just found himself seeing a different face when he was buried inside of Pearl's lush body, and imagining she was someone else, and hard as he tried, he couldn't shake it. Just the thought of *her* had him standing as erect as a Redwood tree as Pearl licked her lips in anticipation and slid her hand

between her thighs. It made him an asshole of the first order, and he *despised* himself for it.

“What’s the matter, Guiles?” Pearl softly inquired as she pulled his cock out and lowered her head to lick the head. He gave her a half-smile. She never called him Guy. It was always *Guiles*.

“I’m thinkin’ we should probably stop, Pearl,” Guy said honestly, and she froze. Slowly, she rose up to look at him, and her heart ached at the unyielding look on his face. He was a man with his mind made up “It’s not you, but somethin’s changed with me. I’ve enjoyed our time together but have to be upfront and tell you that because you deserve nothing less.”

Pearl tried to quell the panic rising within at his devastating words. Guiles was everything she could ask for in a lover. He was insatiably freaky, and the way he ate her pussy made her want to pay him for the pleasure. Sex with her husband had always been a ten-minute chore that she’d endured as she counted ‘Mississippi’s’ in her head. Although they had an agreement, Pearl found herself unwilling to honor it because she just knew she would never find another lover like him. *She would find a way to make him stay. She just had to!*

“Give me tonight?” she pleaded, hating both the way she sounded so thirsty and the reluctance in his black eyes to comply with her request, but then it was gone as he pushed her back into the softness of his bed.

Guy yanked his pants off and grabbed a condom from the nightstand. He followed Pearl down onto the bed, covering her soft curves with his hard body as his lips captured hers. She rolled him to his back and climbed on top, trailing kisses down his body, before wrapping her lips around his straining cock. “Ladies first, *mon amour*.”

Guy closed his eyes and gave himself up to her pleasurable mouth. *He could do tonight*, he told himself. Tonight would be his goodbye to her. He could do tonight.

Her tongue swirled up and down his satiny length, and she eagerly swallowed the sticky essence that appeared on the mushroomed head before lapping at his balls as her hands stroked him. Pearl felt pleasure at his harsh curse as Guy put his hands in her hair and took control. He rose up and Pearl fell back on the bed, her pussy already flooded in anticipation of what would come next. Guy's eyes were unreadable as he straddled her and pulled two straps of leather from underneath one of the pillows and tied one wrist then the other to his wooden bed posts.

As she looked up at him in the dimmed light, Pearl's heart hurt at how beautiful he was. His raven black hair, so sleek in his tightly-woven French braids, was a stark contrast to the burnished copper tone of his skin that reflected his Native American and Spanish heritage. With almond-shaped obsidian eyes over cheekbones sharp enough to cut butter and a regal nose, Guiles was so arresting, Pearl found she could look at him for the rest of her life.

"Move," he commanded, and she jerked at her restraints so that he could see she was incapable of doing so. Satisfied, Guiles moved up further and stroked her lips with his dick, leaving them glistening with his precum as she suctioned him back into her mouth. Pearl moaned, and the sound vibrated along his length, causing him to go taut with restraint to prevent himself from thrusting all the way into her mouth. She sucked harder to let him know she wanted more, and he smiled softly at her.



“Easy, Pearl, we’ve got all night,” he reminded her as he trailed his fingertips from her wrists all the way down to her armpits, observing the way she bit her lips and her nipples tightened to dark buds, begging for his attention. Guy plucked at them, twisted them firmly, and then slowly rubbed away the pain. He stretched over her and fed her languorous kisses as he continued to fondle her breasts. His tongue stroked deep into her mouth, and she wrapped her legs around his muscular thighs, eager to be one with him. Guy shifted so his cock rubbed sensuously against her swollen clit, and he swallowed every frantic whimper she uttered before lowering his head and treating her turgid nipples to that skillful tongue as his shaft was coated in her increasing wetness.

*“Guiles, mmmm, yes like that...I want to touch you,”* Pearl struggled to speak as the erotic pleasure threatened to take her under. It was torture to not be able to touch him and hold him close. The tingling in her pussy was building as his cock rubbed harder and longer against her clit. *Sooo close...*

He chuckled softly, loving how out of control she was with pleasure, “Rules are rules, Pearl.”

His tongue trailed to her ribcage, and his fingers replaced his cock as he slid lower to delve into her pussy and give her relief. Guy’s fingers played her expertly as his thumb pinched her clit hard and his fingers thrust into her and found her g-spot, rubbing roughly. Pearl went wild, jerking and screaming as she instantly climaxed, only to be prolonged as Guy sucked her clit into his mouth and gently bit down while his fingers fucked her relentlessly, and her juices leaked everywhere. Then his tongue plunged into her forcefully and he swirled it around and around lapping up her arousal.

*“Fuuuuuck, Guiles! Yesss! Eat my pussy just like that!”* Pearl shouted as she thrust upward dying for more as he found her g-spot.

Guy inhaled the sweet scent of her musky arousal and shifted her thighs over his shoulders, opening her up even more to reveal her swollen nub. He watched Pearl's pretty face contort in ecstasy, waiting until her eyes drifted shut before he spanked her clit. Hard.

"*Aaaagh!*" she cried out as he continued the smacks in a rapid pattern, breaking her apart again and turning her into a shuddering mass. Guy lowered her bottom to the bed, watching as her arousal gushed out of her and into the cleft of her ass. His dick was rock hard and in need of relief. So far so good. He saw her and only her, long brown hair damp with perspiration that also beaded her rosy skin. Guy grabbed the condom packet and tore it open, quickly sheathing himself and driving into her slickness, causing Pearl to cry out at his invasion. He hissed at the snug feel, allowing her to adjust as he reached over and untied her bonds.

Pearl locked eyes with him, drowning in their blackness as they blazed back at her. She reached up to touch his face, and he allowed her to do so, remaining perfectly still as she lovingly traced his lips and brushed against his Fu Manchu. Then she moved to his broad shoulders and down the sinewy muscles of his arms to his ripped abdomen, until she came to where they were joined and that part of him, so long and thick that was buried within her. That she would never feel again after tonight...she had to let him know.

"Thank you for this. I've never had so much pleasure in my life, Guiles," she smiled tremulously at the affection she saw for her in his eyes.

"You're a vibrant beautiful woman, Pearl," Guiles dropped his head so their foreheads touched. "Please don't forget that. There's plenty of time for you, but it waits for no one, so make the most of it, darlin'."

"Yes, you are right," she breathed against his sumptuous lips. "Starting now. I want you to...*there.*"

Guy nibbled at her lips. "Are you sure, Pearl?"

“There’s no one I’d trust more, Guiles,” she insisted huskily.  
“This is our last night. Give it to me the way I want, *cherie*.”

So he withdrew and reached for the bottle of lube in the nightstand drawer, applying a generous amount on the condom, before he added more to his fingers. Leaning over, he kissed Pearl demandingly as he rubbed against her star. She flinched at the cold wetness before opening herself up to him, undoing his long black braids so his hair became a dark cloak around them as he introduced her to a decadently sinful pleasure.

*“Oh my stars, Guiles!”*

Guy smiled into her mouth as he added a second finger to her ass and felt her relax even more. “There’s so much more to come, Pearl. The most important thing is to relax and stay in the moment with me. I’m gonna fuck you so good, you’ll wonder why you ever waited.”

*“Mmmm, I can’t wait,”* she purred, lifting to meet his talented fingers as he added a third; her hand drifted down to pluck her clit, and she cried out ecstatically.

Guy removed her hand and gave her a mock scowl. “That’s my job, Pearl. Now, I’m gonna need you to turn over.”

Pearl rolled over, dizzy with reckless abandon as she felt him at her back entrance. She cried out at the immense pressure as his head slowly pushed forward, and he massaged her back soothingly but still continued, only stopping when the head pushed past her sphincter to give her relief.

“Spread ‘em, Pearl,” he ordered hoarsely at her tightness, and she obeyed falling forward as he eased in even more and retreated slightly, repeating this pattern until he was all the way in. “Are you ready?”

*“Fuck me, Guy! I need you to move!”* she cried as she flexed tighter around him and needing relief from the foreign, aching fullness.

Slowly, he pushed her down to the mattress, wrapping her dark hair around his fist as he eased them onto their sides, and he

shoved his thigh between hers and opened her up while allowing himself deeper access. Guy bit her earlobe as he started to move, slow deep thrusts in and out of her ass as his lips moved to her neck and teased her sensitive nerves.

Pearl whimpered as his fingers found her over-sensitized clit and teased it while his other arm held her in place across her chest to pluck at her nipples, pinching and twisting them as he fucked her harder and faster, leaning over to capture her lips and cries. Pearl was wrong. So very wrong. *She hadn't been ready for this or this side of him.* He was everywhere, bringing her body and mind to pinnacles of rapture she hadn't known existed.

*"Goddamn, Pearl! Never forget that you were made for lovin'!"* Guy hissed against her jaw, his eyes rolling back with pleasure as he fondled her lush breasts and pussy while fucking her plump ass mercilessly. *"Say you'll never settle, baby! Promise me, Pearl...promise me!"*

*"I won't!"* she screamed as her body succumbed to the intense carnality that only he had been able to evoke, clenching and unclenching around him as they soared together to ecstasy. As he released into her, Guy had to bury his lips against Pearl's neck as he was once more haunted by another face. *Fuck! He was so screwed.*

## **Chapter Fourteen**

*Washington D.C.*

Sidra's stomach heaved uncontrollably as she bent over the toilet and emptied the breakfast she'd just consumed. After making sure she was done, she flushed and then rinsed her mouth at the sink, taking in her sunken eyes and sallow-looking skin. *Great; she not only felt like shit but looked like it as well*, she thought sourly as she reached into her bag for her cosmetics pouch and prayed for a miracle. She applied a liberal amount of bronzer to her cheeks and black eyeliner to her bottom lids. To her lips, she applied a sheer nude gloss and gave a sigh as she evaluated her complexion. At least she didn't look like a "Thriller" video extra anymore.

There was a knock at the door, and then she heard Dominick's concerned voice come through. "Hey, is everything okay with you?"

Sidra closed her eyes, remembering that she'd jumped up from the chair in Dominick's office and made the mad dash to the bathroom. Struggling for normalcy, she called out, "Yeah, I'm good. I'm just taking medication for my...allergies. I'm not supposed to have dairy if I take it. I'll be right out."

"Copy that. Come to the studio when you're ready, Sid." She listened to make sure she heard his retreating footsteps before pulling out her travel sized bottle of Listerine. All Sidra wanted to do was crawl back into bed. Not the bed at the hotel. No, she wanted Casey's bed with him cuddling the fuck out of her. Never had anything hurt so much as being separated from him. She still couldn't even talk about how out of control he'd looked, and she doubted anyone would believe her. Although she feared no confrontation, Casey had really looked like he wanted to hurt her that night, and that was the worst of all. He had to go before it got worse because she knew Casey would not have believed her if she'd told him that.

Sidra hadn't returned any of his attempts at contact and was pissed that she couldn't spend the past weekends with her friends and family. Casey would insist on talking, and she wasn't ready. He had bigger problems that needed attention before addressing *them*, and she couldn't do that without a mediator. Her mother's words danced in her head.

*"That man carries so much pain, I'm surprised you can't smell his infected wounds," Lena warned. "It will make or break you if it's not addressed. Don't say I didn't warn you."*

Taking a deep breath, she opened the bathroom door and exited down the hall to a flight of stairs leading to Dominick's basement. The muted bass thumping from behind the third door on the left was the studio. Sidra opened the door, and Dominick smiled at her lazily. "All better?"

"Just peachy, Dom," Sidra replied with a bright smile as she grabbed her headphones and went to sit in front of her laptop. She opened her personal drawer and pulled out a black scrunchie and quickly pulled her hair back in a haphazard ponytail. Turning her laptop on, she spoke, "Let's work on that new beat for the remix to your instrumental solo. I wanna make it so sick, people will be ill for days after hearing it. At first, I wanted to mix just by wave riding, but it sounds waaaay better with headphones. Don't worry, I downloaded both versions so you can listen for yourself."

"You know I always like what you do, ma," Dominick shrugged as he leaned back in his chair and studied her unnoticed as she slipped on her headphones and went into the zone. Sidra was too everything for words and didn't deserve the way lawyer boy under-appreciated her. He smiled as he watched her get lost in the music and make adjustments on her laptop. From the moment he saw her, he knew they would get along. She was just like him on a level that her punk-ass

boyfriend couldn't even relate to. Hopefully, with this rift in their relationship, Sidra would see the light and move on. Maybe she just needed a getaway. Somewhere to relax and clear her head and he knew just the thing.

Dominick opened his phone and looked at the email his agent had sent to him. There was an 'America The Beautiful' tour that he needed confirmation from Dominick on. There would be ten other bands along with Bison Blue. This would be a great way for her to network her skills, which in turn would keep her too busy to think about anything else. He raised his eyes and watched Sidra bobbing her head to the music with closed eyes and tried to swallow the lump of pride in his throat. She didn't realize the lengths he would go to for her to be happy. It was time to put Casey behind her and make sure he stayed there. Sidra could do way better than him. She just needed space and opportunity. He got up from his chair and motioned to her that he was leaving. Sidra gave him the thumbs up and went back to adjusting tempos and making notes.

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Hours later, Sidra jumped and opened her eyes at the hand on her shoulder. Dominick was standing behind her with a grin on the handsome face that had earned him sex symbol status. Of Asian and Hispanic descent, his features blended nicely together and gave him an exotic look with his slanted eyes, deep olive skin tone, and heavy curtain of wavy brown hair that he kept braided in cornrows. His wardrobe consisted of white dress shirts with vests and ragged denim jeans. Ten years Sidra's senior, he'd started his music career in heavy metal but had moved on to indie rock where he'd carved his niche. "What's up?"

“Sorry to break your concentration, but I just got some good news. We just picked up a fifty-city tour across the nation called ‘America The Beautiful’! Pack your bags, sweetheart; we’re going on a new adventure in two weeks,” he said gleefully, rubbing his hands together. “Isn’t that great?”

“Damn, that is good news!” Sidra agreed, but her mind was racing. There was no way she could do fifty cities with the way she was feeling. Just now, she’d started to doze off, but luckily her boss thought she was just in her zone. Not to mention the fact that a tour of that size would take her away from Casey. Speaking of...

“Hey, Dom, I heard the interview that you did with Kate. Nice job,” Sidra said, watching as he grinned unabashedly.

“Yeah, she played our new song with your beats! You did a great job on it, Sidra. It couldn’t have been done without you,” he replied enthusiastically.

“Well, thank you. I thought it sounded wonderful, and I only had one request regarding the interview. Do not discuss me if it’s not in a professional capacity. Please shut that shit down,” Sidra said seriously.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it,” Dominick replied contritely. “She asked, and I don’t think I said anything offensive-”

“Kate was trying to imply something other than a working relationship, which wasn’t cool in the least because we both know it’s not even like that. Just going forward, I would appreciate not being gossip fodder for the media, alright?”



Sidra offered him a tight smile. “It lets me know that you respect what I’m about. Cool?”

“Yeah, that’s cool. I’m sorry about that, and it won’t happen again. Sooo... in regards to the tour, we should celebrate and grab some dinner or something,” Dom suggested. “What about a drink? I’d love to take you to a little spot I know called The Park. What do you say?”

Before Sidra could reply, her phone vibrated, and she reached into her jeans for it. A glance showed she had two missed calls and voicemails, one from Casey and the other from her doctor’s office. She pressed Casey’s message first.

*“It’s me again. I’m tryna respect the fact that you don’t want to talk to me right now, but the fact of the matter is...it’s killin’ me. My arms feel empty because you’re not in them and, I feel like I’m drownin’, baby. I can’t lie; I’m scared that you’re not missin’ me, and instead, you’re forgettin about me. I don’t want to scare you, but I’ll be damned if I let that happen.”*

By the end of the second sentence, Sidra was gathering her things together and heading for the door. She turned to look at her boss apologetically. “Sorry, I can’t tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow, though. I’ve saved all the tracks to your folder. Have a great night, Dominick.”

She turned to leave and missed the incensed expression on his handsome face.

Sidra listened to Casey’s message eight times as she anxiously waited for the car service. His words and the quiet desperation in his voice summed up exactly how she felt. Her phone rang again just as the car pulled up. “Hello?”

“Hello, this is Dr. Laura Klaus returning your call,” the dulcet voice replied. “How may I assist you, Sidra?”

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Casey opened the door to his condo with a heavy heart. He hated coming home knowing that his baby wouldn't be here. Even when she traveled, Sidra always made sure to leave a message on his answering machine for him to listen to when he got home or put little post-it love notes in his suit pockets. Those were just some of the little things he loved about her. He set his briefcase down and walked into the living room, coming to a halt when he saw her sitting there on the sofa with her legs crossed, where she'd obviously been waiting for him.

He drank in the sight of her hungrily, relieved just to be in her presence. Although she was always lovely to him, she looked like she hadn't been sleeping well.

Sidra wanted to get up and fly into Casey's arms and hold him close to her. He was as handsome as ever, and the stubble was sexy as hell, but he looked exhausted and guilt ate away at her for the part she'd played by staying away. “You look like shit, Case.”

He leaned against the wall and shoved his hands into his pants pockets to keep from making any sudden moves towards her. Instead, he smiled wanly at her. “I feel like it as well. My woman left me for bein' an ass. I really need her to understand that I would rather die before hurtin' her. All I wanna do is take her into my arms, but I *don't* wanna scare her.”

Eyes hot with unshed tears, Sidra replied firmly, “She doesn't scare easily and believe me, there's nothing your woman wants more than that.”

Painstakingly slow, Casey walked to her and humbly kneeled down in front of her. He closed his eyes as her hand caressed his face and lowered his head into her lap and wrapped his arms around her waist.

Sidra let the tears run unchecked down her face as she felt her nylon sweats dampen with Casey's tears. Running her hands over his familiar features, she brushed his tears away. "I love you, Casey."

His hands squeezed her waist tightly as he let out a harsh cry and pulled her closer. "*I love you too, Sidra Jane. Forever and ever. I promise that it won't ever happen again.*"

Sidra didn't say she knew because if it did, she'd have to stab a motherfucker. Some things were just better recognized but left unsaid. Instead, she asked, "Are you hungry? Because I have an *insane* taste for fried pork chops and grape jelly."

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Casey turned off the television with a heavy heart and leaned back in his office chair. He'd been watching the news nonstop for two days, and the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of law enforcement left him reeling and sick to his stomach. *How in this day and age was this happening over and over again???* Some of the media outlets had portrayed them as criminals, but they could sell their propaganda pie to someone else. As a lawyer, he was a firm believer in law enforcement and upholding the law, but that didn't mean that everyone had good intentions once they put that badge and uniform on.

He picked up his office phone and dialed a number. The phone rang three times before it was picked up, and Max Hayes answered tersely, "Hello?"

“Hey, man,” Casey said. “You watchin’?”

“I can’t look away from it,” Max growled. “Wade and I were just talking about a peace rally that we’re organizing here. Everyone seems so shocked by what happened in Dallas, and no, there was *nothing* justified about those officer’s deaths, may they rest in peace, but what did society think would happen when you let people play unsupervised with an active grenade? The unjustified murder of every unarmed black man by the police was that grenade waiting to explode.”

“For every action, there is a reaction,” Casey agreed, turning the television back on. “The anger, despair, and hopelessness are overwhelmingly justified. The frustration to correct this fucked up systematic process we’re in has had me thinkin’ about a lot of things. My brothers and I lived with a racist tyrant who didn’t care about us, let alone a person of color. As you know, our *Take A Stand* foundation is all about tacklin’ issues like this and raising awareness, and we’ve been pretty successful. Darby and Jack are very busy with their other business ventures, but I think I want to step back from the firm and focus on the foundation and its civil rights division.”

“That’s a pretty big decision, brother,” Max said thoughtfully. “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Casey thought about Sidra and all the other women in his life he cared about and then the kids and all the future babies to come. And lastly, his friends Max, Graham, Guy, and Antonio. Then there were the family members of every slain man and boy who longed for justice and peace. “Yes, I’m sure it’s what I want to do.”

“Then I approve wholeheartedly, and I want in. The day that a black person, be it child or adult, doesn’t need to be counseled on how to walk, talk, and hold themselves with more than just dignity and respect because of what someone may assume they’re up to, is a day I look forward to,” Max stated firmly.

“Amen,” Casey said softly, feeling the sting at the back of his eyes as he watched Alton Sterling’s crying son. “Amen.”

There was a moment of silence as they tried to reign in their emotions. Finally, Max cleared his throat noisily, “So, how are things going with Sidra?”

“Things are good,” Casey said nonchalantly. Sidra had been back for three days, but they’d yet to be intimate. She was gone first thing in the morning after waking him with a cup of coffee and a kiss, and then he didn’t see her until he got home. She made dinner, and they talked about their day, but by seven, she was dead to the world. He planned on changing that by leaving early today and taking his woman out for a little bit of wining and dining. “What about with you and Georgie?”

“Everything is gravy. I can’t wait to give her my last name! We’ve been talking about kids and how many we want. I want six, and she said how about two and the dogs,” Max said in amusement. “Her business is doing very well also. You and Sidra should come visit. Bring Ruby and D.J.; they’d love it here.

“I think I could work that out,” Casey replied but then frowned. “I’m not sure about the kids, though. Sid and I are on probation with my brother and his wife over a few... misunderstandings.”

Max’s loud laughter filled his ear. “Do I even want to know what happened?”

“Nothing *happened*,” Casey said defensively. “Jack’s just bein’ his usual overbearin’, protective self.”

“Well, it can’t be any worse than my reputation as a horny farmer,” his friend replied dryly. “Georgina’s city friends and the chef at her family’s restaurant seem to think I’m a voyeuristic deviant who loves to watch farm animals getting it on all day!”

Casey bust out laughing, “Say what?! Please tell me you’re makin’ that shit up!”

“No, I’m not!” Max said indignantly. “And the worst part about it is, they’re always giving me shit and saying that’s where I got my bedroom skills from!”

“Well...is it?” Casey asked delicately, trying not to laugh as he idly twirled a pencil on his desk.

“Bye, fool,” Max said and hung up, causing Casey to laugh even harder.

His assistant Gail buzzed him. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Sorry to bother you, sir, but there’s an Anna Dayton here to see you. I did let her know you were incredibly busy, but she’s insisting for just a moment of your time,” Gail informed him crisply. “Shall I have her wait until you become available or have security escort her out?”

Casey grinned, imagining Anna sitting there listening to his short-tempered assistant. “Show her in. What time am I due in court?”

“Thirty minutes, sir. I’ll keep you on track,” she assured him, and then said to Anna, “You may go in.”

There was a knock on the door, and then Anna opened it. “Hi, Casey; thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

Casey rose from his chair and gestured to one of the empty chairs on the other side of his desk. He smiled politely. “Hi, Anna; please have a seat. What I can do for you?”

Anna leaned forward and smiled winningly at him. Casey took a moment to really study her. She had big blue eyes, a short, straight nose, and a pretty smile. Her blonde hair was cut in a sleek bob, and she was dressed very conservatively in a prim navy suit. There was nothing that screamed drama-filled or complicated about Anna. She was pure vanilla, and at one time, she would have been exactly what he would have gone for.

Now, he was used to something richer and bolder. Something that made his taste buds explode with the sweet and spicy

flavor that left him in constant craving status for his next serving of it. Sidra had done this to him, with her fiery sass, sweetness, and sarcasm, and he loved it. Her physicality was just icing on the cake.

“I was just in the neighborhood and again wanted to apologize for my faux pas the last time we saw each other,” she said earnestly. “I certainly didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Anna, you didn’t have to come over here just to say that,” Casey said coolly. “Please be assured that *I* meant every word of what I said that night. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m due in court.”

“Yes, of course,” Anna stood up and glanced over at the television. A disapproving frown marred her face. “It’s just a shame that they’re still not getting it.”

Casey regarded her sharply. “Not getting what?”

“*Them*. They’re so fixated on it being the color of *their* skin when it’s really *all* lives matter. Don’t just make it about one specific race,” she explained with an eye roll.

“Solid evidence disputes your statement, Anna,” Casey said sharply. “This *is* happening to black people, and it’s happening on *our* watch. We can figure out how to send people to space and survive, build vehicles that don’t run on gas, but don’t have the logic, intelligence, or decency to deal with a fellow human being civilly? That’s a damn problem, and you’re a silly ass fool if you don’t think so.”

“You don’t have to resort to name calling, Casey! I’m not disputing that it’s happening; I just think we should move forward as Americans and make it great-”

“When was America *so* great?” Casey inquired with frustration. “When we participated in slavery and denied black people their basic rights as humans? Because that’s what is happenin’ right now! It happened to the man who pleaded he couldn’t *breathe*, to the boy who was just so *crazy* to think he could wear his sweatshirt hood up, to the man who informed

the police that he carried a weapon legally, as in his *constitutional right* to bear arms, but it wasn't even on his person! You're fuckin' sleepwalkin' if you don't see the correlation of these events."

"So, you're saying that we should hate the cops then?" Anna shook her head in disdain. "I would never have thought you would feel-

"You don't fuckin' know me, lady to be assumin' anythin' about me!" Casey snarled. "I have *the highest* respect for law enforcement, but wearin' a uniform means you are held to a higher standard and should conduct yourself in that manner. You've overstayed your visit and should go now, Anna."

"I think that would be for the best. I'm sorry; it wasn't my intention to get you all riled up," she said obviously miffed by his brutal words.

"I *am* riled up, and you should be too," Casey countered as he walked to the door and held it open for her.

Anna smiled at him sadly. "I just wish I could say or do something to make it right between us."

Casey's face was impassive as he stared at her, "One, there is no *us*. Two, there is something you can do. You can wake the fuck up. Goodbye, Anna."

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Casey was in a good mood as he left the office. The decision to step back and focus on the foundation felt good and would ensure he leave a solid legacy for the future Sullivan's to come. He didn't even see the damage until he was inserting his key into the driver's side. "Motherfucker!"

His front left tire was slashed and inserted into the jagged tire was a note that read:

*Be wary of the company that you keep.*



“The hell?!” Casey looked around but didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. He would give the note to Darby and let him know what happened. The security camera didn’t rotate and only faced the building entrance. He could hear Darby’s lecture now. The last time his older brother had mentioned a new camera system, Casey had brushed it off with an ‘I’ll get around to it later’. Well, looks like later was today. He opened his door and tossed his briefcase inside. Then opened the trunk for the spare tire and jack. So much for leaving early and surprising Sidra.

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Nina Santos sat behind the wheel of her silver Audi S7 and spied Casey Sullivan with amusement from across his law firm’s parking lot. She watched him change the tire on his blue classic Mustang convertible, enjoying the way his rolled up shirt sleeves exposed his muscular arms. She smiled fondly as she thought of how he used to tell their group of friends it was his dream to own one. You could certainly take the boy out of the country but not vice versa. His gorgeous eyes shining brightly as he leaned forward with an animated expression. Nina remembered when they graduated from law school how his brothers, Ian Rusnik, and the Romankov’s had presented him with the vehicle.

It galled her to no end that he’d wound up in Sidra’s arms of all people. Nina, who had her pick of men, was beyond livid that Casey had rebuffed her every attempt. But she’d watched him watch Sidra and saw his love and devotion to the black bitch. She was just like her *whore* mother Lena, driving men crazy. Many a night while living at home, Nina had helped a drunken cowardly Nero to bed as he bemoaned the fact that he couldn’t go to his true love, Lena. Then after putting him to bed, she would go and soothe her mother and her broken heart.

The same way that Nero loved another, Cecelia loved him, and in the end, Nina was pretty sure that was what killed her mother. Through it all, she'd stayed with Nero because of her love for him and the refusal to deal with her father's 'I told you about marrying a lowly spic' tirade. It was a good thing for Nero that Cecelia and Mauricio had never found out about Sidra. The day after Nina had found out about her bastard half-sister, Nero bought her a new BMW and treated her and two girlfriends to an all-expense paid trip to Paris. It was a bribe plain and simple; one that Nina sold her soul for when she accepted the keys, plane tickets, and credit cards. She'd kept his secret, allowing it to live inside of her and fester like a flesh-eating virus at her soul, as Nero rewarded her continuously. Nina made junior partner two months after she started working at his firm, and dealt with six cases max a year while Nero continued to pay all her bills.

Casey was wasting his time with Sidra. *What would someone like him want with a one-dimensional bitch like her???* Maybe he was too caught up in the jungle fever that seemed to be running rampant through his family, but Nina was confident she could make him change his mind. They had way too much in common for them not to be a successful match. They could be the new power couple of D.C. if they played their cards right. She would help him to realize that.

Nina smirked as she slipped her aviator sunglasses onto her nose and watched Casey finally get into his car and drive away. She turned her car on and followed him from a safe distance.

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It was five in the afternoon when Casey arrived home with a bouquet of deep pink peonies. He opened the door, and a

delicious aroma tantalized his nose, making his stomach growl as he called out, “Baby, I’m home! What smells so good in here?”

Sidra peeked out from around the corner of the kitchen, and his eyes widened appreciatively. Sidra was fully made up and wearing a mint green sleeveless sheath that looked amazing against her lovely dark skin. On her feet were delicate silver heels. “Hi! I’m doing veal piccata, riced cauliflower, and steamed green beans. How was your day?”

“So-so and yours? These are for you,” Casey said gallantly presenting the flowers to her with a bow. Then he kissed her lips tenderly, and she wound her arm around his neck carefully so as not to crush the flowers. “You look so pretty. I’m gonna need you to leave nothin’ but them heels on later.”

Sidra smiled with pleasure and brought the flowers up to her nose. “Thank you, baby! I missed you today. Why don’t you go relax, and I’ll set the table? I think these flowers will make a great centerpiece.”

Casey gave her another quick kiss. “Veal piccata huh? I didn’t know you could get down like that.”

Sidra laughed. “That makes two of us. I did carry out from Da Lucco’s.”

They walked into the kitchen, and he laughed when he saw the takeout bags.

“I’ll set the table, baby. Let’s eat, I’m starved!” Casey exclaimed. “I didn’t think you really cared for veal. I remembered you said something about it when Noelle made it last October.”

It was true, Sidra hadn’t liked it that much, but this morning when she woke up, she’d experienced a deep hunger for it. “I thought we could give it another try.”

There was a knock at the door, and Casey frowned. “I’m not expecting anyone are you?”

“Yes, I am...I invited a guest for dinner,” Sidra murmured.

“Would you mind getting that while I set everything up?”

“It better not be DICK,” he warned darkly as he headed to the door. He glanced in the peephole before unlocking it. “Hey, Dr. Laura! How are you doin’?”

“Hi, Casey,” the older woman said affectionately as she accepted his hug and kiss on the cheek. “I was invited for dinner by your lovely girlfriend.”

“Well, come on in,” he said with a stiff smile as he stood aside to let her in. So, Sidra was calling in reinforcements over what happened. Casey gave a sigh of vexation; he couldn’t really blame her, he supposed. He walked down the hall and backed into the kitchen where the two women were exchanging pleasantries. Sidra glanced at him, her eyes unreadable, and he smiled at her, letting her know that he would follow her cue on this. Slowly, she smiled back, her eyes full of love.

Sidra was filled with relief. Everything was going to be okay. *They* would be okay. “Casey, why don’t you fix Dr. Klaus a drink?”

“Of course. Come have a seat and let’s catch up, Doc,” he offered, and they walked into the living room.

Sidra pulled out three white ceramic platters and then opened the boxes of green beans and cauliflower. They hit her nose, and she braced herself at the aroma of the cauliflower. Slowly, she internalized it. *That wasn’t too bad*, she thought, pleased with herself. Next came the large plastic container of veal piccata, and her taste buds watered. Yes! She’d been waiting to eat this *all* day. She eagerly lifted the lid, and then *it* happened. The sight of the dish and the smell of lemon and capers filled her with sickening nausea, and she could barely control it as she slammed the lid back on the container and took off down the hall, past an alarmed-looking Casey and Dr. Laura for the guest bathroom, where she lost the war with her extremely sensitive stomach.

## Chapter Sixteen

“I’m so sorry,” Sidra moaned dismally as she lay in bed watching Casey pour another glass of 7-Up then handed it to her which she eagerly downed. “I can’t believe I ruined dinner like that.”

“It’s all good, darlin’. Want another slice of cheese pizza?” He glanced into the cardboard box.

“There’s still some left?” she asked eagerly and slowly sat up. “*Yes, please.* I thought I ate the whole thing!”

“Damn near. There’s one slice left, and I wouldn’t dare get between the both of you,” he joked.

“So, Dr. Laura left? Think she’ll ever come back?” Sidra asked hopefully.

“Definitely not for dinner,” Casey shuddered. “From the sounds you were making, hell, *I* wanted to leave with her, but somebody had to make sure whatever was inside of you hadn’t killed you.”

“I see. So the scenario of me floating on a piece of wood in the ocean, and you holding it up would never happen?” Sidra frowned and swatted his arm when he laughed at her. “You are soooo lucky I like you, boo.”

Casey crawled over to her and planted a soft kiss on her lips. “I ain’t lucky, darlin’. I’m blessed. Come here.”

Willingly, she went into his arms and settled comfortably against his chest. “Why didn’t you tell me Doc was coming over, Sid?”

“Because I didn’t know how you’d react, but it wasn’t just for you. I need her as well.” Sidra raised her head to look deep into his eyes. “I’m scared of what’s going to happen to us. I was so relieved when we left Granny’s house, but then not

even five hours later, we're in the worst fight we've ever had. It was scary and *you* were scary. I'd never seen you like that and honestly couldn't say what you would have done. I just knew what I would do, and I don't ever want to feel that way again."

Casey's jaw tightened. "I can't say or show you enough how deeply I regret that night, and you were right. I'm always tryin' to get you to talk and open up, but I couldn't. I was so ashamed of what happened to me when I was little, and I hate that I can't control that feelin'. Seeing Mabel triggered some of those memories."

"Mabel? What happened to you, babe? Please talk to me," she urged, watching as he struggled with himself. "I'm here for you, Casey. You have fears, and I have fears; if we're going to work, we need to be able to confront them together and tell them to fuck off for good, baby. I got you and this. I trusted you; now it's time for you to trust me."

Casey stared at the white ceiling as he listened to her words and the truth behind them. "Patrick was the devil incarnate. He hated that I was born and how small in stature I was. He constantly verbally abused me, and when Ma and the boys weren't looking, he would beat me just to hear me cry. Darby was big and solid, and he could take a beating while he stared defiantly at Patrick the entire time. I still think that Patrick bein' gone from this Earth was the best thing that could have happened, not just to us, but himself. Darby would have killed him eventually. I'm pretty sure of it.

I was a fast kid and could usually run and hide when things were about to go down. One day, he caught me unawares and decided to show me a lesson," Casey said bitterly. "He said he'd show me that no matter how fast I ran there was no place I could hide that he wouldn't be able to find me. He had a friend named Dipper who trained huntin' dogs and was just as redneck as he was. He had pit bulls, bloodhounds, and mountain curs that were trained to take down anythin' from a wild boar to a grizzly, and they were vicious. Patrick took me to Dipper's cabin and bet him that I could outrun his best dogs

for twenty dollars. There was no way I could outrun them dogs, but that sonofabitch convinced him I was somethin' of a Flash Gordon. So, they bet on it, and Dipper pulled one of each dog from the breeds. They dropped me in the woods two miles from the cabin, and I needed to make it back unscathed.”

Sidra stared at him in horror, but he didn't notice; he was so fixated on the ceiling. “I ran my ass off and felt like I was gonna die but kept goin. The first time I lost, and Patrick told me I wouldn't be losin' anymore, but I was so mad that I hit him in the face, and for my defiance, he broke my arm in two places and then made me do the hunt all over again. He said if I refused, he'd have the dogs grab me by my injured arm. We weren't leavin' for a doctor until I earned him back his money. By the time we left, I'd made his money back and then some. I was delirious with pain and runnin' a fever when we got to the hospital. Alexei was there for somethin'- I can't recall, and when Patrick left to call Ma, he came to my room and asked me what happened. So I told him.

When Ma and the boyos came, Patrick told them I fell out of a tree in the woods. Nobody believed him, but who was goin' to defy him??? I left the hospital with my arm in a cast, and that night Patrick went out drinkin' with his friends. The next mornin', Ma got a call from him. He was in the hospital, and his leg was broken in two places. He said that he took a tumble down some stairs, but I *knew* what had happened to him. My suspicions were confirmed when he started whuppin' me with soap bars in a sock,” Casey said with a sad smile.

“I just love, Alexei,” Sidra sighed dreamily, and Casey tugged on her curls with a frown.

“Hey now, there'll be none of that! So anyways, word got out that I could outrun Dipper's dogs, and pretty soon he was takin' bets from these hicks who wanted to bet against me with their dogs. I became really good at it, but I dislike some breeds of dogs because of it,” he said and raised his pant leg and twisted his ankle so she could see the large scar there. “They would tear my clothes and bite me. This came from a pit bull bite as I hauled ass up a tree. It would be another month before

I saw Alexei at the general store with my Ma. I let him know what was goin' on, and he asked me for the men's names. The day after that, no one placed any more bets, and I never had to do that again."

"What a bastard," Sidra's voice was shaking with anger for the pain Casey had suffered at his father's hands. "I'm so sorry for everything that man did to you and your brothers."

"Yeah, he was, and he hated how much we loved each other! He used to try and make Jack and Darby fight each other, but they wouldn't do it, so he took their toys and set them on fire. He hated how much Ma loved us and how she hated him." Casey's eyes shut tightly. "Sometimes, late at night, I'd hear him forcing himself on her and yelling at her to say she loved what he was doin'. Then I'd hear the slaps because she refused to do it. I hated how powerless we were, and in turn, sometimes I hated her for stayin'," he whispered and his arms around her tightened. "For not bein' strong enough to do somethin' about him. I remember askin' her to go to a friend's party, and she said no, that I had to go to the laundromat after school. I got mad and said I hated her. That she was ruinin' our lives and wished they would both go away...Patrick killed her that night. I'd give anythin' to see her again and let her know I didn't mean it! I was just so *tired* of it all. I was...just a stupid fuckin' brat who wanted his way!"

Sidra sat up quickly. "You were a *child*, Casey! *Kids are supposed to act out occasionally*. You couldn't have known that was going to happen."

"That's what Doc says, but I'm still too ashamed to tell Jackie and Darby," he said in a tortured voice. "Sometimes I just feel like I'll never be free of him."

"No, Casey! Patrick doesn't get to win," Sidra fumed, her curls whipping back and forth as she shook her head and poked him in the chest. "You know why? Because I'm a demanding *bitch* who won't settle for her man being anything but happy! You deserve it more than anyone I know, and I



want to give it to you, but it has to come from within you as well. I used to think there was something so wrong with me that made Nero afraid to claim me, and my mother not insist that he do so, but after what happened at his home, and at the wedding I don't. I think I got away easy compared to the disaster that is my half-sister. He's really done a number on his dead wife, my mother, and Nina. I don't need that kind of negativity in my life. It's like trying to hold a fart in you know? Eventually, you're going to feel the effect and so will everyone around you."

"What the fuck, babe?" Casey started laughing again as he pulled her close. Only his baby had the ability to make him feel good when talking about his fucked up memories.

*"I need us to work, Casey.* If it doesn't, then I want to at least be able to say I gave it my all before raising a baby by myself," Sidra said seriously.

"I'm all in, darlin'. I love you so... WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST SAY?!" he shouted, sitting up with excitement and hugging her tightly to him. "Are you really pregnant?!"

"Yes, you psycho!" Sidra wrapped her arms around his neck and laughed joyously as he rocked her in his exhilaration.

"When I went to New York before the wedding, I missed my gynecologist appointment that was supposed to renew my birth control. So I took a test a couple of days ago. Very early stages, but I made an appointment to go back for an appointment— as an expectant mother. That's the other reason I called Dr. Klaus. We need to deal with all of our issues before this little one gets here."

"WE'RE HAVIN' A BABY!" Casey shouted. "I don't care if it's a boy or girl; I want it to look just like you but with my sense of stability. Now when are we gettin' married?"

"I want to wait," she said firmly. "I want us to take our time and do everything right. Just because I'm pregnant doesn't mean I need a ring right away."

“Bullshit!” Casey threw back at her. “You’re holdin’ out for your mother’s approval. We’re not waitin’. I need you to make an honest man outta me.”

She didn't respond to that; instead, she said, "Can you believe that we're going to be parents? It scares the crap out of me! Look how great our family is at being parents! What if I'm not as good as Noelle and Avery?!"

Casey rubbed her shoulders and smiled reassuringly at her worried expression. It was strange to see Sidra so unsure of herself, but he wouldn't have it or her any other way. It meant that she trusted him more and more with her vulnerability. "Are you kiddin' me? Our baby is gonna have a kick-ass mama who will make all the other mamas jealous. You're nurturin', lovin', compassionate, and kind— all of which will hopefully thin out your other traits that are kinda...disturbin'. Our baby is gonna be the perfect blend of adorable, crazy, smart, and dysfunctional. She'll be a cuter, hipper version of Wednesday Adams."

"I just want the baby to be healthy. I don't care about the sex." Sidra shuddered. "And size. THAT is something I am concerned about. Goodness, if I have to push a kid the size of baby Jack out, I'll be bowlegged for the rest of my life!"

"Baby Jack is really cute, though," Casey said. "But you definitely have to eat your Wheaties in the mornin' if you're gonna engage with him. On my last visit, he wrestled a drumstick away from Ruby! She cried and demanded it back, and hell, even his own daddy was scared to take it from him!"

Sidra laughed and Casey just couldn't help himself. He grasped her chin to make her look at him. "We're gettin' married. Give in and accept it, Sid."

Sidra didn't answer. She was too busy pulling off his tie and then unbuttoning his dress shirt as she moved to sit on top of him. "You know what's happening right now?"

Casey smiled slowly as he unzipped the back of her wrinkled dress. "I believe in actions. Show me, love..."

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Fuzzio's was packed, and Dominick was chilling in his usual spot in the after-hours lounge as he declined offer after offer from the bevy of beauties carousing by his booth as he scrolled through his phone. His mind was focused on Sidra and her reconciliation with the lawyer. Over the past few days, he'd bitten his tongue numerous times in an effort to not make snide comments as she oozed happiness, prancing around the studio and working her magic for his album.

A shadow fell over his table, and he was engulfed in a feminine oriental scent. Without looking, he put on his fake smile and said in a low voice, "Not tonight, hon."

"And why not? There's nothing but space and opportunity here, Mr. Harris. Or can I call you Dominick?" the smooth, cultured voice inquired smoothly, piquing his interest. He looked up, and his eyes met a pair of large brown ones that belonged to a Hispanic beauty with a tousled black bob. Her voluptuous figure was highlighted by the figure-hugging white mini-dress she wore with impossibly high white heels. Although they'd never met, he recognized her immediately and wondered why she'd sought *him* out.

"Dominick works for me, and what should I call you?" he drawled as she smiled and slid into the booth across from him.

"You may call me Nina," she said flirtatiously, and he smiled back at her, heart pounding as he waited to hear what she wanted.

"Then Nina it is," Dominick declared. "I believe you were going to let me know about an opportunity?"

At first, she didn't answer, as she was too busy scrutinizing her surroundings with contempt. He couldn't really blame her. The lounge was one of D.C.'s best kept secret where musicians, politicians, and normal folk could be found intermingling in privacy, which was the number one rule at Fuzzio's.

"Why would someone of your stature be hanging out in a dump like this, Dominick?" Nina murmured scornfully.

“Because I can. You don’t like it, you can tottle your pretty ass out of here in those ridiculous heels,” he said condescendingly, enjoying the way her glossy red lips tightened with disapproval. “If not, then tell me about this opportunity.”

“Fine; I’d like to discuss your employee Sidra Barton and her boyfriend Casey Sullivan,” she said boldly. “I believe we can be of mutual assistance to each other.”

Dominick considered her suspiciously as he tapped his phone impatiently. This woman was used to getting her way, and those who didn’t accommodate her could do nothing for her. She believed he could and *would* help her. *The gall of these pretty hoes*, he thought to himself with amusement. She wanted Sullivan for herself, which would make Sidra free of him *if* Dominick aided her. “I’m listening...”

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Dominick was in a good mood when he arrived home later that night. That Nina was one sick bitch. He would love to tell her how sick, but would refrain for now, just to see how far she’d go. Immediately, he went to the bar and poured himself a generous drink. As he sipped on Hennessy, he walked over to where his housekeeper usually set his mail and saw the large manila envelope that was addressed to him. It was slightly open which meant security had already inspected it, so he opened it and pulled out the black and white photos. The glass in his hand fell to the floor and shattered everywhere as the alcohol seeped into his gray suede boots. There were ten black and white photos in all. Each one more graphic than the last, and everything he hoped the world would never know about him. *But where did they come from???*

Frantically, Dominick looked inside of the envelope and saw the small white paper stuck at the bottom. He pulled it out, and his eyes damn near fell out of his head as he read it.

*Greetings, Mr. Harris! We know your dirty little secrets, and soon the world will know them too! In order to prevent this from happening, please read the instructions below.*

He read the instructions with numbness and knew he would have to comply. The stakes were just too high not to. *Secrets, not secret.* Which meant they now owned him. Dominick sat down on the floor surrounded by the glass and liquor and for the first time in a very long time, he cried like a baby.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

*New York...*

“This is certainly a big step for you, ‘Sid Vicious’. Are you ready?” Ian inquired, enjoying the way her eyes flashed at him.

After sharing her pregnancy news with Casey, they decided some changes were in order. He told her about his plans with the foundation, and they both agreed to buy a new place together. Sidra had decided to go forward with corporate deejaying and spent the last hour and a half going over branding and negotiations with Ian.

“Stop calling me that, Gandalf,” she ordered, helping herself to another éclair from the pastry tray on his desk. “And why are there sweets at this meeting? I’ve already had two of these!”

“Clearly, they are here to ‘sweeten’ your disposition, but they appear to be sugar-free,” Ian’s blue eyes twinkled as she scarfed the pastry down.

“Did I ever mention how happy the sound of you being quiet makes me?” Sidra smiled as she looked over the contracts. “I

happen to know firsthand that this firm is *all* about making its clients happy...

“Brat,” he said affectionately before taking a sip of his Earl Grey tea. “So, how goes it with young Sullivan? Things seemed a bit tense at the wedding.”

“Everything is great. We’ve decided to move in together, and while I’m here, I’ll put my place on the real estate market,” Sidra announced excitedly.

“Why not rent it out like your besties do theirs?” Ian asked curiously as he handed her an itinerary. “Take a look at this. I’ve arranged a place for you in Veuve Clicquot’s Polo Classic and VH1’s Save The Music.”

“Oh, it’s way too small...for the two of us,” she said lamely before changing the subject. Goodness, she’d almost said for the three of them! “Polo classic AND VH1?! Ian, that’s so sweet. I’m going to take back every bad thing I ever thought about you!” She laughed when he sucked his teeth before continuing. “So, this itinerary says I’ll be fully immersed in corporate and fashion events, stateside only, unless I otherwise request it and am required to wear the clothes by those designers, and I get to keep them...nice!”

“Thought you might like that. I insisted upon it because I wanted you to remember it when I ask: When will you and your father be reconciling?” Ian asked candidly. “And why are you keeping it a secret?”

Sidra shifted in her chair to rub her behind. “I was wondering what that sharp pain in my ass was.” At his inquiring look, she said pointedly, “It’s your nose. In my business. Get out of it and stay in your own damn lane, Ian.”

He snorted his amusement, “You certainly aren’t one to kill with kindness, are you?”

“Not when running you over with a car is more instantaneous and effective,” she retorted. “If you’re going to get in my business, I’ll return the favor. Why aren’t you dating? For an

old coot, you're remarkably stylish, smart, and funny...still have all your real hair? No plugs?"

"Of course, I do," Ian said with great affront. "I socialize occasionally; I just like focusing on the family now. Harvey was the great love of my life. I've never expected to find what we had with anyone else. But if you must know...I did have drinks with the former dean from your high school once."

"*Dean Christopher Sammich?!?*" Sidra screeched. "That guy looks like something I painted with my toes! And he smelled like expired French onion dip! I'm surprised at you, Ian. Never in a million years would I have ever-"

"Christopher was very kind to me, Sidra," Ian said sharply before picking up the photo of him and his beloved late partner from the corner of his desk. "He just wasn't Harvey, and that was not his fault. I just wasn't ready for anything serious yet, and somehow I don't think I ever will be again."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to bash him," Sidra apologized. "You're a fantastic catch, I'm sure you'll find someone perfect for you, Ian."

"Not like Harvey, dear girl," Ian said softly. "They just don't make them like him anymore."

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It was late afternoon, and Ella Kemp was just sending Noelle and Avery *On A Whim's* calendar for the next three months when Sidra walked into her office holding a bag behind her. She smiled with pleasure at the sight of her comrade-in-arms turned friend. "Hey you! I didn't know you were in town!"

"Translation: why the fuck did no one warn you?" Sidra teased her as they exchanged a tight hug. "It's a short trip for work and I'm selling my place, but I couldn't *not* come by and say hi to you and Jenny. Where is she by the way?"



“*Giiirl*, her ex Odell is in town, so she left early to show him around,” Ella said knowingly with raised eyebrows. “He came in, and next thing I know, they were all up in each other’s faces, breathing heavily, and I was like simmer down, sluts!”

“I hope they’re able to work things out; I liked them together,” Sidra said hopefully as she pulled the bag from behind her and placed it on Ella’s desk. “This is for you. Just my way of saying thank you for all your help at the wedding.”

Ella eyed the sparkly gift bag warily. “It’s not Nina’s head is it?”

“Nope, just some things to help you relax on your vacation,” Sidra said cheerfully as Ella pulled out a scented candle, tea, chocolates, and bath oils.

“Wow! This is a really thoughtful gift. Thank you, Sidra,” she said sincerely.

“You don’t have to sound so surprised,” Sidra said with offense. “I’m a really thoughtful person.”

“I’m sure Nina appreciates your thoughtfulness in not killing her that night,” Ella said with a straight face. “How is she by the way? And if you don’t mind my asking, your father as well?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Sidra said with a careless shrug as she sat down on the edge of Ella’s desk. “I don’t try to keep up with them folks. I’m too busy minding my own business. So, where are you going for vacation?”

“A special place my parents used to take me and my brother when we were kids,” Ella said, smiling fondly. “I’m starting a new business venture there, and there’s no place like it or that I’d rather be. I’m just making my ‘To Do’ list before I get out of here next week.”

“I hope you have a really good time,” Sidra said and picked up the list. “Hmmm, that’s strange. I don’t see ‘knock boots with tall, dark and handsome’ anywhere on here, Ella Kemp.”

Face flushed with embarrassment, Ella snatched the list back from her. “And you never will. Ever. Now go away; I have stuff to do before I leave, you colossal pain-in-the-butt.”

Sidra cackled, “You know you’re nothing at all like I thought you’d be.”

“What do you mean?” Ella inquired cautiously.

“Relax; it’s not a big deal. It took me awhile to figure it out, but I did,” Sidra said happily. “You seem so different and down-to-earth that I wouldn’t have put it together until I saw you standing over Nina with your fists still in Mortal Kombat mode.”

“Yeah, well everyone has a past. You can either learn from it and swim forward or stay stuck and sink. I chose to swim,” Ella said simply as she fidgeted with the piece of paper.

“I tread water for a while, myself,” Sidra admitted. “I take it Noelle and Avery know?”

“Noelle does. Our mothers were sorority sisters, and it’s actually how I got this job. I was looking for a change, and they needed someone here, so voila!” Ella laughed quietly.

There was another knock at the door before the man she’d teased Ella about stuck his head in. “Hello, ladies. I hope I’m not interrupting anything, but I hoped to have a few words with you before you left for the day, Ella.”

Sidra glanced at her friend and winked, but it wasn’t noticed as Ella stared at the man. *And she had the nerve to tell Jenny and Odell to simmer down*, Sidra thought slyly as she watched him fully enter the room. White tees and jeans seemed to be his uniform, not that there was anything bad about the way the shirt hugged his muscular arms and the denim clung to his thighs and what looked like a promising ass. She turned to Ella who was standing perfectly still, watching him with her full lips drawn into a tight, uncompromising line. Nothing was said, and Sidra wasn’t even sure he was aware she was in the room still as his stormy dark blue eyes were fixated on Ella. Finally, he spoke, his voice a deep husky tenor as he

demanded, “Why haven’t you returned my calls? I thought I made it perfectly clear to you that I didn’t want anyone but you handling my event. Jenny’s a nice girl, but I don’t want her. *I Want. You.*”

“Your visit wasn’t necessary, Mr. Easton,” Ella returned crisply. “I left you a voicemail earlier this afternoon letting you know I would be there the day of your event.”

Wyatt stared down into her dark eyes and felt his manhood stirring, making his jeans uncomfortably tight in the crotch area. Silently, he cursed and discreetly shifted his stance so as not to draw attention. Ella’s gaze remained unblinking on him, and he hoped like hell she liked what she saw enough to give him a chance. His gaze fell to that plush mouth of hers, remembering the night of Darby and Avery’s wedding when he should have been a million miles away instead of standing in a garden at midnight bewitched by her beauty.

He looked just as sinful as Ella remembered with those dark blue eyes promising naughty intent. She knew firsthand how long and thick his brown hair was because she’d tugged it loose of his bun and ran her fingers through it.

“This trip was necessary. You’ve been avoiding me, Ella Bella.” Wyatt’s lowered voice was a dark caress as he shifted closer to her and helpless to resist, her hand came up to either stop him in his tracks or just to see if his heart was racing as fast as hers. *It was. Dammit.*

From behind her Sidra spoke, “Well, I guess that’s my cue to leave. See you later, *Ella Bella.*” Ella’s teeth gnashed together at the other woman’s teasing tone. She smiled politely at Wyatt. “Please excuse me while I see my friend out.”

Grabbing Sidra’s elbow, she attempted to guide her out as Sidra laughingly called out to Wyatt, “I’m Sidra Barton, by the way! Don’t give up on this one! I was once like her, and I’ve found oodles and oodles of happiness with my man!”

Wyatt smiled widely at her as Ella tried shoving her out the door. “It’s nice to meet you, Sidra Barton! I’m Wyatt Easton and thank you for the vote of confidence. Trust me, I have no plans of giving up!”

Outside of the office, Sidra was only half successful in evading Ella’s pinches. “Stop pinching me, Ella Bella,” she singsonged.

“Why would you encourage him like that?” Ella seethed as they reached the elevator, and she jammed the button. Sidra had the impression that she wished it were her throat.

“Because I think he’s good for you,” Sidra replied truthfully. “I didn’t think I ever could be happy, but I am. It’s time for you too, girly. I ain’t mad at a man who can recognize the excellence that is our Black Girl Magic. Don’t fight him too hard.” The elevator opened, and she stepped in and blew Ella a kiss before turning her hand into a claw. “On second thought...*nothing* is better than sex after a good fight! So fight your heart out, you feisty little wolverine! Raaawr!”

“I feel like I need instructions or medication, fuck maybe *both* just to deal with you! Real talk, Sidra? Don’t turn your back on Nina,” Ella replied solemnly, and Sidra fought the urge to touch her stomach protectively at the worried look in the other woman’s eyes. “I’ve seen her type of crazy before but with even less control. *Be careful.*”

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Donat “Lucky” Zabrosky struggled to put his wrinkled black tank top on as he hurried to his front door. It was nine in the morning, and he only knew one person who was fucking crazy enough to be pounding on his door like he owed them money. He opened it with his standard threat, “Sid the Kid, I’m gonna kick your ass if you don’t cut it out!”

“Hi, Lucky!” Sidra said, holding up a brown paper bag that he knew contained szarlotka, Poland’s version of apple pie, dill

pickle soup, and poppy seed bread. “I come bearing gifts from Krakow’s Finest.”

He groaned with pleasure, even as he opened his arms to her. “It’s always good to see you, kiddo. The food ain’t bad either. Come on in.”

She walked past him, and knowing her way around, headed towards his kitchen. Lucky closed the door, glanced towards his bedroom, and then followed after her. She grabbed orange juice from the fridge while he got the glasses. “So, how ya been?”

“Really good. I’m changing directions with deejaying, and I put my place on the market,” she replied, accepting the filled glass he gave her. “Thank you. I’m flying out this afternoon but wanted to see you before I left.”

They sat down at the small dinette, and Lucky eagerly pulled the styrofoam cartons out, raising his eyebrows when Sidra opened a small styrofoam bowl of dill pickle soup. He watched with disbelief as she opened a packet of strawberry jelly and squirted it into the soup. “When the hell did you start eating this soup, and with jelly?! That’s pretty disgusting!”

“Hush it up,” she warned quickly downing the contents of the small bowl. Lucky pulled his own larger bowl closer to him when he saw the way her eyes lit up and braced himself.

“Them puppy dog eyes get no love around here, so don’t even try it,” he growled affectionately, and they shared a laugh.

After their initial meeting all those years ago, Sid had made it a point to go outside and talk to Lucky whenever he came to pick Nero up or drop him off. They discovered they had quite a bit in common and agreed on many things. They both loved the Boston Celtics and agreed that rocky road ice cream was the best, Marvel Comics over D.C. all day long, Foghorn Leghorn was a pimp, and sex with Madonna had to be terrifying. Despite her mother’s wishes, Lucky had escorted her to the sixth-grade father-daughter dance and had also shown up with the rest of her family for her high school

graduation. There were many that felt Nero had done her a true disservice by not being in her life, but they didn't know that Lucky had always been there for her.

She was closer to him than her own mother, and when he found out how Nero had treated her, he consoled her as she cried her eyes out to him. Lena frowned with disapproval but held her tongue when Sidra invited him to her standard birthday dinner with her mother. But what would she have said? Unlike her biological father, Lucky had never missed a dinner and always showed up with his grandmother, making sure to take plenty of pictures of Sidra for her scrapbook.

“So, I guess it’s “officially” official, huh?” he inquired gruffly. “*Now*, do I finally get to meet him?”

Sidra smile warmly at him as she confessed, “*He met mom and didn't freak out, Lucky!* So yes, you can meet him. We’re going to be looking for a place together in D.C., but he also wants to buy his older brother’s place in Whiskey Row.”

Lucky’s heart warmed as he looked at the beautiful girl he’d first met as a child all those years ago. While he didn’t have any kids of his own, God had certainly seen fit to bless him with a surrogate daughter. Sidra was everything he never knew he needed or wanted. While his large Polish family was happily procreating left and right and urging him to do the same, he’d been content to hold conversations with a smart-ass kid on a stoop in Bed-Stuy as she introduced him to soul food, and he gobbled down plates of spicy collard greens, fried chicken, catfish, mac ‘n’ cheese, and sweet potatoes. While her douche of a father spent time with her mother, Sidra had taken him all over her block and proudly introduced him to her neighbors.

Next thing he knew, the cake and pie lady was sending him home with sweets, and the old black pimp was schooling him on what ‘real’ women really liked. He never came around empty-handed and always made sure to pass out his grandmother’s pastries and a comic book for Sid. It made him happy to know that for all the gifts Nero bribed her with, he

only received a polite *thank you*, while a comic book from him made her eyes light up, and she'd give him the cheesiest grin.

“Let me say something here.” At her warning look, he raised his hands in surrender. “What? I can't say nothing? You ain't never brought anyone home to your granny's because of how your mother would react, and yet you brought this young man home and he survived?” He pointed his finger at her. “He better treat you right, Sidra Jane, because I'm too old to go back to jail, but I would gladly do a stint for you.”

Sidra stood up and leaned over him to give him a hug and rub the top of his head affectionately. His hair was no longer a brown carpet she used to tease him about. It was now a buzz cut liberally sprinkled with gray. Donat Zabrosky had done very well for himself but still lived in his grandmother's house. When his uncle had passed away three years after they met, Martyn had left the business to Lucky, and to this day, it still continued to flourish as he opened up car services in other cities, ensuring that Sidra always had a ride wherever she went. He was busy as hell but had always made a point to drive Nero around, just so he could see Sidra.

“You'll love him, Lucky! He's freaking amazing, and I couldn't ask for a better man to have in my life other than you. He comes from a wonderful family, and they're good to me as well. We'll all get together soon, and you'll be able to see for yourself,” she gushed.

Lucky patted her arm fondly and cleared his throat noisily. “That's really good, kiddo. Let's make that happen sooner rather than later. Well, you better get going or you'll miss your flight. I know you have to stop by your granny's too.”

“Yes, I'm headed there next. I called Mom this morning and didn't get an answer, so she's probably over there. Walk me to the door, Bubba,” Sidra said and linked their arms together. They hugged before he opened the door, and he nodded at his waiting driver who tipped his hat in return.

“Be safe, kiddo. *Kocham cię*,” Lucky said fondly and kissed her cheek. It was ‘I love you’ in Polish, and he'd taught it to

her when she asked the night of her high school graduation.

“*Kocham cię*,” Sidra returned sincerely before walking to the car. Lucky watched her pull her phone out and raise it to her ear. From his bedroom, a cellphone rang and rang. He turned around to find Lena standing in the doorway in his bathrobe.

“You should give her a call soon, so she doesn’t worry,” he admonished. “You hungry? She brought my usual soup and pie. Or I can whip up some eggs and sausage?”

“No thank you. I should go, so I can call her back,” she said hurriedly and went back to the bedroom.

“You say that every time,” Lucky said mildly. “So, why didn’t you tell me you met her guy?”

“You *know* why,” she said as she picked up her clothes, and Lucky sat down on the bed and yanked her into his lap. Tilting her chin up, they shared a kiss that was warm and familiar, one they’d done a thousand times since Sidra turned fourteen. When the kid came back a wreck, Lucky had torn into Lena and said all the things he’d been holding in since first setting eyes on them, including his attraction to her. There wasn’t a day that didn’t go by that he didn’t thank God the feeling had been mutual, but enough was enough.

“Hey, this is *me*. Don’t lie. If the kid can do it, so can you. I’m done hiding everything. We ain’t getting any younger. I want the proper invite, or I’ll just show up on a Sunday evening...” Lucky trailed off leaving the unfinished threat to her imagination as he rubbed her thigh soothingly.

“*Could you imagine what would happen to my brand if I stepped out with a man?!*” Lena huffed, “I worked damn hard to get to where I am, and now you’re asking me to switch it up? What do I look like?!”

“You look like a woman who’s been clocking in regularly for this dick like it’s your full-time job!” Lucky said confidently as he smacked her ass and gave her a hard kiss. Lena attempted to resist, but it was futile. With a victorious smile,



Lucky drew back and rubbed her bottom lip gently with his thumb.

“I’m not perfect, and you’re not Mother Theresa either. We been doing this for years. No more games, Lena. I’m too old to be sneaking around like I’m cheating or something!” He pulled her lips down to meet his hungrily, and they fell back on the bed. *“Make it right, Lena.”*

## **Chapter Eighteen**

*Washington D.C.*

“I want somethin’ that’s fiery and wild just like her,” Casey hovered over Kat as he watched her design Sidra’s engagement ring at his office desk. “Does it have to be a diamond?”

Kat gave him a thoughtful look. “It doesn’t have to be a diamond. Want me to show you what I came up with?”

Casey seemed pensive. “Is it any good? Ouch! What was that for?!”

“Shut up, jerk! If I didn’t love Sid so much, I’d make you propose with a damn ring pop,” Kat smirked as he rubbed the spot on his ear she’d plucked. “Here. Allow me to show you what I’m proposing. It’s a champagne halo diamond set in a gold twisted pave band.”

Casey took the sketchbook and studied it from different angles for several minutes. He pictured staring into his baby’s eyes as he slipped it on her finger. The words weren’t really important because she was marrying him no matter what she said, even if he had to gag and drag her there caveman style “It’s just like her. *Perfection*. How soon can you have it done?”

“Give me two weeks. What’s your hurry?” Kat asked curiously. “Not that long ago you looked ready to go on a throat-punching spree at the mere mention of her name.”

“Nothin’ has changed. I’m just ready for us to level up and get to where we both want to be,” Casey said smoothly. “What about you and Holt? Every time he comes around, you look like you’re shittin’ tacks. You tellin’ me you put us through hell for fun?”

“There’s nothing really going on between us. We’re just really busy, you know?” Kat replied evasively as she made notes in her sketchbook.

Casey smiled, watching her mouth stick out in a little pout. It was the same expression she’d worn when Alexei told her she couldn’t tag along with the boys. A fierce wave of protectiveness surged through him. She was his baby sister; if Holt wasn’t treating her right, something needed to be said.

Suddenly, she slammed the book shut with frustration. “I want to have sex with him so bad, but I can barely get any alone time with him!”

“Wait-what-ewwwwww!” Casey covered his ears and jumped out of his chair, running for the corner of his office. “*What the fuck Kat?! What the fuck?! You can’t just spring shit like that on me!*”

“Oh shut up!” she said crossly “I’m a woman who has *needs!* I’ve been saving myself for the right man, and Holt is it! *The way he kisses and touches me- would you cut it out?!*”

“*Find a happy place, find a happy place...*” Casey desperately chanted to himself as he rocked in the corner. He yelped when she came closer and whacked his arm with her notebook.

“Cut it out, jackass! Why can’t we just have a normal conversation?! You’re my brother, and we’re supposed to be close,” Kat started to cry. “I just want the happiness everyone else has now. Is that so wrong?”

Casey took a deep breath and managed to pull himself together. He pulled her into his arms and held her as she cried. Seeing her like this killed him as much as listening to her talk about having needs did but in a totally different way. “Don’t cry, Kat. Have you told him how you feel? Maybe I could talk to him for you?”

Kat squeezed him tighter to her and gave a sad laugh. “No thanks. I think I’m just trying to force something that’s not meant to be. If he wanted to, Holt could make more of an effort as well. *Ugggh!* Let’s change the subject. Do you think my parents will remember to bring us something back from their lunch date? Or should I go grab us something to eat?”

“Hey, it’s about time your parents got caught up in each other. Come on, baby sis. I’ll take you to lunch,” Casey said and steered them towards the door. “There better not be any stains on my jacket, snotface.”

“Thanks, Casey. While we’re eating, I’m going to put in the order from my vendor on the stone. Carat size?”

“Four, please.”

“What a lucky bish,” she said with a grin. “I’m so happy for you guys.”

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Vivienne leaned against the passenger door and tried half-heartedly to evade Alexei’s demanding lips. She was unsuccessful and was soon swept away in another breath stealing kiss. “Mmmm, you’re making me late for my meeting.”

“Cancel it, Vivi,” Alexei whispered in her ear as he placed her hand on his bulging erection. “You haven’t seen to all my needs.”

*Lord, this man made her weak*, Vivienne thought as his tongue traced her lips, and she shuddered in response as she stroked his thickness. His large, warm hand slid up her thigh and under her black skirt. “Oh, not you don’t! I told you I have an urgent meeting. You didn’t even feed me!”

“I did, my dear,” Alexei countered, smoothing her thick black waves into semi-order and fixing the collar of her black and white pinstriped blouse. “Several times.”

“Caviar and champagne is not lunch, Lex,” she drawled as she replaced her red lipstick. They’d stolen away to a nearby hotel under the guise of having a lunch meeting.

“That wasn’t what I was referring to, my love.” Alexei watched with amusement as her face flushed with understanding and embarrassment.

“Why do I let you do this to me?” Vivienne laughed enjoying their sensual wordplay. “I’m late, so I’ll see you this evening.”

She hopped out of his vehicle and closed the door quietly, even though there was no one around in the private garage to hear them. Vivienne bent down to look at him. “Later, Mr. Romankov.”

“Looking forward to it as always, Mrs. Romankov,” Alexei’s blue eyes twinkled as he winked at her.

She hurried to the elevator, and once inside, quickly made herself presentable, finishing just as the doors opened to the receptionist area of her firm. She smiled winningly as Dominick Harris rose to his feet. “I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting, Dominick.”

“Hi, Vivienne, I just got here. How’ve you been?” It was always good to see one of their more popular clients. She glanced around, noticing there was extra activity going on in the area— as was the normal when an attractive man was in the vicinity.

“Great, thanks. Would you like something to eat or drink?” she asked. “We have fresh scones and coffee.”

“No, I’m not that hungry,” he said dully and Vivienne could see the dark circles under his eyes.

“Well then, follow me and let’s get started, shall we?”

Vivienne led the way to her office and closed the door behind him, before motioning him to sit down in her sitting area. “So, what can I help you with? I’ve been brainstorming for your tour. When we’re done, I’ll show you what I created. I think you’ll be happy with the results.”

Dominick said nothing as he reached into his messenger bag and pulled out a crinkled manila envelope. “I received this in the mail and thought you should know. I’m being blackmailed.”

*Blackmailed.* Vivienne actually flinched when he said the word. That was the last thing she expected this meeting to be about. She took the folder from him. “*Okaaaay.* What are you being blackmailed with—oh my goodness!”

“I don’t know how this person got that information!”

Dominick jumped up and started to angrily pace the room.

“NO ONE knows that shit! That’s my personal business! They said if I didn’t follow directions then they would share my secrets with the world!”

Vivienne’s head shot up. “There’s more than this? What aren’t you telling me? *This* is not a problem. We just need to get in front of it. I can easily spin this, and we move forward. I promise it can be done. What is the other secret? How did this even happen? Your background check came back clean!”

“Like you, I have powerful friends,” he said dully and fell back into his chair. “The other secret is just not mine to tell. I have to talk to other people, but there is a way to keep all of this from exploding in my face...”

“Fine. What’s your suggestion?” Vivienne snapped.

Dominick looked at her and felt hot shame course through him. *He was so fucking weak!* “I was offered a reprieve. Fire

you as my public relations agent, and I'm safe and off of their radar." At her shocked look, he explained, "This blackmail is not about ME; it's about YOU. Someone wants your head on a platter, and I was told to tell you that they're only getting started."

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After leaving Casey's office, Kat walked over to her mother's. She felt pretty good about her decisions. When she got back home, she and Holt were going to have a talk, and then she would be done with him. There were plenty of other men who wouldn't treat her this way, and she would eventually find one who made her heart beat as fast as Holt did.

*Yeah, fucking right*, she thought as her phone chimed in succession, signaling incoming emails. Kat opened it and was happy to see it was her preferred vendor. She opened the email, and at first she couldn't comprehend the words, but slowly they started to make sense.

*Ms. Romankov,*

*It is with deep regret that we are unable to supply you further with our product.*

There was more after that, something about the right to refuse business...but she could only focus on the words at the bottom. Words that flat out didn't make any fucking sense to her.

*Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact Vivienne Romankov.*

Mystified, she opened the other emails from four more vendors indicating the same thing in the exact same format. Kat was very confused about why this was happening to her. She had excellent credit and had never missed any payments with these people since she started her business three years ago. The only thing she wasn't confused about was that she was being blackballed, and it had something to do with her mother. There was something *familiar* about the emails. Slowly she read them again...

## Chapter Nineteen

Sidra woke from a deep sleep and sat up as her stomach growled angrily. She glanced at her watch and saw that it was nine-thirty at night. *Damn it, she'd overslept!* Casey had picked her up from the airport, as she'd suffered from a particularly vile case of nausea that she'd thankfully slept through. The baby was definitely kicking her butt. She went to use the restroom and brush her teeth before going to find her man.

Casey was in his study, going over case files. Silently, she watched him from the doorway, thinking about how handsome he looked with his wire-framed glasses and his dress shirt sleeves rolled up. It seemed that with the decision to focus more on the foundation and less on practicing law, so had the desire to look uber-professional, and the scruff on his chin would continue to grow. She scrunched her nose at the thought. While Noelle and Avery seemed to like that their men were part of the beard gang, Sidra was not particularly fond of it. She watched his disheveled dirty blonde hair fall onto his forehead as he bent his head over a document. The way his long fingers held the page confidently and assuredly was the same way he stroked her body. He spoke without looking up, startling her.

“Keep lookin’ at me like that...it’s no wonder you wound up pregnant,” he drawled, a tiny smile playing around his lips. “Feelin’ better?”

“The reason I wound up pregnant is because I can’t keep my hands off your fine ass,” Sidra returned sassily as she strolled into the room.

Casey lifted his head, smiling slowly as he watched her approach with that all legs, lean limbs, and badass strut, knowing underneath the black lacy robe she wore the

skimpiest of panties. Possessiveness surged through him because Sidra was his. She was art in motion: so graceful yet untamable and wild at the same time. Yes, that's what she was—a living, breathing masterpiece, and he couldn't wait to see the changes *his* baby made to her exquisite body. He pushed his chair from his desk and tilted it back, allowing her to ease into his lap as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He smoothed the black curls from her face and pressed his lips to hers, once, twice before pulling back. “You didn't answer the question, darlin'.”

“I'm feeling much better, now. Sorry, I've been such a drag. ‘Bean’ is really trippin’ in the afternoon,” she said, fiddling with his shirt buttons. “What do you want for dinner?”

Casey placed his hands on her stomach gently still in awe that they'd made a baby. “I got somethin’ in mind. It's a surprise... So ‘Bean’ is what we're callin’ the baby?” He slowly rubbed her stomach. “I like it. When are we gonna start tellin’ people? I want the whole world to know that since you knocked me off my feet, I knocked your ass up. Hey, let's put that in our weddin’ vows!”

“And people think *I'm* the mental one,” Sidra replied sarcastically and kissed the corner of his mouth. “We have our first doctor's visit next week, but I want to wait until after the first trimester. That's usually pretty standard, I believe.”

Casey held her eyes steadily, “I don't know if I can wait that long, but I'll try. That's the *only* reason we're waitin’, right?”

“I'm not going to lie to you and say that I don't have concerns with my mom, baby,” Sidra said carefully. “I just want to be sure that *everything* is okay.”

“Sid, everythin’ is gonna be fine, unless you plan on leavin’ me, but I should warn you that you won't be gettin’ far,” Casey advised grimly. “As for me, it'll be a cold day in hell before I leave my babies.” His hands slid to her hips and tightened possessively as his lids fell to half-mast and trapped her in the fire of his hazel eyes. “We're done talkin’. It's time for you to make love to your man. Kiss me, darlin’.”



Sidra lowered her lips to his and her tongue slid between his soft lips to explore his mouth, loving his heady flavor of mint, masculinity, and confidence as her nimble fingers unbuttoned his shirt to reveal his golden skin that was warm to her touch. She sighed with pleasure and relief as his fingers deftly untied her robe and his warm hands cupped her achingly tender breasts, loving the exquisite feeling building inside of her as he slowly massaged her swollen nipples in circles. She shifted so that she was facing him, her legs on either side of his chair and his throbbing erection under her behind. The kisses turned urgent as Sidra's hand lowered to his pants and quickly undid them. Casey drew on her bottom lip, exhaling harshly as her hand slipped in to stroke his heavy cock, and he lightly pinched her throbbing buds.

*"Jesus...why is it so damn good with you?!"* she whimpered against his ear, shuddering in response as her arousal seeped through her panties and dampened the front of his navy slacks. *"It hurts sooooo good, baby! Don't you ever stop!"*

*"Because it only works with ME, sugar,"* Casey growled as she caught the drops of his precum from the large mushroomed head of his shaft and sucked it from her fingers, purring with delight at his sticky, salty essence. *"You were made for me. But then you know that right?"* He placed her hand on his chest, and his other hand tugged her panties aside and his fingers glided into her saturated mons. *"As sure as this heart beats for YOU, this pussy gets wet ONLY for me right, Sid?"*

He didn't give her a chance to answer as his digits slipped from her wetness to pinch and tug on her swollen clit while simultaneously inhaling a nipple into his warm mouth and biting gently. Casey was filled with male satisfaction as she splintered apart in his arms, her fingers clenching tightly in his hair as she screamed aloud and her breath fogged up his glasses.

Sidra panted wildly as her body spun violently out of control, and Casey rotated suckling between both nipples and continued to torture her pulsating clit. He was playing her

hormonally-charged body expertly, not giving her a chance to recover from one orgasm before the next started to build. She seized his face in her hands and kissed him passionately as he surged up with his arms locked around her and set her on the edge of his desk and worked his pants down. He mumbled against her lips, “Papers.”

Frantically, Sidra reached back and shoved them aside. They went fluttering to the ground as Casey gently pushed her back, gutturally he insisted. “Knees up, Sid! Touch yourself and watch me enjoy a good meal.”

Eagerly, she did as he said, watching and loving the way her pussy drove him delirious as he closed his eyes reverently and slowly licked her weeping slit, cherishing the taste of her sweetness. At the first touch of his talented tongue, her thighs jerked reflexively but he kept them in place, his large hands keeping her wide open for him. Casey breathed deeply, and so aroused by his reaction, she creamed a little more for him. Sidra observed him as she cupped her breasts and jerked on her distended nipples, whimpering at the ecstasy his tongue was giving her as he fucked her thoroughly with it, and his nose brushed deliberately against her magic button. She spread her legs wider and greedily lifted her hips, offering more of herself to him. “*Mmmm...aaaggh! More, babe! Fuck that feels so goood...ooooohhhh!*”

Sidra inhaled sharply, too weak to scream as her eyes drifted shut in rapture as she came again, tears sliding from her lids as Casey hungrily lapped up her overflowing juices. Breathing raggedly, she spoke, “*Lawd, what you do to me! Come own this pussy, baby.*”

He was painfully hard, barely able to touch himself for fear he might bust before he ever got inside of her. *He could eat Sidra’s delectable pussy all damn day; it was just that GOOD.* Just the sight of her playing with those ripe nipples as she watched him through hooded eyes and bit those pouty lips was enough to do him in. “Gimme a second, love.”

She opened her eyes, and he saw nothing but wicked intent as she playfully touched his cock with her toes. Casey jerked away and scowled at her. “Oh, that’s funny?”

“You see me laughing?” she asked imperiously with arched eyebrows. “*Now, Casey. I. Need. You.*” Her hand trickled down between her legs, and she teased, “Or should I start without you?”

Casey knocked her hand away and followed her down to the desk, his engorged cock poised at her entrance and his face a mask of tight concentration to keep control. Then he paused.

Sidra lovingly kissed his throat and chest as she wrapped her long legs around his waist and tried to ease him in, but he was reticent. “Wha-what’s the matter? *I’m dying here, baby!*”

He leaned over and whispered agitatedly into her ear, “*I don’t want to scare Bean!*”

“*What?!*” Sidra asked in confusion, and he looked down between their legs and then back at her meaningfully and realization dawned on her. “*Oh...I see.* No, no, no, Bean is *okay*, honey!” she quickly reassured him. “But *mama* is another story ‘cause she’s *hurtin’* for some of your good lovin’, boo. So you just go on ahead and-”

“I don’t think we should do this right now,” Casey tried to ease off her but yelped with alarm when Sidra grabbed his dick gently but firmly. “Sidra-”

“*Shut up and listen to me! You can’t just get a woman all wet, hot and bothered then leave her!*” Her eyes squinted evilly like Kathy Bates in “Misery”, and Casey broke out in a sweat as her grip tightened slightly. “*Bean is FINE! But you know who’s NOT fine?! Mama! Because she ain’t gettin’ no vitamin D!* Jack and Noelle are the horniest people I’ve ever met and fucked like rabbits throughout both of her pregnancies. I’ll be damned if you think I’ll be abstinent for the duration of this pregnancy! *Mmmmph!*”

She could no longer speak as Casey’s mouth came down on hers brutally, and he plunged into her welcoming body. They

both sighed with pleasure at the homecoming. The kiss softened as Casey moved slowly in her silken heat, rippling through her heightened nerve endings until he bottomed out and then slowly repeated the motions. Sidra's hands drifted down his back, and her lips moved with his in time to the leisurely strokes that she was readily receiving, their tongues meshing together erotically.

"*ALWAYS,*" he rasped, moving faster as she clenched tighter and tighter around him, a sure sign that she would be coming soon as her sex gushed around him. In Sidra, he'd found a way to destroy his demons. Her fierce love was the sword that slayed them one by one. As he looked into her enchanting eyes, he saw all of her love for him and that she was no longer running. She was standing still next to him, ready to face anything that would dare come their way.

"*ALWAYS,*" she agreed in a breathless voice, her eyes focused on him, loving the way Casey looked at her. *Always her.* He saw her chaos and pain but still chose her heart every time, instead of walking away. He was as strong as a lion, the king of the beasts, but she knew his heart was as gentle as a lamb's. He was her man, and she loved him beyond reason, for loving her just right.

"*I love you so much, Sidra Jane Barton. You and Bean are my entire world,*" Casey's low voice shook, not only with the precipice of his orgasm but because this woman broke him down and built him back up in every look and touched she graced him with. *He would surely die without her.*

"*Forever and ever, I'm yours. The both of you complete me,*" she swore, holding onto him tightly. "*I love you, forever and ever, Casey Sullivan. I can't...wait! Cum with me.*"

Casey's arms wrapped around her, protectively holding her in place from the wood beneath her as he plunged harder and deeper, the base of his spine-tingling more with every move of his hips. Sidra screamed her pleasure as he drove them higher and higher, convulsing around him as the orgasm crashed over them in tsunami sized waves of bliss.

Panting heavily, they slowly came back to reality, and Casey reluctantly withdrew from her body, immediately missing her. He bent down and retrieved his shirt, gently cleaning the stickiness from between her thighs. “Are you okay?”

She attempted to take the shirt from him, and with a scowl confirmed, “I’m more than okay. Please don’t use that shirt! It costs two hundred dollars!”

Casey tossed the shirt aside and picked her up. “Taking care of my babies is priceless. Let’s get you in bed, and I’ll make us dinner. I defrosted the spaghetti Noelle gave me on my last visit.”

Sidra laid her head on his shoulder as he carried them down the hall buck naked to their room, feeling the kiss he pressed to her riot of curls. “*Yuuuummm*. She makes the best spaghetti. Garlic bread too?”

“Picked some up this afternoon. We’re gonna eat, and then I’m ready for rounds two, three, and four,” he warned and she laughed as she rubbed his chest tiredly.

“Dear God, you’re going to kill me!”

“But what a way to go darlin’,” he smirked down at her sexily.

They each had fears and more than their share of pain and flaws. Just a couple of imperfect souls made perfect by their love for one another. *Perfectly imperfect*. That was the best way to describe their love.

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*I’m going crazy*, Dominick thought as he left Fuzzio’s and glanced around at the darkened parking lot, paranoid that even now, someone was watching him. Even though he’d acquired two bodyguards, courtesy of Darby Sullivan, that Vivienne insisted he now have, and who moved into bedrooms on either

side of him, he was still scared out of his mind. Seventy-two hours was the time she'd asked him for when he informed her that he had a week to make a decision.

"Everything okay, boss?" Wall asked abruptly as he trudged along next to Dominick. It was the name he'd secretly given the enormous man when he showed up at his security gate reporting for duty.

"Yeah, it's cool," Dominick muttered, wondering what Sidra would say about the man's presence when she saw him tomorrow. Suddenly, Wall stepped in front of him protectively, blocking Dominick's vision, and his hand pulled his firearm out in front of him.

"That's far enough!" he ordered. "State your business with Mr. Harris."

"My business is none of your business," the voice said icily, but Dominick recognized it immediately.

"It's cool, I know her." As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized the falsehood of his statement. He knew who she was and that she was very determined, just like he was. They had a common goal, but how far would she go to achieve it? But there was no way that she could be his blackmailer because it wouldn't make sense...then again none of it did.

Wall stepped aside, and Nina Santos was revealed to him. This time, she wore a short black dress. Her crimson lips were the only splash of color on her pale face.

"So, have you made your decision, Dominick?" Nina challenged impatiently, unaware of the storm brewing within him. "Your deadline was yesterday, and as I didn't hear from you, I thought I should follow up in person."

"That's your fucking problem, lady," he snarled, walking up to her and backing her against her Audi. "You're so damned spoiled that you didn't realize my lack of a response *was* my answer! But now I have a question for you: Was it you who sent me that envelope? Was it, Nina?!" He was in her face with wild eyes, breathing heavily and out of control as he

slammed his fist on the Audi's roof, making her jump.  
“ANSWER ME YOU OVER-PRIVELEDGED BITCH! WAS IT. YOU?!”

“That's enough, boss!” Wall pulled him back sharply and led him to the car, but Dominick wasn't done, frothing at the mouth and struggling against the larger man.

He screamed out to her, “SHE'S WORTH TEN OF YOU! ON YOUR BEST DAY, EVEN IF THE POPE BLESSED YOU HIMSELF AND SHIT GLITTER ON YOUR HEAD, YOU COULD NEVER BE HALF THE PERSON SHE IS!”

“GET IN THE FUCKING CAR!” Wall shouted, unlocking it and shoving him in before going around and starting it. The vehicle peeled out of the parking lot leaving Nina standing there shaking at the hatred and vitriol Dominick had unleashed on her.

Calmly, she got back into her car and locked it, her body boiling with rage at the words he'd dared to speak to her. His obvious devotion to Sidra was a bitter pill for her to swallow. *Every man she encountered became ensnared by the bitch,* Nina thought spitefully, reaching into her purse and grabbing her Italian stiletto switchblade. *Dominick was so lucky that she hadn't been carrying it,* Nina thought as she leaned her seat back and viciously stabbed into the expensive leather of her passenger seat, imagining it was their faces. With her other hand, she hiked her dress up and shoved her other hand into her panties, fondling herself as she stabbed the seat viciously over and over again until her climax overtook her.

Only when she found the desperately-needed release did she relax with a satisfied smile on her face. She wasn't sure what he'd been ranting and raving about, but she would soon find out.

Dominick had just made a very dangerous enemy.

## **Chapter Twenty.**

“Good morning!” Sidra said brightly as she sailed into the studio the next morning. She set her things down and placed a white paper bag on Dominick’s desk. “I was feelin’ bagels this morning, so I got you a bacon and egg on plain. There’s also a V-8 in there as well.”

“Thanks, Sidra,” he said quietly, watching as she bounced back to her seat and pulled her own sandwich out. “What the hell is that monstrosity called?”

“Oh, this thing? It’s corned beef with extra corned beef, white cheddar, pickles, and yellow mustard on an everything bagel,” she announced excitedly as she took a huge bite. So good. Making love with Casey on top of being pregnant made her insanely hungry, and even though it was only eight in the morning, it was her second meal of the day already. In no time, she’d devoured the bagel as Dominick watched in awestruck horror.

“I can clearly see you’re one of those men who dates women who push food around on their plate then lick the fork as their meal,” Sidra said disparagingly.

Dominick chuckled as he took another bite of his sandwich and watched her. She looked particularly pretty in a three-quarter-sleeved chartreuse wrap dress. Her knotted head scarf was a paisley print with purple, chartreuse, and navy. Delicate gold jewelry adorned her wrists, neck, and ears, and she complemented the ensemble with purple stilettos that wrapped around her ankles. Something was different about her, though. Sidra always looked like a million bucks, but today even more so. “You look really, really nice today.”

She beamed with pleasure. “Awww, thank you so much! So, I have something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Okay, lay it on me,” Dominick said, bracing himself as a sense of foreboding overcame him. He just knew he wasn’t going to like what she said next.

Sidra took a deep breath and blurted out, “I’m giving you my two-week notice! I thought it would be best to do this while



we're ahead of schedule.”

She waited for him to say something, but he didn't. He just sat there looking so devastated that it hurt her heart just to look at him. “Please say something, Dom. It's been such an honor to work for you, and I've learned so much-”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked finally, raising his sad eyes to meet hers imploringly. “We're such a good team. We're good together, damn it! Is there anything I can do to change your mind??”

“We *do* work well together,” she acquiesced. “But I'd like to go in another direction with my career. As I said, I'm so honored to have been able to work with you, but I need to do this for *me*.”

Sidra watched as Dominick just sat there staring at his desk. It was only then that she noticed his appearance. He hadn't shaved, and his normally meticulously-groomed hair appeared unkempt. His clothes were wrinkled as well, and Sidra felt a pang of guilt that she hadn't even noticed. *This was all Casey's fault*, she thought furiously, recalling their conversation this morning.

*“So you're gonna give him your notice today?” he inquired eagerly as she applied her makeup.*

*“Yes, boo. I already told you I would,” she confirmed, rolling her eyes at him in the mirror.*

*“Poor Dick,” Casey said mournfully. “He's gonna be so upset to see you go. I bet it's gonna tear him up somethin' awful to not see your face every day, pretty girl.” His unhurried smile was full of glee. “Can I be there to comfort him?”*

“I understand, Sidra.” Dominick's words broke her reverie. He sighed heavily and shifted despondently in his chair. His expression was sincere as he continued, “I wish you nothing but the best of luck with all your future endeavors. Tell you what, let's play hooky today. I remember you once asked me why I live here in D.C. instead of L.A., New York, or Miami

where it's easier to hook up with major producers. Do you remember that?"

"I do! I mean don't get me wrong, I love D.C., but I think it holds more appeal for me because my man lives here, you know?" Dominick hated the way she smiled that special smile when she spoke of punk-ass lawyer boy.

"So, come on, and I'll show you, mama," he urged. "Don't mind the humongous third wheel that's coming with us today."

"He was pretty hard to miss in the hallway. What's up with that?" Sidra grabbed her purse as he held the door open for her.

"Trust and believe, I wish it wasn't necessary," he muttered as she passed him.

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They drove through the streets of D.C., and he affectionately showed Sidra where he went to elementary, middle and high school. "It was just me and my grandparents, and they worked hard to make sure I had everything even though my mom had dishonored the family."

Sidra flinched at the bitterness in his voice. "How did she do that?"

"Not only did she become pregnant out of wedlock, but she didn't have a relationship with a Chinese man. So, she was a double disappointment to them. My grandfather could barely stand the sight of me because of this. They were proud people who raised their daughter right, expecting her to uphold the family name, but she didn't. They were killed, when I was seven, by two masked men that robbed their grocery store."

"Oh my goodness, Dom! I'm so sorry for your loss," Sidra said sympathetically, reaching over to hold his hand tightly. "You lost your whole family??? I can't imagine what that would be like as an adult, let alone a child."

He looked at their hands joined together and thought to himself with relief, *finally*. “I wasn’t alone for long. A white couple took me in and raised me, but I left when I was eighteen and never looked back.” Dominick looked out the window. “They were only in it for the money anyways.”

Sidra attempted to pull her hand back, but his grip tightened imperceptibly before he released it. “I’m going to show you something that I’ve never showed anyone, Sidra. I want you to promise that you won’t reveal it to anyone.”

“Hold up, it’s nothing illegal is it?” Sidra asked suspiciously as they pulled into a gated facility. She looked around at the well-kept grounds and noticed plenty of elderly people around and read the name on the building. Canterbury Hill Nursing Center.

Dominick gave her a crazy look. “At the nursing home?! Hell no!”

The SUV pulled up by the front entrance and their doors were opened. The two of them were escorted in where the facility director greeted them personally. The elderly black man said. “Hello, Mr. Harris. We’ve been expecting you, and I must say we’re in a good mood today.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Dougan. This is my friend Sidra. Sidra, Mr. Lee Dougan,” Dominick introduced them with a smile, but Mr. Dougan looked worried.

“Sir, I’m not sure introducing an unfamiliar person is such a great idea,” he said apologetically to Dominick.

“It’s alright. Thank you,” he said firmly and turned away, guiding Sidra by the elbow. They walked down a long hall before reaching a set of open doors. Inside, there were senior citizens engaging in numerous activities as the staff helped them. Turning to the two bodyguards, Dominick requested they stay back and then motioned for Sidra to follow him quietly. They walked the large room, weaving through the groups of people until they reached the corner of the room where a nurse sat next to a small, frail, wheelchair-bound

woman with a long white braid who stared out the window with blank eyes. There was an empty chair on her other side.

Dominick held his hand up to Sidra, silently asking her to wait. Then he slowly sat down in the chair and spoke softly in Chinese to the woman, who never responded. Sidra watched in the glass reflection as her face remained serenely blank. For fifteen minutes, they were like that until Dominick slowly got up and pressed a kiss to her cheek. It was then that Sidra saw the woman's eyes close serenely and she gave a hint of a smile. Dominick hugged the nurse before motioning for them to go. Silently, they walked back to the SUV and were soon on their way back to his house. Dominick didn't speak, and Sidra respected his silence. She checked her phone and found she had four missed calls from Casey. As soon as she made sure Dominick was okay, she would call him back.

"She's your mother." It wasn't a question, and he nodded his head in silent confirmation.

"Xia Tse, but she was always known as Penny," Dominick said fondly. "She was born in Richmond, Virginia and is smart as hell. Her parents were incredibly proud of her and the way she excelled at everything she did with a full-ride scholarship to school and on the success train until she met a boy. But he wasn't just any boy; no, this one was very clever and cunning, charming himself into Penny's good graces and her bed as she did his homework for him and gave her body to him. He, too, was going places, just not without her. He took what he needed from her until he passed the required classes and then left her devastated and pregnant. Ashamed, she went home to her parents who were angry and heartbroken at her stupidity. They could no longer brag to their friends about her achievements due to the dishonor she'd brought upon them.

After I was born, she tried to commit suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. She wasn't successful but wound up in a coma that she didn't wake from until I was one. Since then, she's never been able to speak; at the most, she grunts. But she's

always had the best care in the best facilities, and she's now starting to suffer from dementia. Today was a really good day, and I make it a point to visit her every day that I'm in town or FaceTime her on her nurse's iPad. I don't think I have that much time left with her, so I cherish it."

"I think that's wonderful that you love your mama so much," Sidra said warmly. "Thank you for sharing that with me."

Dominick turned to face her. They were so close that he was invading her personal space. "I shared it with you because you're special to me. I knew it the moment I saw you at Vivienne's dinner party, and it was confirmed when I spoke with you. *I could feel it, Sidra.* Do you know how pissed I was when you left with him and let him fuck you in the garden? *I wanted to beat the shit out of him. Can't you see?! We were destined to meet, Sidra.*"

Although she was shocked as hell to find out that her first time with Casey was not a private moment, Sidra stood her ground with his babbling, as red flags went off in her brain.

*"Dominick, you are in my personal space, and I do NOT like it. BACK. THE. FUCK. OFF."*

Instead, he unbuttoned his shirt and revealed his muscular chest to her. "You don't get it, do you?! He reached for her and she drew her fist back, but he easily caught it. *"Stop fighting and listen to me!* I saw *it* when we were talking, and it's the reason I touched your hair. LOOK. AT. ME."

Furious, Sidra tried to kick the glass separation, trying to get the bodyguards attention, but he caught her leg. *"Please look."*

And then she saw it on his shoulder by his neck. The little birthmark that resembled a heart with a bite taken out of it. It was just like hers except with her darker complexion, it was harder to discern. From her father's side of the family. All of the fight left her, and she fell back against the seat in shock.

"How...how..." she couldn't formulate a coherent sentence.

Dominick fell back against the seat too and smiled sadly at her. Before Sidra could speak, the door was flung open, and Casey took in the scene before him. She knew from how untidy she looked with her dress high up on her thighs from attempting to kick Dominick and Dominick's unbuttoned shirt that it appeared very compromising. "No! This isn't what it looks-"

But Casey was livid and not trying to hear it as he dragged Dominick by his hair out of the car and commenced to beating the shit out of him.

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*Earlier that morning...*

Casey was in a GREAT mood as he exited his Jaguar and walked to the entrance of his firm's building. Today, Sidra was going to give Dick her notice, and then the jackass would be out of their lives permanently. This weekend they planned to go to The Row and spend some quality time with friends and family. They'd agreed not to say anything about the baby, which would be damn hard considering how excited he was about Bean. Hopefully, Kat had news on the ring as well. Maybe she'd worked a miracle, and it would already be done. Casey would love nothing better than to propose to Sidra in front of their family, especially knowing he had Granny Evie's approval. Fuck what Nero and Lena thought. This was their time, and he wouldn't do anything to spoil the moment for her.

"Good morning, Gail!" he greeted his assistant and then noticed her disapproving frown.

"I'm sorry, sir. She showed up again—unannounced," Gail replied abruptly as the restroom door opened and revealed a beaming Nina Santos. "Shall I call security?"

Casey grinned at the eagerness in Gail's voice. "You are a security-happy fool aren't you?" he whispered with a wink. Aloud, he said, "No that's okay. She won't be staying that long. I believe I have two appointments back-to-back, correct?"

"Yes, the environmental one is first. I've already prepared the conference room, and they are expected in thirty minutes," Gail confirmed side-eyeing the younger woman.

"Sounds good, thank you," Casey said, giving her a warm smile before turning to address Nina.

"Good morning, Nina" he greeted courteously and gestured for her to lead the way to his office. "After you."

Casey followed her back and had no doubt that the exaggerated swing of her hips was just for his benefit. He deliberately left the door open as he went around to his desk. "Have a seat."

"Sorry to just drop in like this," she purred, and now knowing what he did, Casey saw how her every move was calculated to draw attention to herself. The suggestive licking of her lips and leaning in close to him, her hands brushing against him... Now, he knew and was disgusted by it. The women in his life, from his baby to his niece had never put on a pathetic act to score attention. They were just strong, beautiful, and genuine women. He felt sorry for Nina and her sad life.

"Then why did you?" he asked bluntly and watched her eyes narrow at his tone. "From now on, there will be no more dropping by. Call and make an appointment like everyone else."

"Oh come on, Casey! Surely that's not how friends treat each other!" Nina tried to mock pout, but Casey shook his head.

"We ain't friends, Nina. Especially after the way you and your father treated Sidra," Casey said firmly. "She told me all about growin' up with Nero in and out of her life, and the way you treated her."

“Then whatever she told you is a lie!” Nina spat venomously. “I was nothing but good to her! I longed for us to be close to each other, but she turned me down at every turn.”

Casey gave her a hard stare before shaking his head sadly. “That could very well be the most pathetic lie I’ve ever heard. I’ve been to your house and your firm. Neither you nor your father have any pictures anywhere of Sidra! No one has ever mentioned her, and case in point: when she was here the last time you were here, you said NOTHING about her to me. And Nina? Don’t disrespect my woman by calling her a liar. I promise that you won’t like the consequences if you do it again.”

“You would believe her over me?!” Nina asked, outraged by his words. “We’ve known each other for years!”

Casey stood up and walked back around his desk. “Indeed we have, but we’re more like acquaintances than friends. Knowing you doesn’t make or break me, so of course, I choose Sidra each and every time. I wish you nothin’ but success and good health, but it’s time to cut ties, Nina.”

Nina grabbed her purse and stalked to the door Casey was holding open. “I feel sorry for you, Casey. I actually came over here to warn you that I recently had the pleasure of meeting Dominick Harris of Bison Blue and informed him that Sidra was my sister. He seemed so *obsessed* with her, that I felt that I should let you know, seeing as how they work together in such close proximity. Who knows what he has planned for her?” Joyfully, Nina watched Casey’s eyes flare with anger before he concealed it. She widened her eyes innocently. “Well, I should go. Be careful and watch yourself, Casey. It’s obvious whose side you choose to believe, but her mother also had a way of bewitching people as well. Goodbye.”

Casey watched her leave and then sat down at his desk again. Nina’s words playing over and over again in his mind.

*“He seemed so obsessed with her, that I felt that I should let you know, seeing as how they work together in such close*



*proximity. Who knows what he has planned for her?”*

Sidra wouldn't dare do anything to hurt their relationship, but Dominick was a different story altogether. The way he was always staring at Sidra or hovering around. His obvious dislike for Casey was also an issue...

Casey dialed Sidra's cell, and it rang and rang before going to voice mail. He tried it again and the same thing happened. His frustration was growing, but he told himself to calm the fuck down. Still, there was a little doubt, especially with her giving her notice. Who knew what the slick bastard would try?

He stood up and headed for the door, determined to go see for himself. Then he saw the group of men filing into the conference room and remembered the appointments today. *Shit! Dick* would have to wait...

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Three hours later, Casey was finally done with meetings. He called Sidra again but still no answer. Now, he was growing concerned, with Nina's words mind-fucking him over and over again.

“Gail, I'm heading out for an hour,” he informed his assistant and hurried out to his Jaguar. He stopped in dismay when he saw the damage, rage flowing through him as he observed the shattered back window. Cautiously, he approached the car and saw the rock laying in the backseat with a piece of paper tied around it. He opened the backseat and grabbed the rock. The note was the same as the prior one.

*Be wary of the company that you keep.*

The drive to Dominick's took forever thanks to a five-car pileup on the freeway, but finally, he was there, in Gail's car. The security guards hired by Darby's firm recognized him and allowed him access. He got out of his car and was informed that Sidra and Dominick were not there. They'd left a couple

of hours ago on an impromptu trip. Casey caught the two guards smirking at each other, and it enraged him even further.

“What’s so funny? I’d like to laugh,” he snarled, and they quickly straightened up. “Why don’t you share the joke with me?”

“There’s no joke, sir,” they hastily reassured him. He stared at them unwaveringly until they looked away nervously.

Casey stalked back to his Jaguar to wait, his anger turning to rage and ready to erupt. It would be another thirty minutes before the gate opened again and the large black Ford Expedition pulled in. He got out of his car and watched the two guards in the front get out, but nobody got out of the back. One of the guards he’d spoken to earlier walked over and spoke with them, but they made no move to open the back doors of the expedition. Casey ran to the vehicle and opened the door before they could stop him. The sight of Sidra laying there with Dick’s shirt unbuttoned turned his heart to ice before the volcano of rage finally erupted and he lost it, snatching Dominick by his hair as he pounded his face, threw him to the ground and viciously whapped his ass.

The guards tried to hold him back but couldn’t as he turned and kicked the big motherfucker’s kneecap back and heard the pop before he went down screaming in pain. Then he turned back to Dick. The second guard got a broken nose when he tried to bear hug Casey from behind and Casey slammed his head back, smiling at the sickening crunch he heard before he was released. Casey pulled a bloodied Dominick up and slammed his fist into his jaw over and over again as Sidra stumbled out of the car.

“Stop it, Casey!” Sidra screamed. “You’re hurting him! Leave him alone! He’s my brother!”

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

*Two months earlier...*

*Glasgow...*

Magnus Carlisle was the fucking man, at least in his head. On the outside, the twenty-two-year-old bookstore clerk didn't look like much with his pale green eyes, acned complexion, gangly build, and blonde hair that turned into a frizzy halo if he didn't use at *least* a pound of gel. But the inside was a different story altogether. Magnus was a computer genius who hacked into Scotland Yard at the age of eight. For kicks, when he was ten, he hacked into the accounts of the three richest men in the world and wiped their accounts out for a day.

*One of these days, your devilry will cost you, Magnus,* his Scottish mother Meredith scolded him constantly, and then he would try to obey her, for he loved his mum above all else. His mother babied him endlessly, and they were each other's worlds. His father had died in an accident at the factory that he worked at. Even though they'd received a good chunk of money as a settlement and didn't have to work, they both held down modest jobs. *It builds character,* his mum had always said until passing away a year ago. Magnus had tried very hard to resist hacking, but his efforts were futile, and now it had cost him his new girlfriend Jackie, a sweet, twenty-year-old barista. She was kidnapped on her way to the flat they shared from work two months ago. For a week, he went out of his way trying to find her, and the helplessness and fear of the unknown drove him mad.

The police knew nothing, and he'd even hacked into Scotland Yard again just to see if they were telling the truth, but there was nothing. Then two weeks ago, he was sent a picture of Jackie. She was tied to a chair and her face was bruised and swollen. Magnus was horrified and frightened at the writing on the back:

*It doesn't pay to be nosy, Mr. Carlisle. We'll be in touch.*

Magnus couldn't eat or sleep as he waited. It would be another week before he was sent another picture of Jackie, and the sight of her in bed with two men doing unspeakable things to her sent him into a frenzied rage. That night when he came home from the bookstore, he walked into his dark flat and sensed a change in the air. Despite the heat from the furnace, it was sinisterly cold. Magnus paused in the doorway and tried to determine what was different. By the time that he came to the conclusion he wasn't alone, he heard the small click of a gun."

"Welcome home, Magnus. Won't you come in?" The voice was wispy but so icy, Magnus shivered as he stepped inside and fearfully closed the door. He couldn't tell where the voice came from, but it seemed to be *everywhere* surrounding him with its menace. "Turn around and face the door until I say otherwise."

"What do you want?" Magnus demanded as he obeyed the order, but his nerve was soon lost with the mocking titter that filled the air.

"Don't you want to know about your girlfriend?" the voice taunted, and Magnus stepped further into the darkened room.

"Tell me how Jackie is!" he demanded, forgetting his fear for the moment. "If you've hurt her, I'll-"

"Tsk-tsk, Magnus! You'll do nothing of the sort," the voice said soothingly. "And your girl is fine. Terrific actually...I tried her out myself last night."

"You, bastard! What do you want from me?!" he cried angrily as he spun around the room. "Show yourself! You fucking coward!"

"In good time. There is a list on the coffee table. Pick it up," the voice commanded and Magnus hurriedly did so. He scanned the names printed on the first sheet and then the second and third.

"Your job is to find out everything you can about each person on that list. *Everyone has a secret that they want to remain hidden.* You're going to do what you do best, you little

maggot. Find them and then report it to me. You no longer work for the bookstore. You work for *me*. Pack a bag as you will be relocating. Follow my instructions to the letter, and you will be reunited with your girlfriend.”

“And the...raping?” Magnus choked out, and again there was the soft laugh that left a trail of ice down his back. His next words made the bile rise up in Magnus’s throat and spill.

*“Don’t worry. Jackie has been supplied with Ecstasy and Rohypnol before each session. You can’t rape the willing.”*

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*Present*

*Paris...*

“It was nice of Romankov to allow us some freedom,” Cruz remarked idly to Holt as they waited in the penthouse suite of the Hotel Leroux. “Are you sure the information is correct?”

“Surely, you’re not questionin’ me? My source is *always* correct,” Holt answered smoothly as he checked his watch for the third time. *Soon.*

“So what changed? Could it be a certain Swede’s affection for a stunning jewelry designer?” Cruz inquired politely. “The desire to help her out of a predicament?”

“Don’t concern yourself with my affairs,” Holt ordered as he pulled his phone out and checked the hotel’s surveillance camera. “What’d you bring?”

“Duh, ‘The Butcher’? What do you think I brought?” Cruz rolled his eyes.

“Your favorite butter knife? A spork? How the fuck should I know?” Holt asked sarcastically.

“You show me your toys, and I’ll show you mine,” Cruz suggested slyly.

“*Butchers*,” Holt sneered at him with contempt. “This is why I work alone.”

“Because Woodsmen are so much better? I don’t think so,” Cruz threw back scornfully. They grew silent for a moment before he asked, “So what’s your plan?”

“To split their sides with my humor and have them lose their heads over my good looks,” Holt murmured dryly. “And you?”

“Not a spot on me,” Cruz boasted. “I have plans to meet with an old flame before we leave. I didn’t bring a change of clothes. What’s your song of choice? I like A-Ha’s “Take On Me”.

“Anything from Beastie Boys’ “Licensed to Ill,” Holt confessed. “There’s just somethin’ about it that inspires me to really wanna *put in work*, ya know?”

“It’s the beats and the adrenaline. I hear “The Wolf” likes Lionel Richie’s “Say You Say Me”, Cruz snickered, and Holt cracked a smile. “The Old Heads definitely liked slow dancing with their targets.”

“Showtime,” Holt said quietly. “Incoming of seven. Six guards and the lead. I don’t believe in lingering, so less than a minute. I’m headin’ low first, so go high.”

They looked at the wide-entranced double doors between them, now hearing the group’s approach and slowly inched away from the doors. Holt crouched low, his right hand behind his back and silently withdrew his weapon. The doors slid open and the group walked in. Two guards in front the lead in the middle with a guard on each side, and two more in the back. The doors automatically closed, and the back guards turned to confirm. They were startled to see the two men, and instinctively reached for their guns, but Holt was already moving, across the wooden floor. Silver gleamed in the light as he slid past them. His blade making a clean swipe before he spun around to a stop on his knee, facing them and hearing

their anguished screams before they fell apart. Holt watched Cruz soar over the falling bodies and embed a knife in each man's stomach before pushing the shrieking target forward between the two remaining guards as Holt advanced swinging his arm forward and decapitating them in one fell swoop. Their heads flew through the air and landed by the lead as their bodies dropped to the floor, blood gushing from their necks. Holt heard the sound of a wet splat and turned around to see the bloody remains of the guards Cruz had stabbed.

Holt looked at Cruz and sneered, "Seriously?! *Wasp injection knives?* Where's your craftsmanship and dedication to what we do? I know a toddler who could have done that in her sleep!"

"I told you I have a "situation" later. And look, not a spot on me!" he boasted proudly. "I must say those skills are quite impressive. The blade cut through them smooth as silk! What kind of blade is that?"

"Son, please! Nobody knows steel like us Swedes," Holt stated arrogantly, holding the bloody ax up to the ceiling lights. "This particular ax I designed to skin large game. I can dress and quarter an animal in five minutes flat with it. It's sharp enough to remove the hide from an animal, even a frozen one." He bent down and used the suited jacket of one of the dead men to wipe the blade clean before sheathing the weapon on his back. "Nineteen-inch hickory handle, under two pounds, I designed the blade to be able to chop through bones as tough as the pelvis and ribs."

"You know, you really do look like Thor when you hold the ax up?" Cruz observed with amusement, turning to look at the skinny, trembling young man that they'd flown halfway across the world for. "What do *you* think, Magnus? Can you see the resemblance?"

Scared shitless after witnessing the swift and gruesome deaths of his assigned bodyguards and the sight of their body parts now scattered all over the place, Magnus couldn't speak.

“He looks like he’s going to be ill,” Holt guessed grabbing the young man by the arm and leading him to the couch, kicking a head out of the way to get there. He plopped him down and shoved his frizzy head between his legs, ordering, “Breathe, Magnus.”

Cruz walked over and opened the travel-size bottle of Scotch he’d swiped from the bar and spoke contemptuously, “*Bah!* So, he has no fear of breaking into Scotland Yard but crumbles like a cookie over a few body parts. Stop being a baby and drink this! We need to get out of here. *Madre de Dios!* Will we need to feed and burp him and then change his diaper too?”

Holt laughed uproariously as Magnus grabbed the bottle and downed its contents, gasping as the fiery liquid hit the back of his throat. He glowered at them, bristling with indignation. “When Kat finds out how you treated me, you’ll be sorry! You know she and I go way back? We’ve been pen pals since we were five years old. I’m practically the Romankovs’ son-in-law!”

Holt told himself not to be jealous of this boastful man-child that he could crush with just one of his massive hands, but he couldn’t resist taunting Magnus. “Well, you’ll be glad to know she’s upgraded. Get your ass in gear and grab your shit. You’ve got some serious explainin’ to do.”

Holt watched him scramble for his things, and Cruz leaned over to whisper, “Surely, “*The Woodsman*” is not threatened by an acne-ridden youth???”

Gnashing his teeth, Holt didn’t bother answering as he watched Magnus with dagger- filled eyes.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Casey watched from outside of the private hospital room as Sidra sat in the chair next to Dominick’s bed. She’d barely left



his bedside since he was admitted yesterday and was barely speaking to him. Casey could still remember the shock at her words that didn't register until after he'd hit Dominick two more times. Sidra had thrown herself over the unconscious man, and he cringed thinking about how he'd come so close to hitting her.

Footsteps echoed at the end of the hall, and he turned to see Jack, Ian, and Darby heading his way. Their grim expressions jolted a fresh wave of shame that flowed hotly through him. He straightened from the glass partition wordlessly and entered the empty room across from Dominick's to wait. Ian entered the room and quietly closed the door behind him. His honorary father's expression was one of severe disappointment as he stared at him, and Casey felt the heat creeping up his neck.

"I'm sorry, Ian," he mumbled, lowering his eyes. "I don't know what came over me. I saw them together, and their clothes were disheveled. They appeared to be in a very compromising position. I lost my head, even though Sidra tried to reassure me it wasn't what it seemed."

"I'm told she explained to you that he was her brother? And yet you didn't stop?" Ian inquired coldly as he observed Casey's less than stellar appearance. His hair was unkempt and his dress shirt and suit pants were wrinkled. Dark shadows lay under his bloodshot eyes. The younger man obviously hadn't slept since the incident occurred a day ago.

"She did explain that to me." Casey's jaw clenched when he remembered the horrified expression on Sidra's face when Dominick remained motionless.

*Dominick's personal security team was hired by Darby, and they'd drawn their weapons while they called it in to Darby. Sidra wept over him, only moving when the guards insisted they had to check him while they waited for paramedics.*

*Casey attempted to talk to Sidra, his hands reaching out for her, but she flinched away. "Baby, let's go over here and let them do their job-"*

*“Don’t touch or talk to me right now,” she replied icily, walking away from him to hover in the background and check Dominick’s progress. Soon the paramedics arrived in a black van, and the prone man was carefully lifted into it while another van pulled up and tended to the injured security guards.*

*“Where are you taking him?!” Sidra yelled, and they gave her an address. It was the private hospital where all the local celebrities and politicians went to avoid scandal.*

*“Come on; I’ll drive,” Casey urged, reaching for her, desperate to feel the connection they’d had this morning when she left for work. Sidra shrugged away from him and walked over to the other car to retrieve her purse. before walking over to the passenger side of the Prius to get in. Casey started the car, and they drove to the hospital in tense silence.*

*“What happened to your car?” Sidra asked looking around the small vehicle.*

*“It was vandalized,” Casey said curtly. “I’m sorry. I overreacted when I saw you guys like that. You hadn’t returned any of my calls, and I didn’t know what to think.”*

*“I gave Dominick my notice, and he asked if he could show me something, so I said yes. He showed me where he grew up and took me to see his mother in a nursing home,” Sidra explained shortly. “We were on our way back, and that’s when he confessed his feelings for me. It was weird at first, and I initially did think he was trying to do something, but then I saw it, Casey! He has the same birthmark on his shoulder that I do! After that, you came and beat him unconscious, and that’s all I know for the time being.”*

*“I really am sorry, Sid,” he implored. “You just weren’t answering my calls, and it made me think of all the doubts that I had about him. And then Nina-”*

*“Nina! What the hell does Nina have to do with any of this?!” Sidra demanded sharply.*

*Fuuuuck. He glanced over at her uneasily and saw her arms were crossed over her chest as she stared straight ahead. Her mouth was an inflexible line and her chin was tilted stubbornly. "She came to see me this morning and let me know that she'd met with Dominick and to tell me that... he seemed obsessed with you."*

*Sidra said nothing and stared straight ahead for the remainder of the trip. When they arrived at their destination, she finally spoke. "I have never loved anyone but YOU, Casey Sullivan. I may have been a bit of a flake, but it was always and will only be you for me. You say you love me, but then my psychopath of a sister is able to easily infiltrate your mind and have you driving over to wherever I am to check on me. I just found out that I have a brother. That SHE has a brother, which obviously she knows nothing about either, or she wouldn't have tried something so fucked up. The fact that you readily believed her says a lot about your issues that need to be addressed. You beat a man unconscious and injured two others." Sidra shuddered and rubbed her forehead with frustration. "Now, I am going to go make a couple of calls to Jack and Vivienne, and then I will sit with Dominick. I don't want to talk to you right now. I. Need. Space. From. You. Okay?"*

*"Okay," Casey said quietly, so full of remorse that he felt like he would choke on it. Sidra got out of the car and entered the facility without looking back.*

*"And please tell me again why you felt like you had to exercise your fists so rigorously?" Ian asked caustically.*

*"I was given some misleadin' information, and again, when I arrived on the scene, it appeared to be a compromisin' position," Casey said tiredly. "I would give anythin' to take it back, and I'll pay for his medical expenses."*

*"Are you sure you graduated cum laude? And if so, was your major 'Jackass 101'???" Ian fumed. "Because your insecurities have got you as blind as a bat when it comes to Sidra!"*

The door opened and Jack and Darby walked in; Casey rushed forward. “How’s Sidra doin’? I haven’t been able to speak to her, and no one will tell me how Dominick is either.”

Jack’s fist shot out and slammed into his jaw, and Casey saw stars as he staggered back to the wall before falling to his knees. Then he was being picked up by his oldest brother and forced to look into hazel eyes just like his, except these were filled with anger and disappointment. “Sidra’s fine. Dominick is not so lucky, you stupid sonofabitch! You damn near broke his jaw, and his ribs are bruised on top of the concussion you gave him. WHAT WERE YOU THINKIN’?!”

“Obviously, I wasn’t,” Casey groaned and gingerly touched his jaw, “you bastard!”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” Jack barked. “Since you’re a lawyer, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how much trouble you’re in if he decides to press charges. I’m inclined to urge him *and* Darby’s employees to do just that. Get yourself some help asshole before you go anywhere near Sidra or Dominick again.” Jack shook his head in disgust. “She doesn’t want to see you right now anyways.”

Upon hearing Jack’s words, Casey began to struggle and swing frantically, but Darby grabbed his other arm, and even then, it was hard to hold onto Casey. The thought of Sidra leaving him was killing him.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Ian fumed as he too had to join in. “We’re going to have to sedate him!”

Suddenly, Casey stopped struggling, but they held fast, unsure of why. From behind them, Sidra spoke quietly, “Let him go.”

They did and he approached her warily. Slowly, she pulled him to her and hugged him tightly. Casey held fast as he whispered starkly, “*I’m sorry, baby. I’m so, so sorry! I’ll tell Dominick how sorry I am. I never meant to go this far...and I shouldn’t have listened to Nina. Please forgive me! I love you and ‘Bean’ so much, baby!*”

Sidra kissed his cheek, dying inside at the frantic look in his eyes. “I love you too, Casey. It would just be for the best if you leave, though. I need to figure all of this stuff out and make sure Dominick doesn’t press charges against you. Go home and get some rest. I’ll meet you in The Row this weekend, okay?”

Ian also reassured Casey, “I’ll stick around as well, dummy.”

She didn’t wait for his response, but heard Darby ask, “*What or who the fuck is ‘Bean’?*”

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Sidra watched Dominick sleep, exhausted herself, but refusing to leave without getting some answers. Twice he’d woken up, seemed relieved she was there and drifted back off to sleep. Now, she watched as his eyes flickered before slowly opening. Sidra sat up and poured him a small cup of water. “Welcome back.”

Dominick slowly sipped the water, feeling bad as he saw how tired she looked. “Thanks for sticking around.”

“Ummm, it was the least I could do after what happened,” Sidra said worriedly. “Are you feeling okay?”

“My jaw hurts like hell, and so do my sides. How bad is it, and what the fuck is Casey’s problem?” he demanded, gingerly touching his jaw.

“A couple of bruised ribs, and you were concussed,” Sidra replied, hoping he didn’t ask for a mirror. “The doctor says you should heal splendidly.”

“Why did he do it?” Dominick ground out. “I knew that asshole was crazy! You should break up with him. If he can do this with no provocation, what will he do to *you*?”

“What he does to me is not *your* concern, Dominick,” Sidra snapped. “I’m here because I’d like to discuss that little tidbit you dropped on me before...well you know.”

“Before your boyfriend beat my ass you mean?!” Dominick asked cynically. “Yeah sure, we can get into that. It’s pretty simple, though. Before Nero’s thot ass married Cecelia or took up with your mother, he used my mother first. The price she paid for his deception was a kid, dishonor to her family, and now what I’m sure he considers her blessed silence. The only reason I found out he was my father is because the couple he paid to take me in was complaining about needing more money when I was ten. So, I went to see him at his father-in-law’s firm, and he quickly escorted me out. He took me for a hot dog and just talked to me about staying in school. He informed me that he was the one taking care of mom’s medical bills. Nero said we couldn’t tell anyone that we were related, or they would find out he was in the country illegally and deport him. Then we would never see each other again or take care of Mom.”

“He told you he was here illegally?” Sidra’s voice was filled with disbelief. “And you believed him?”

“I was a stupid fucking kid! Of course, I believed him!” Dominick shouted. “He came to visit me twice a month at the house. It wasn’t until Nina was five that I found out that I had a sister. I asked him why I couldn’t meet her, and he said that he wasn’t allowed to see her either because of her mother, but he would try for my sake. I didn’t see him for three months and was going crazy with worry. When I finally saw him again, he told me he’d been deported. That Nina’s mother had pressed harassment charges against him. That was the reason we would leave them alone. So I didn’t press the issue again. But then I kept coming to the conclusion that two plus two isn’t five and went to the library to investigate his rights. I started to ask questions and snoop around in my guardians’ personal things and realized he made everything up. I confronted him, and he didn’t admit everything was a lie, but

he didn't deny it either. The only thing he did say was that if I ever told anybody that or anything else about myself, he wouldn't pay for Mom's care anymore."

"What do you mean anything else?" Sidra asked furiously, damning Nero to hell, but even there was too good for him.

Dominick closed his eyes, hating his weakness and struggling for words. He tried to speak but couldn't. A movement by the door caught his eye, and Ian Rusnik stepped in and quietly shut the door and spoke.

"The fact that he is gay, Sidra. Isn't that right, Dominick? Your father wanted nothing to do with an illegitimate child, much less a gay one."

### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Jack handed Casey a new ice pack that he took and placed on his aching jaw. His head was throbbing as well, but he'd be damned if he told his mean as a rattlesnake brother that.

"Thanks," he said sarcastically. Jack ignored him to pull out a chair at his dining room table. Darby was busy reheating the leftover spaghetti and garlic bread for them. "D, I already told you that I'm not hungry."

"Who said anything about you?" Darby retorted. "Jack and I haven't eaten since this morning when my wife sent us off with breakfast-to-go. Dealin' with your dramatic ass has left me extremely 'hangry'."

"You wanna tell us what made you fly off the handle like that?" Jack demanded curtly.

"I don't, and I already said I was sorry," Casey said quietly, the tic in his jaw betrayed the turmoil he was struggling to conceal.

“Sorry, my ass!” Jack barked, pounding his fist on the table and making an already rattled Casey jump.

“You might be my older brother, but you’ll lower your voice when you talk to me in my own goddamn house,” Casey snarled as their hazel eyes clashed across the table, neither willing to back down.

“Or what? You gonna gimme some of what you gave Dominick?” Jack mocked with a smirk. “Well, come on, lil’ brother! Let’s see what you got!”

“Back. Off.” Casey’s lips barely moved as he advised Jack. The already thick tension between them was growing by the minute.

*“Motherfucker, you back off!”* Jack laughed contemptuously. “Oh, I see how it is! So you can come to my house and ambush me with a fuckin’ intervention on how to get *my* shit together, but I should keep quiet as you unravel???

*Fuck you, Casey!”*

“Enough, Jackie!” Darby intervened, moving to stand at the head of the table and give himself time to get between them. “This ain’t what we came here for!”

“It’s exactly what we came here for!” Jack yelled, turning to him. “Don’t you dare try to coddle him! He can throw all the hissy fits he wants, but we ain’t leavin’ until we figure out what’s goin’ on here!”

“SHUT. UP. JUST SHUT UP!!!” Casey roared and stood up, swiping the centerpiece case off the table as they watched it crashed to the floor. “Y’all wanna know why I lost my fuckin’ mind with Dominick?! Because I thought he was tryin’ to take her from me. Like Patrick took Ma! Loving Sidra scares me to death because I want her to stay with me always, but what if she goes too?! What if I smother her with my love, and it’s too much for her???”

“It’s like Sidra’s rock-bottom in your face crazy, but he’s the emergency crazy in the hidden panic room,” Darby whispered



loudly to Jack, who was studying his brother with a furrowed brow.

“Sidra is strong and knows her mind. Unlike you, we’ve never doubted her love for you,” he said quietly. “Help us to understand, Case.”

Casey tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling and tried to collect his thoughts. “The day Ma was murdered, I got mad at her. I wanted to go to a stupid birthday party, but she said that I couldn’t and had to go straight to the laundromat after school. I’m ashamed to say that I said an awful thing to her... I told her that I hated her...” Casey swallowed convulsively and hung his head in shame. “I’m so ashamed of myself, but it was the last thing I ever said to her, and then everything happened. I froze up and should have told her I was sorry, but I didn’t think that was the end...that I’d *never* see her again...”

Casey bleakly met their eyes. “Ma thought I left for school, but I heard her say to herself on my way out that she wished she could leave this hellhole and had never set eyes on Patrick. I’ve always kind of thought that she wanted to leave us too... but then she did leave, and I had no one to love me.”

“That’s not true, Case,” Jack said roughly as he stood up and grabbed his little brother by the neck, pulling him close to wrap his arms around him. “I’m here and so is Darby. Vivienne, Kat, Ian, Lex, Holt and Guy too. We ain’t goin’ anywhere, and we all love you, the same way you love us. Noelle, Avery, Ruby, baby Jack, and D.J. are the newest members of our family, and they love you as well. Our family is growin’ bigger and stronger together. We’ve come so far from where we were; it’d be a cryin’ shame if you didn’t evolve as a person as well. So, don’t be scared to love your woman with everythin’ you got and receive’ the love she gives you in return.”

“If anythin’, that lesson should have taught you that tomorrow’s not promised, asshole,” Darby added affectionately as he joined in on the hug. “Shake that devil off

your back and live your life right, little brother. Ma wouldn't want you to be so burdened. Don't take to heart what she said. We all wished to escape the hell of that bastard."

Casey stiffened and suddenly pulled back. "That's another thing that bothers me. Why weren't *we* good enough for him? What made Nate so special that he could treat him decent, but not *us*?! I keep rackin' my brain and comin' up with shit! Who treats their kids so fucked up?!"

"You're lookin' at it wrong, Case," Darby insisted. "Patrick was never good enough for *us*! Everyone knew we deserved more, and him less. He couldn't break us, so he tried to bring us down to his level, but we rose above that shit."

"Every level brings a different devil. You need to pick and choose your battles," Jack said, clapping him on the back affectionately. "Now, let's eat."

Casey set the plates while Jack grabbed some beers and Darby sliced the bread. They sat down together and grasped hands as Jack blessed the food. They didn't speak until after their plates were filled and bottle caps were popped.

"Man, they've really trained us up," Casey smiled. "Unless Vivienne and Kat were with us, we never blessed our food after Ma passed."

"Or went to church on Sundays," Jack said proudly around a forkful of pasta.

"I swear Sister Mary McCloud is holdin' on by a thread every time she sees me in the doorway," Darby grinned. "Now, she's the Sunday school teacher and spills all my dirt to D.J. It's amazin' how God sends you the things you never knew you needed, and your life changes for the better in the blink of an eye."

Casey snorted, "If McCloud is spillin' your dirt then that's enough dirt to grow a garden. Your ass was bad as hell and the reason we had rules in the first place."

“I don’t blame you for feelin’ that way. Middle children are often misunderstood. Sorry, we all couldn’t be perfect, angelic and spoiled like you,” Darby tossed back disgustedly and turned to Jack. “Seriously, I had to iron this fool’s underwear because it felt ‘weird’ to him wearin’ them wrinkled.”

“Oh shit, I forgot about that!” Jack laughed. “What does Sidra say about you needin’ pressed Underoos?”

Casey shrugged nonchalantly. “She doesn’t and won’t know unless you tell her that every Saturday, Darby took the time to carefully iron my draws while I laughed hysterically behind his back.”

“You little fucker!” Darby said in wonder. “You did that on purpose!”

“Because you wouldn’t stop wakin’ me up with wet willies!” Casey retorted, ducking Darby’s punch. “I died laughin’ every time I saw your big hands carefully ironin’ my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle undies!”

“Just terrible. I *pray* that Ruby and Jack aren’t like the two of you,” Jack said fervently.

“Good luck with that, brother,” Darby said cheerfully. “Ruby’s determination to get her way, especially now that she’s seen baby Jack’s strength, is in full effect. It’s like tryin’ to put a tornado in a box.”

“Who you tellin’??? The other day she was screamin’ like a banshee because she tried to give him a hug, and he latched onto her hair and wouldn’t let go. I felt so bad for my baby girl, just layin’ there bein’ held captive,” Jack said mournfully. “I got her free, but I swear the kid was tryin’ to arm wrestle *me* and flex his weight!”

Casey laughed along with his brothers, longing to share his own news about Bean. He couldn’t wait to be part of the fatherhood gang.

Darby pointed his fork at Casey. “So, you ready for all the life changes?”

At first, he thought his older brother was talking about Bean, but then he remembered the email he sent to his brothers regarding the foundation. “I am ready to do my service, not only to the foundation but to my country. These our tryin’ times for our nation, and we need to stand strong and united in making our voice heard.” Casey looked at them somberly. “I just can’t believe how hard it is for people to understand that.”

“Amen to that,” Darby took a swig of his beer. “It’s appallin’ because you tell yourself how hard can it be to comprehend that if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a fuckin’ duck! It’s as simple as that. Havin’ common sense and compassion should be mandatory like having a current license to drive or washin’ your ass.”

“The sad thing is, it will get worse before it gets better,” Jack said regretfully. “We just have to rise above it and press forward. To be the change we want to see for future generations to come. So, I’m on board.”

“Amen to that. Thank you guys for showin’ up. I wish it had been under better circumstances,” Casey said sincerely.

“You don’t need to thank us,” Jack assured him. “Just don’t ever think that we won’t, and remember what we said about lovin’ Sidra. She can take your love, and if she didn’t want it then she wouldn’t be here.”

“She’s pretty strong-willed,” Darby agreed. “I don’t think she’d have a problem speakin’ her mind.”

“Y’all don’t know the half of it,” Casey rolled his eyes. “Her mother is Angela Woodrow.”

His announcement was met with a “Get the fuck outta here!” and “That makes perfect fuckin’ sense!”

“So, the ‘man hater’ is gonna be your mama-in-law?” Darby burst out laughing at Casey’s sour look. “Oh, that is too good! That more than makes up for ironin’ your panties!”

“So what did she say about you marryin’ “Calamity Jane”?”  
Jack asked curiously.

“That she doesn’t approve,” Casey said coolly. “But clearly, she isn’t aware of what happens if you try to come between a Sullivan brother and his woman.”

Jack looked at his brothers and raised his bottle, and they clinked them in silent agreement.

“Hear, hear,” Darby said softly.

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Dominick awoke from another nap and panicked to see Sidra’s chair was empty. He attempted to sit up, but the pain in his ribs made him fall back against his pillows, struggling to catch his breath. “She left me...”

“Sidra would never do that, Dominick.” He turned his anguished gaze to meet Ian’s concerned one on the other side of the bed. The older man closed the newspaper he’d been reading and placed it in his lap. “How are you feeling?”

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there,” Dominick mumbled. “I’m alright. Where’d she go? Back to that asshole who did this to me?”

Ian’s eyes froze over at his words, and his own carried an Artic chill when he replied. “Dear boy, while I am sympathetic to your current condition, if you talk about Casey in that manner again, I will be forced to show you a crazy that makes his look like an all-expense paid trip to Disneyland. Understood?”

“Why are you here?” Dominick demanded, looking away from the impeccably styled older gentleman. “I’m fine now, and I’d appreciate some privacy. Please leave now.”

“I’m here because you attempted to leave the firm. While that is your prerogative, I can’t help but feel you’re doing it for all

the wrong reasons,” Ian explained, holding Dominick’s gaze. “We’ve treated you well, have given you great exposure, and your following has increased tenfold. Our services have been more than exemplary. There has been no feedback or indication from neither you nor your agent that you were unhappy with our services. So that leads me to believe that you just don’t want the world to know you’re gay, correct?”

Dominick closed his eyes at the words and fought the scalding hot shame the words filled him with. “You don’t understand... what it’s like for me.”

“No, I guess I can’t,” Ian drawled sarcastically. “After all, I’m only a middle-aged gay man who was raised in a strict Catholic family that believed homosexuality was a sin and immediately cut him off upon hearing his admission. On top of that, my partner was a black man, and back in those days, interracial relationships weren’t so accepting.”

There was a long silence before Dominick opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. “Did-did you love him?”

“From the moment I saw him,” Ian’s response was swift and assured with an enormous smile. “I never regretted being with him. Harvey had reservations about coming out at first, but I couldn’t live like that, having my happiness controlled by those who couldn’t even be happy for me.”

“Was it worth it?” Dominick was mesmerized by Ian’s confidence. The older man was out and proud, surrounded by people who loved and accepted him for who he was.

“Every single day.” Ian’s smile was full of the memories that he and his partner had shared. “My only regret was that he was gone too soon. Taken by cancer. Dominick, it’s a shame that you haven’t gotten to be the person you were meant to be, but things do happen for a reason. I believe *this* is your chance to turn your life around and step into the light. Not the celebratory spotlight, but the light that is rightfully yours.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Dominick’s frustration rang through in his words. “My father never wanted me, especially once he found out I was gay. The pics were of me and a teammate from my high school soccer team...experimenting. Nero kept tabs on me and threatened to not pay my mom’s bills. Because he knew I liked to sing, he hooked me up with a talent scout who was putting a band together, but only on the condition that I keep my sexuality a secret.” He laughed bitterly. “Nero was so adamant that being gay was a dirty sin, that eventually, I was revolted by it as well and have been fighting the urges ever since.”

“You’ve never...” Ian’s eyebrows raised curiously and Dominick turned red with embarrassment.

“Once,” he whispered with deep shame. “It happened with the soccer player, but not since then. I...interact with women who get off on anal intercourse only. My agent finds them for me.”

Ian’s eyes were sharp. “So, your agent is the same one hired by your father.”

“Yes, he keeps tabs on me for Nero,” Dominick said with self-loathing. “I wish I was like Sidra. She’s so brave and doesn’t take shit from anyone. When I discovered who she was, I asked Nero about her, and he told me to stay away. It was the only time in my life that I stood up for myself and blackmailed *him*. I told him that if he didn’t butt out, I would tell the world about him and his illegitimate children. But I couldn’t bring myself to tell her who I was.”

“And why is that, Dominick?” Ian’s voice was so full of pity that he couldn’t bear to look at him and see it reflected in his eyes as well.

“My entire life has revolved around people who didn’t want or accept me. I couldn’t bear it if she turned out to be one more,” Dominick said thickly and lay back against his pillow, blinking back tears. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to rest now.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

Sidra waited in the elegantly designed lobby and surveyed the black and white portraits of architectural monuments around the world that hung on the walls.

Her eyes drifted to the all-white furniture and crystal containers filled with sansevieria plants. With no appointment, she’d been kept waiting for fifteen minutes but had no intentions of leaving without being seen. It was six in the evening, and she was tired and hungry. Ian had been giving her suspicious looks as she made excuses, due to morning sickness, to leave Dominick’s room. All she wanted to do was get back to the hospital and make sure Dominick would be looked after before heading to Whiskey Row. Lord, she was in need of some girl time and baby cuddles!

Finally, she heard brisk footsteps behind her and turned around to watch Nero approach, looking very distinguished in a black suit and a silver, white, and black striped tie. He glanced at the



reception booth and gave a formal nod before smiling warmly at Sidra. She didn't return it and headed for the exit, indicating he should follow. From behind her, he spoke. "This is a surprise, Sidra. I never expected to see you in my place of business."

The translation of '*what the fuck are you doing here?*' was loud and clear to her. She stared at the Lincoln Memorial and tried to center herself and not show her anger. *Focus on 'Bean'*, she told herself. All the stress wouldn't be good for the baby. Sidra kept her eyes on the statue as she confessed. "That's a mutual assessment. I'm here because of my brother Dominick."

"So, he finally told you," Nero jeered. "I was wondering when he would grow a pair and confess. He was always such a sensitive, wimpy child. I didn't think he had it in him."

"Why, because you thought you'd crushed his spirit completely with your blackmail?" Sidra asked calmly. "All he ever wanted was to be loved. *You* took his mother from him, but I'm sure in your eyes, she was weak too."

"I promised her nothing, and she willingly helped me. I didn't hold a gun to her head," Nero retorted defiantly.

"No, I'm sure you didn't, but when it comes to women, your charm is just as dangerous a weapon," Sidra said disdainfully. "Your professional life seems very admirable, but the truth is, you slept your way to the top. Don't try to deny it; your children are the proof."

Nero was fuming at her words, but he was honest enough with himself to recognize the truth of them. That still didn't give her the right to speak to him that way. "Watch your mouth, *mija*. You are being very disrespectful right now, and that, I will not tolerate."

Sidra laughed caustically at his words. "*No, YOU watch your mouth*. If you think I won't turn my ass up outrageously in your place of business, then you are *seriously* mistaken! I don't give a damn who is around and watching. This is what I

want from you, so pay attention: you are going to apologize to Dominick for being so cruel. Explain to him that you are a megalomaniac, homophobic asshole of epic proportions and beg for his forgiveness and understanding.” Sidra rolled her eyes at him, now noticing the resemblance between him and Dominick. They had the same complexion, nose, and mouth and were even built similarly. “For some reason, your approval is really important to him, but I have no doubt that once you give it, he’ll realize he never needed it and be able to move on with his life.”

“*And you?*” Nero bit out, enraged at her audacity. “What do you want from me? Surely you didn’t come here just for Dominick. Or are you making sure I don’t press charges against Sullivan for assaulting me at his brother’s wedding?”

*And that’s why I don’t understand why people label me ‘The Crazy One’,* Sidra thought in exasperation. Casey had assaulted her father AND brother, which meant Lena should probably take it easy on him. Not that she was worried because her mom stayed strapped, and Casey wasn’t *that* off his fucking rocker. “I want nothing from you. I came here strictly for my brother. Take on Casey at your own foolish risk. I suggest you find the time and set up a meeting when I return to town next week. Sooner rather than later, Nero.”

Sidra watched him turn away and remembered something else Dominick had told her. “One more thing, Nero.”

He spun around to face her, dark eyes full of irritation. “What else can I do for you, Sidra?”

“Nina approached Dominick and attempted to solicit his help in breaking Casey and me up,” Sidra watched Nero’s eyes widen with disbelief. “She offered herself in exchange for his help.” Her lips twisted into a sneer at his horrified realization. “Can you imagine the catastrophe if he’d unknowingly taken her up on that offer? Or worse, that he knowingly would as a form of revenge against you?”

She watched as he opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. “It gives me no pleasure to say this, but the worlds

you fought very hard to keep separate are about to collide. There won't be anything you can do to stop it, Nero."

At one time, the sight of him gagging on a spoonful of his own medicine, as if giving an unwanted blowjob, would have brought her immense pleasure. That was the funny thing about babies. They had a way of softening you. *Dammit*. She wanted her baby to be surrounded by light and love. Not just by Casey's side, but her side too. It was a far stretch to imagine herself calling Nina up just to say, "Hey girl, heeey!", but they had to start somewhere. Sidra hoped liked hell she wouldn't regret her next words. "I know exactly how that feels, so I'm offering my assistance if you'd like it. I'll be in touch when I get back."

He called after her as she walked away. "How do you have my number?"

Sidra called over her shoulder. "I got it from my mother!"

Her town car was waiting across the street at Starbucks because she'd been unsure of how long the meeting would take. She waited patiently to cross the street with fellow pedestrians and noticed a tall, shabbily-dressed white man wading through the crowd. She tucked her purse closer to her side and kept him in her peripherals as she stared at the timer. Twelve seconds until the light changed. He was closer now, and Sidra turned to look directly at him. She was surprised to find him staring right back, and his expression bothered her. It was as if he knew her and didn't like her. His brown eyes traveled up and down her body in a way that made Sidra feel violated.

"Do you have a fucking problem?" she snapped aggressively at him, causing other pedestrians to also eye him suspiciously.

Instead of answering her question, he asked one of his own. "You're Casey Sullivan's lady, right?"

A sliver of unease ran through her as she reached into her purse for her phone. She wanted to get a picture of him and

show Casey. Suddenly she felt herself being propelled forward into oncoming traffic as people screamed and cars honked as she frantically tried to find her footing. Her hands and knees felt like they were on fire as they scraped the hot asphalt, and she glanced into the panicked driver's eyes of the car heading directly for her. Through the chaos, she could hear the man as his words rang in her ears:

*"You should be wary of the company you keep!"*

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*Whiskey Row...*

'Aunt Sideeee, wake up!' Ruby ordered as she patted Sidra's face with her small hand until her aunt opened her eyes. Satisfied that she'd gotten her way, the little girl climbed into bed with her and snuggled next to her. "It's playtime!"

Sitting up, Sidra held her close and tickled her, loving Ruby's squeals. "Who's Auntie's baby? Tell Auntie!"

"Me Auntie's baby!" Ruby screamed delightedly, and Sidra laughed at her joy.

"You got owie, Auntie Sideee?" Ruby's concerned expression was touching as she frowned at the bandages on Sidra's knees.

"I did, but they're getting better," she reassured Ruby who leaned down to kiss the gauze Band-Aids.

"Owie better?" Ruby asked hopefully, making Sidra's heart swell with love for her kind and thoughtful goddaughter. Now, the man who had pushed her made her heart pound with another feeling that was the exact opposite, and heaven help him when Casey found him. The driver of the oncoming car had barely managed to avoid her and swerved into the next lane to do so, hitting a bus in the next lane. Several witnesses

told the police what the man had done and the direction he'd run, but he was long gone.

For as long as she lived, Sidra would never forget the terror of that moment, and she relived it on Casey's face as he wildly burst into her cubicle at the emergency room.

*"Baby, are you okay? How's Bean?! Where's the fuckin' doctor at? Why isn't he in here with you???" he yelled.*

*"Ssssh! Casey, I'm fine now. I can't lie; it scared the hell outta me, but we're all good here. I need to know if you've had any client disputes?" she asked and told him what the man said, watching as his face first paled with fear and then turned red with fury.*

*"You know something about this?" Sidra asked him, grabbing his face to keep him focused. "Casey, do you know this man?"*

*"I don't know the man, per se, but there have now been two incidents that have happened...Never did I imagine something like this would happen and to YOU of all people. I'm gonna fix this, baby," he vowed as the doctor came in.*

*The one highlight of all the insanity was that they got to hear Bean's heartbeat for the first time, and Casey and Sidra turned into a happy teary-eyed mess as they listened to how strong it was.*

"Yes, lovebug, owie is better," Sidra said and hugged her goddaughter, smiling devilishly as she came into contact with the small monitor her parents had attached to Ruby's pajamas. Hmmm.

Sidra got out of bed with the little girl and whispered into the monitor. "Oh, don't play with that, baby! That's the *special* tape Auntie made with Uncle Casey last night. If this got into the wrong hands..."

She lay back down on the bed with Ruby and listened to two sets of feet running up the stairs. *Rookies*. The door to her

bedroom burst in, and Ruby's wild-eyed parents entered.

"Good morning! Lovely morning, isn't it?"

"Give it to us!" Jack demanded, holding his hand out with a ferocious scowl. "We want the tape!"

"You're awfully cranky this morning, Jackson. Why is that exactly?" Sidra reached into her robe pocket and threw the small black object at Jack.

Ruby looked at Jack with confusion and a wobbly lip. "Daddy, why mad?"

Jack looked at the object and relaxed as he passed it to his wife with a slight smile. "That's actually pretty funny, brat."

Sidra crossed her eyes at him. "That's what you get, buster. I *told* you I was doing my best."

Noelle, who was holding baby Jack, struggled to catch her breath. "Do you have any idea how it feels to carry this kid *and* run up the stairs?!"

Puzzled, she looked down at her hands and laughed at the small roll of black tape labeled with the letters 'XXX' in white. "Very clever, Sid."

"Just getting started, and the day is young," she beamed proudly. "It feels so good to be here!"

Casey appeared in the doorway, freshly shaven and carrying his shaving kit and toiletries. "Mornin', y'all. What'd I miss?"

"Your woman gettin' the best of us bright and early," Jack replied, taking baby Jack from his relieved wife. "C'mon, Ruby."

"We'll leave you to get dressed. I reserved a table for us at The Pink Champagne," Noelle said.

"That sounds like a great idea," Sidra said around a yawn. "I'll be right down."

“The hell you will,” Casey said as he closed the door behind Noelle and took off his robe.

Sidra propped herself up on one elbow and watched him approach the bed in his naked glory, his erection growing under her approving eyes, and that broad-shouldered, muscular build with tight abs being blessed by the early morning sunlight. “Is this really happening? You’re over your fear of Bean seeing and hearing you?”

“I talked with the doctor, and he assured me I’m all good. So this is really happenin’, love,” Casey replied huskily as he peeled the covers back to reveal her body clad in a navy and white striped nightshirt. “That’s the only drawback of comin’ to visit. With Ruby’s unpredictability, you have to stay dressed at all times.”

Sidra sat up, allowing Casey to peel the shirt off of her and toss it over his shoulder. She grabbed his hand and pulled him down to nestle between her legs. They exchanged slow, lazy kisses as her hands trailed down his muscular back and taut ass, lightly raking her nails across his skin just the way he liked. Goosebumps spread like wildfire over his body and she laughed into his mouth. “Gotcha.”

“Indeed you do, darlin’. The question is what are you gonna do with me?” Casey smiled, pulling back to stare down at her lovingly. Her face, still soft from sleep, radiated beauty and serenity. This was what Bean was doing to her. Opening her up to forgiveness, love, and its infinite possibilities. He still couldn’t believe how strong the baby’s heartbeat had been. When they’d finally come home from the hospital last night, he’d still expected her to rip into him over his reprehensible behavior with Dominick, and he was braced to hold his tongue and take it. Instead, she’d laid her head in his lap and told him about Dominick’s background, Nina, and her visit to Nero.

*“It was wrong of him to not inform me of his real identity, but I get it, and so should you. We all want love but fear being rejected because of our imperfections. And we all have them.”*

*There's not a one among us who is unflawed and perfect, Casey. Surely, you understand that?"*

Grudgingly he could admit she had a point and would make a strong effort with Dick-Dominick, for her and their baby. His eyes moved further down to her perfect breasts that were a little fuller. He stared hard at her abdomen, inspecting for changes, but it was too soon, and he gently rubbed her there. "You gonna answer me?"

Sidra pretended to ponder the question and laughed as he growled into her neck and reached between them to slide the head of his shaft up and down her increasingly wet opening, making her weak with pleasure. "It's simple, Case. I'm going to love you until the end of time."

Casey seized her lips in a hungry kiss as her body welcomed him in, and he drove deep inside of her just the way she liked. Her long legs wrapped around his waist as he rode her body and she fed him kisses. "*You're so fuckin' perfect, Sid. God, my pussy drives me crazy; it's so good and I can't get enough of it or YOU.*"

Sidra couldn't speak because his lips were on hers again as he stretched her arms above her head and fucked her crazily. He went so deep, that her juices were gushing out with each thrust and down between her ass cheeks as she convulsed with pleasure.

*"So wet, baby. Gimme them titties,"* he ordered, and she arched high thrusting her breasts to his lips and crying out as he bit her nipple and drew it into his mouth roughly. "Now put your face down and keep quiet unless you want Ruby to know what Uncle is doin' to Auntie."

Casey withdrew slowly, and Sidra rolled over eagerly onto her elbows and knees. First testing her band-aid knees, before signaling to him all was good. Casey bent and licked her juices running down her thighs nipping at them the closer he got to her pussy. He plunged his tongue deep into her, and Sidra screamed into the pillow, trying to shift away as she came, but



he locked his hands on her thighs and carried on pleasuring her mercilessly.

Sidra stopped fighting his oral skills and the carnal pleasure he was giving her as her body became weightless with ecstasy. Her man, for all his prim and proper exterior, was sooo damn freaky and nasty that he had her completely whipped, but it wasn't enough for her. She wanted in on the action. "*Casey, stop being such a selfish bastard! I want to taste you too!*"

"Another time. Come fuck your man." He gently lifted her and turned her around and lowered her onto his manhood. Sitting back to have her rock on top of him, his face shiny with her juices. Sidra licked his face clean, sighing with pleasure as he thrust up and she moved down. She nudged until he leaned his back against the wall and she leaned back on her arms to support her weight and they both watched her pussy rise and fall on his cock. His fingers teased her sensitized clit gently, and she gushed for him even more.

The new position increased the friction against her g-spot, and Sidra could feel the tremors of her orgasm growing within her body as she welcomed it, moving faster and faster as Casey gripped her waist tighter and tighter. He snatched her to him, pulling her lips to his and groaning his pleasure as they clung to each other and went headfirst over the edge, falling into ecstasy together.

When Sidra left the room to take a shower, Casey pulled out his phone and reviewed the text Graham had sent him.

*I have the information you requested.*

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

"I'm loving this place!" Sidra exclaimed as she sat down at the table along with Noelle and Avery at the Pink Champagne.

"Why have we never been here before?"

“Because Noelle holds us captive at her house with delicious meals,” Avery joked.

“Whateva, heffas! I thought it would be nice to chit chat without tripping over all the testosterone in the house,” Noelle said as she perused the menu. “It’s a great spot to hang out, and when you move here, Sidra, this will become the official happy hour spot. Here comes the owner Pearl Mignon. You’ll like her; she’s a really nice lady.”

They watched the older pretty lady approach their table with a welcoming smile as a waiter followed behind with a full tray. “Bonjour, ladies! How are you doing today?”

“Bonjour!” the women chorused, and then Noelle introduced them to one another. “Pearl, these stools are fabulous! Did *Americana Traditions* design them?”

A flicker of sadness crossed Pearl’s face before she smiled. “Yes, Guy created them. I think you’ll enjoy the special menu I’ve created for you. There’s a summer sangria with strawberries and cantaloupe. We have marinated green olives and cheese crostinis, clams with prosciutto, Moorish pork skewers, paella, and salt cod fritters with aioli.”

As Noelle and Avery exclaimed over the numerous dishes set before them on the table, Sidra was fighting a battle with her stomach. It heaved traitorously as the spices from the marinated olives and clams assaulted her nose. Carefully, she pushed her chair back and slowly stood up. “Excuse me one second. I have to go to the restroom.”

She paced her walk, breathing only through her nose as she went. *This was a really bad idea*, she thought as she finally made it into the ladies’ room. Thank goodness it was empty. Sidra ran into a stall and relieved her stomach. When she was done, she reapplied her makeup and rinsed her mouth out. When she exited the bathroom, Pearl was waiting for her with a sympathetic smile and a tall glass that she held out to her.

“I created a ginger-lemon spritzer for you,” she said cheerfully and added, when Sidra shook her head, “Don’t worry, it’s non-alcoholic and will hold your stomach down. I’ll keep them coming to the table.”

Sidra drank thirstily from the glass, relieved that the cool, delicious beverage was doing what Pearl promised. “You are a lifesaver! Was I that obvious?”

“Just a little bit,” Pearl admitted. “I don’t think your friends caught on, but I was watching you a little more closely.”

“And why is that?” Sidra asked suspiciously as Pearl laughed.

“It’s just that Guiles talks about his friends a lot, and I was trying to picture you selling real estate,” she confessed

“Oh, honey, that’s *not* why he calls me that,” Sidra said with a friendly smile and took another sip of her drink as she eyed the older woman speculatively. “So, you and *Guiles*, huh?”

She watched with fascination as Pearl blushed a thousand shades of red at the question. *Well daaayum*. Now, who would have thought Pippy was laying pipe down that good? Not Sidra that was for sure. “*I see*. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to my friends. Thank you for the drink, Pearl.”

Sidra went back to the table and sat down, giving her friends a big smile. She could get through this meal as long as she didn’t look at the clams. Carefully, she picked up a crostini and nibbled on it. “So, what are we talking about?”

“D.J.’s birthday is coming up, and Max has invited him to the farm,” Avery explained.

“That sounds great. We got him the telescope he asked for,” Sidra said and reached into her purse for her phone. “Listen to this; I created it for his astronomy time. I call it “Galileo’s Groove”. I think he’ll really like it.”

They bobbed their heads to the smooth beats laced with techno base until it ended, and then she switched to another one. “And

this playlist is called “Adventures in Ruby Land” and this last one’s “A Gentle Giant’s Lullabies.”

“Sid, these are amazing! How long have you been working on them?” Noelle asked excitedly then narrowed her eyes. “And who exactly is the ‘Gentle Giant’?”

“You seriously have to ask that?” Sidra raised her eyebrows at her. “I can smell the Icy Hot mixed in with the perfume on your arms from your adventure up the stairs earlier today.”

“Leave my baby alone, bish!” Noelle reached over and tugged on one of her curls. “When are you putting the color back in your hair? I miss it.”

“Oh, not for a while. It was time for a change,” Sidra replied noncommittally. “I’ve been working on the music in my spare time. The kids are inspiring me in ways I never thought possible. We’ve come so far from our New York days. I remember when it was *everything* to be in a club spinning music and screaming ‘Fuck That!’ at the top of my lungs along to a Kid Cudi song.”

“Or that awful time when I was in denial about Pierce,” Avery agreed. “I still can’t believe that I thought he was everything I ever wanted. He was in such denial about who he was, that he was willing to go through with that farce to prove a point and make his mother happy.”

“What if I was still at home being smothered by Alicia? No Ruby or baby Jack makes for a bleak future,” Noelle said as she looked at her friends. “Jack tells me every day how blessed he is to have met me, and I feel like it’s the other way around.”

“We *all* are lucky that the two of you met and decided to take it one step further,” Sidra said, holding up her glass. “Can I get a witness?”

“Amen,” they chorused, clinking glasses.

“And now, with you and Casey becoming parents and tying the knot, the future has never looked brighter,” Avery chimed in with a sly smile at Sidra.

“What-who-I’m not pregnant!” The protest was feeble and reeked of falseness, even to her ears.

“Then here, have a clam,” Noelle offered as she shoved the plate under Sidra’s nose and watched with glee as her friend turned green. “Yup, positively green and your -ah-cleavage...”

Sidra jerked back from the offending plate and crossed her arms defensively. “What about it?”

Avery popped an olive in her mouth and spoke delicately. “Well, that’s just it...you *now* have one.”

Sidra sucked her teeth at them as they high-fived each other and laughed shamelessly. “The both of you are giving my middle finger all kinds of life! Do not open your big mouths until I inform Casey that you know. We wanted to wait until after our doctor’s appointment this week.”

“Oh, another baby! I can’t wait to spoil him or her. I’m going to save all of the kids’ things for you,” Noelle said.

“Congratulations!”

“But I thought Darby was getting all of baby Jack’s hand-me-downs?” Sidra cracked.

“Yes, congratulations, and you’re terrible,” Avery scolded.

“How are you feeling?”

Sidra placed her hand on her tummy. “Real talk? I’m so happy and scared at the same time, I don’t even know what to do or say! I feel so protective of ‘Bean’ and Casey... I just want everything to be just perfect! I’m confused about Nero because he’s such a douchebag that I want to stay away, but he’s created a shit storm that he needs help dealing with. I feel so protective of Dominick but want to annihilate Nina. I feel like my emotions are cue balls that are just scattered all over a table.”

“So, Nina really wanted Dominick to be her co-conspirator to break you and Casey up? That child needs Jesus in the worst way,” Avery scowled.

“I’m more concerned about Dominick,” Noelle said quietly.  
“Would he ever have said anything to you? I don’t like how he could smile up in your face and know there was so much more than what meets the eye. I know you want to believe the best, hell we all do but are you okay with his deceit?”

*“Damn, Noelle! Can I live?!”* Sheesh, here it goes! I liked Dominick before I found out everything, and given his history, I understand his wariness. Do I condone it? *No. I. Do. Not.* But I get it. You don’t because no one has ever rejected you on the levels that we were. But I also think knowing what Casey is capable of is an added incentive. I still have to tell Lena about everything as well, but in the end, I want us all to find happiness or come as close as we can to it. My mother may not approve of my relationship with Casey, but that’s okay because it’s not her choice to make,” Sidra finished with a huff. “I’ll always choose Casey.”

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“Are you sure you know what you’re doing, boo?” Sidra asked doubtfully as she watched Casey row the small boat effortlessly through the lake.

“Would you like to row instead?” Casey retorted.

“And miss out on you flexin’ those muscles? No thank you,” Sidra said as she leaned over and gave him a peck on his lips.

“Did you miss me today?”

“I always miss you, sugar. How was it with the girls?” Casey pulled the oars into the boat.

“It was great, but they figured out I was pregnant,” Sidra admitted sheepishly as she trailed her fingers in the water.

“Apparently, my having a cleavage was a big giveaway.”

Casey’s eyes roamed over her. In the setting sun, her dark skin, so rich and sumptuous, was set off by the cobalt blue off-shoulder eyelet dress. Her curls sparkled thanks to her

playtime with Ruby and some tubes of glitter. She was flawless and as always, he was filled with a sense of pride that she was *his* woman. “I don’t think it’s too noticeable. So, this means we can tell people? You better say yes because it’s *killin’* me to hold it in.”

She flicked water at him mischievously and blew him a kiss. “Yes, we can tell people. Want to hear something I made?”

“Lay it on me, baby,” Casey urged, and Sidra eagerly took her phone out. Soon the quiet air was filled with classical music that was soon joined by slow-grooving rhythm and blues with bits of joyous children’s laughter. The three components should have sounded odd, but instead, it created a lush melody that Casey found himself enchanted by. The song ended and another began, each song richer and more complex than the last, and when the last song ended, he was filled with poignant sadness and longing for more. Breathlessly, he asked, “*What was that? It was fuckin’ awesome, baby! Play it again!*”

Sidra flushed with pleasure as a shy smile crept across her face. “Do you really like it? I call it ‘Bean’s Magic’. It’s how I feel about the baby. I never knew I could love on a level like this, you know? I had to put it into music.”

“‘Bean’s Magic’...I love it,” Casey said reverently with tears in his eyes. “Our baby is gonna have the best mama.”

“*And daddy.*” Sidra glanced around with concern. “Babe, the sun is going down and we should probably get out of here. Didn’t you see ‘Lake Placid’ or any ‘Friday The Thirteenth’ movies?”

“Nah, this is perfect,” Casey said, waving her concerns off as he looked around. “I always come here and do my best thinkin’. This is where I decided which college I would go to. What I would major in. Where to open my practice...I’ve never made a bad life-changing decision here.” Casey pulled his phone out and opened his playlist and selected SafetySuit’s “Never Stop” before shifting carefully and managed to kneel

down in the boat in front of her as the song started. “That’s why I know that this is why I want to do this here.”

*This is my love song to you  
Let every woman know I’m yours  
So you can fall asleep each night, babe  
And know I’m dreaming of you more*

*You’re always hoping that we make it  
You always want to keep my gaze  
Well you’re the only one I see  
And that’s the one thing that won’t change*

Sidra was filled with joyous disbelief as Casey pulled a small velvet box out of his pocket and opened it, revealing the champagne halo diamond set in a gold twisted pave band. The stunning design of the ring left her breathless, and she had to force herself to concentrate on his words.

“Do you remember the first time we saw each other, and I was completely awful to you?” Casey asked in a tight voice that held a faint tremor. Sidra nodded wordlessly. “I still remember that day like it was yesterday and every encounter with you after that. Especially when you said my black suit matched my soul.”

*And with this love song to you  
It’s not a momentary phase  
You are my life, I don’t deserve you  
But you love me just the same  
And as the mirror says we’re older  
I want to look the other way  
You are my life, my love, my only  
And that’s the one thing that won’t change*

Sidra released a peal of laughter as she wiped tears from her eyes as Casey continued.

*“I’d never met anyone like you. So beautiful, untamable, and full of life and energy that you turned my life upside down. People are automatically drawn to you, and it made me so jealous because I wanted you for myself. Every laugh, smile, and touch you shared with someone else, I wanted to snatch back for myself. When you leave a room, it’s like someone*



turned out the lights and I'm left in darkness until you come back. I never thought I had a chance with you, that someone like *you* would even want someone like *me*," Casey's voice matched his tender touch as he wiped the tears from her face.

"Stop selling yourself short, Sullivan! I was just flitting through life, grinding and partying until you came along. In you, I found a steady anchor of love and kindness. I remember when you first came to visit me in New York, you yelled at me about my atrocious eating habits. After you left, I was so confused as to why you would care about something so dumb," Sidra said tearfully. "You cared about my well-being instead of just getting in my panties, and that blew my mind."

"Oh, I cared about that too," Casey laughed when she pinched him but caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm.

*You still get my heart racing*  
*You still get my heart racing*  
*You still get my heart racing*  
*You still get my heart racing*  
*For you*

"Darlin', you are the love of my life and the bright star that is my future. You challenge me, annoy me, and love me like no one else can. You set my soul on fire, and in that fire is where I am most at peace and feel alive." It was getting harder to speak because he was getting so emotional, but Casey persevered in a slightly wobbly voice. "My last thought when we go to bed is that I can't believe you're mine, and the first thought in the morning is that I can't wait to see your face. I'm not a perfect man, but I know I'm perfect for you as you are for me. My love for you knows no bounds, and I promise to be the best husband and father to you and Bean if you'll have me. Sidra Jane, love of my life, would you do me the honor of becomin' Mrs. Casey Sullivan?"

"*HELL YES!*" she shouted ecstatically. "*Always yes to you!*"

Casey slipped the ring on her finger, and they marveled at how perfectly it fit.

"So now you're stuck with me no matter what," Sidra proclaimed, doing a happy shimmer and rocking the boat

precariously. “That means I can relax my maintenance now.”

“Well hold on now,” Casey cautioned as he eyed her suspiciously. “What exactly do you mean by ‘relax the maintenance’?”

“I mean that I’m going to let my toenails grow so long that I’ll be able to sit in a tree and catch your dinner in the water,” Sidra teased him.

“The hell you will!” Casey growled as he pulled her to him for a kiss.

“Damn, Kat does excellent work,” Sidra said breathlessly when they broke apart and she admired the way the ring sparkled in the disappearing sunlight.

“Yes, she does. I didn’t think it would be ready in time for this visit. I’m still wonderin’ how she pulled it off,” Casey shook his head. “I should have known not to bet against a Romankov.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

Kat watched her childhood friend Magnus inhale a third helping of spaghetti carbonara. The slurping sounds he was making were the only noises in the Romankovs’ formal dining room. She looked to her left at her father who was wearing his usual impassive expression and then across at Holt’s deliberately bland one. With a sigh, he reached over and took the plate from Magnus.

“Hey! I wasna finished!” Magnus’s indignant cry filled the room.

“Yeah, you were, and the sight of the way you eat was makin’ me sick,” Holt said disgustedly. “Pigs at a trough are more dignified than you. Now, I want you to tell me the story again.”

“I already told you!” Magnus retorted. “I was being blackmailed to obtain information on Mrs. Romankov’s clients. They kidnapped my girlfriend Jackie and threatened to kill her if I didn’t cooperate. I had to get a message to Kat, so I hacked into her emails under the guise of ruining her business, and she knew it was me!”

Kat returned Magnus’s happy smile, and Holt growled softly, causing the younger man’s smile to disappear. She glowered at Holt who bared his teeth at her in a semblance of a smile. “Magnus has OCD tendencies that won’t allow him to deviate from certain patterns even if he tried,” Kat explained to Holt and Alexei. “I once teased him about all his letters being written in the same formation and he said-”

“Well, at least you’ll always know it’s me!” Magnus finished cheerfully. “And brilliant girl that she is, Kat figured it out!”

“Clever girl,” Alexei murmured to his daughter who’d unknowingly helped them in their search. He turned to Magnus. “You’re sure that you were able to undo the damage you did? They have nothing?”

“Nothing. They have hackers, but they’re not like me. I set up viruses that would destroy their system if they attempt to retrieve anything,” Magnus assured him. “Just as you asked, I warned them that if a hair was harmed on Jackie’s head, they wouldn’t be able to even access a Commodore 64 without me destroying it.”

“That’s good to know.” Alexei steepled his fingers. “Often times, we are blinded by what we want to see instead of what is really there. We’re infatuated by the illusion they create. Do you understand that?”

Kat’s eyes were held captive by Holt’s. She wanted to look away but get lost in the turbulent blue waters at the same time. The truth of her father’s words resonated deeply with the doubts she was already having about him. She was no dummy and knew that his shit was on a whole other level that she wasn’t prepared for if her father had trusted him to bring back Magnus.

“I believe I do, Alexei,” Magnus said cautiously. “Why are you saying this to me?”

With a look of regret, Alexei reached for his briefcase next to his chair and placed it on the table in front of him. He opened it, withdrew a file, and stood up. He walked around the table to place it in front of Magnus before walking back and taking his seat.

Kat watched Magnus open the folder, and he blanched as he stuttered, “S-S-Surely there...m-must be a mistake! This is *not* Jackie! She would never wear this much makeup or dress this *provocatively*! It’s a bloody lie!”

“For your sake, I wish it were,” Alexei replied grimly.

“Jacqueline Tusseau, age twenty-six. Born to a Scottish mother and French father. The man you saw her in bed with is her boyfriend Douglas McNall. He’s part of a small ruthless Scottish gang run by his cousin Ermines McNall, who is looking to make a name for himself. This particular gang is extremely ambitious and associates with three syndicates that I am familiar with. Douglas and Jacqueline have been extremely hot and heavy for the last three years. She wasn’t kidnapped, Magnus. You were her mark. She found you, stalked you, and reeled you in to do the gang’s dirty work.”

“Those are lies,” Magnus said brokenly, and Kat shot her father a furious look that he ignored.

“For such an intelligent man, you were easily able to fall victim to her plot, but that is our weakness as men I suppose,” Alexei conceded, raising his eyes to the ceiling. “And now, I will make you an offer that you cannot refuse. Come work for me, and with my protection, you will be able to exact your revenge against those who trespassed against you.”

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Upstairs, Vivienne stared up at the starry sky from a guest room balcony. Below her, she could hear the small army of men patrolling the grounds with those huge bear dogs. With the beautiful scenery and heavy presence of security, she should have felt secure and at peace, but instead, her mind was raging with the secret she'd kept all these years. For so long, she'd tried to contain it, but it was now unavoidable. The blackmailer was now going after her business, but it wasn't just hers. It was Jackie and Ian's business as well. She couldn't let them be collateral damage for a bad decision that had altered all of their lives.

"What a fucking mess I've created," she spoke aloud with self-loathing.

"Indeed it is," Alexei concurred from behind her, and slowly she turned to face him.

Quietly, he closed the bedroom door. "May I ask why your things are in *this* room if I specifically ordered them to be placed in *my* room?"

"I'm sorry, Lex, but it just felt very *surreal* to me," Vivienne said carefully, watching his blue eyes darken with irritation as he approached her. "I haven't set foot in this house in twenty-four years-"

"And whose fault is that?" Alexei shot back at her angrily, cutting off her explanation and infuriating her. "You left me, Vivi! Not the other way around. That was your choice to walk out those doors. Now, you're back in my bed where you belong, and that is where you will stay! When I give an order, I expect it to be obeyed. Do you understand me?!"

"And THAT is what I don't miss! *Your high-handedness!* You may not believe this, but for twenty-four years, I managed to eat my vegetables, tie my shoes, look both ways before crossing the damn street, *and* keep a human being alive without your assistance!" Vivienne snarled, jabbing her fingernail into his chest.

Alexei glowered into her furious face, torn between wanting to kiss her and throttle her and couldn't help himself. He bent and scooped her over his shoulder and smacked her ass hard. His anger at his beautifully stubborn wife receded slightly with her outraged shriek as her fists pummeled his back viciously. Amusement growing at her predicament, Alexei rewarded her with another hard smack and winced as he felt her teeth on his back through his dress shirt. He headed for the door and threw it open, intent on showing her exactly where she belonged.

“Put me down, you bastard!” Vivienne screamed loud enough to wake the dead as her soon to be ex-husband chuckled. *“You are so dead, Romankov! I am going to smother you while you sleep!!”*

Alexei chuckled and awarded her with another stinging smack that caused her to wiggle frantically as her pointed heels stabbed his abdomen and they stopped at the stairway landing. “Watch it, Vivi. My men don't take well to threats of my demise.”

The blood was rushing to her head, making her very dizzy. *“I promise to God, Alexei, that I'm going to bite IT off first chance I get-”*

“OH. MY. GOD. Did you really just say that, Mama?!” Kat's words echoed throughout the foyer, and Vivienne tried to raise her head as Alexei paused for her to answer their daughter. The effort made her dizzy, but she could make out her daughter and-

“Oh, hi, Kat! I didn't see you standing there...and Holton... and of course Magnus,” she finished weakly. “Lovely evening, isn't it?”

Holt grinned at the sight of the normally impeccably-groomed Vivienne Romankov hanging upside down from her husband's shoulder. “It's certainly one for the history books, ma'am. Enjoy your night.”

Vivienne gritted her teeth at his teasing and jabbed Alexei harder with her shoe, and he grunted in response. *SMACK!*

And down the hall, they continued. *“I cannot believe you did that! What are you doing?!”*

Alexei didn't answer as he reached under her skirt and ripped her panties off. Trailing his finger against her damp puffy nether lips and chuckled. “Well, look who's wet. Shut up, Vivi. I am over your stubbornness, so now it is time for your punishment.”

They reached his room, and he opened the door and slammed it shut with his foot. Alexei quickly undid his pants and kicked his shoes and socks off as he tossed her on the bed.

Vivienne was stunned from the lack of blood circulation, and Alexei took advantage of it. He lay down on the bed and grabbed her by the waist, positioning her pussy above his hungry mouth as he felt her cool breath on his engorged manhood. The sight of her, opened up for him, aroused him painfully, and he could feel himself dripping as he treated her to a long leisurely lick of his tongue. She moaned in ecstasy as her tongue touched his swollen head and lapped up his precum. Alexei groaned with pleasure as he encouraged her. *“So, bite me, Vivi! Do your worst.”*

As her mouth was now full, Vivienne didn't bother responding to his taunt.

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Kat watched in shock as her father strolled off with her mother slung over his shoulder like a caveman. “Holy shit! I hope he's still alive in the morning.”

“She could very well be the death of him,” Holt said softly next to her. “But what a way to go.”

“She's magnificent!” Magnus said with awe. “Your mum's a real MILF, eh?”

Suddenly, he was squeaking like a mouse as Holt lifted him into the air with one hand, choking the life out of him. “If you

ever feel inclined to say somethin' that stupid and disrespectful about Ms. Vivienne again, I suggest you think about me and what I can do, not just with one hand, but my ax as well. Am I clear?"

"Bacarat...crystal...clear," he gasped as Holt suddenly released him and he hit the tile floor with a painful thud, gasping for air.

"I believe you had too much to drink at dinner, Magnus," Kat informed him distastefully. "I think it would be best if you went to your room and slept it off."

"Erm-yes, that seems like a good idea," he said feebly as he left. "My apologies."

Holt indicated to the guard by the front door that he should follow along and watch Magnus. Kat was impressed that the burly Russian did so without question.

Holt grabbed her hand in his, and Kat felt fissions of pleasure at his touch. "Come take a ride with me."

He didn't wait for her to answer as he steered them towards the front door.

Once inside his truck, they didn't speak but let Sam Hunt do all the talking as his deep voice crooned "Speakers".

*I softly kiss your neck and slowly whisper  
You breathe in 'cause it feels cold where my lips were  
T-shirt for a pillow, music up real low, creeping through the window  
I can feel the bass line in the bed liner, and your heart on mine,  
Tryin' to jump up out of your chest.*

*Baby, you're now on fire, girl you're on fire  
Out in the dark, wrapped up in the stars  
So right, girl I'm so high*

"So what happens now?" Kat asked listlessly. She knew the men were involved in something heavy if Magnus was a necessity and it had to do with her mother. There was a "don't ask, but even if you do we're not saying" policy in effect. They were treating her like a child again and she *hated* it.



“Now we do what we do best.” Holt’s cryptic answer irked her to no end. *What did that even mean?* Nothing else was said for the moment and they just enjoyed the music.

*You and me, wild and free  
Way out in the woods nobody for miles  
Love in the back of the truck with the tailgate down  
Just us and the speakers on  
Love in the back of the truck with the tailgate down  
Just us and the speakers on*

“Where are we going?” Kat finally asked looking at him in the shadows.

“You’ll see,” was Holt’s ambiguous reply as he continued to drive, and soon they were parked by the lake. Kat hopped out as Holt pulled a blanket from the bed of his truck and a small picnic basket and cooler, along with two large sitting pillows. She watched as he laid the blanket in the bed of the truck and set the basket and cooler to the side. Then he lifted Kat up and set her inside where she sat down with her legs tucked underneath her as he sat down across from her.

Holt watched Katerina, still in disbelief that he was finally able to get her alone. He’d tried for weeks and had decided if he wasn’t able to accomplish it tonight, that he would kidnap her. “You wanna tell me what’s got you tryin’ to run from me?”

Kat stared up at the sky as she contemplated her answer. “I don’t know you, and that makes me very nervous. I know how I’ve felt about you forever, but that you also lead a double life.”

Holt tensed at her words, wishing like hell he could deny them. “I’m the same man that I always was, Kat.”

“No, you’re not! I saw you in Sweden,” she confessed. “You were suited up and lookin’ so fine that I was like...anyways, you did not look, move, or act like *my* Holton. I could smell the money oozing off you from across the street and through my car window!”

“Kiss me, Kat,” Holt urged as he grabbed her hand and tugged her towards him as she crawled between his legs. “Kiss me, darlin’, and then tell me how different I now am.”

Kat stroked his beard, staring into his eyes as she lowered her lips to meet his firm, warm mouth. His tongue licked her chin, and she covered his lips with hers. Holt held her close to him as he stroked the nape of her neck, and she climbed into his lap, seeking more of the taste she craved. Holt breathed new life into her, fanning the flames of her banking desire as she settled atop his manhood. Her fingers yanked on his ponytail, willing him to submit to her demanding kiss, and he did so, allowing her to explore his mouth to her heart’s content as he fought the urge to pull her under him and take her.

Kat released his lips, crying out softly when Holt rubbed his beard against her cleavage, licking the revealed swells of her aching breasts as her V-neck blouse shifted. She tugged his hair free of the leather tie and grabbed handfuls of it as his tongue trailed up the column of her throat and he gently sucked her accelerated pulse. Heaven help her, it felt soooo good, and she ground down harder on his manhood, desperately wishing the layers of their clothes would disappear.

“I’m still the same man that’s crazy about you, darlin’,” he promised roughly as he cupped her ass and caressed it, making her pulse skitter. “*Only YOU have the power to drive me this crazy, Kat.*”

She traced his ear with her tongue, enjoying the growl rumbling through his big body and bit his lobe as he surged upwards. *“But I need more, Holton.”*

Holt released her bum to grasp her face in his so she could see how serious he was. “Then marry me, Katerina.”

“Wha-What did you say?” Kat asked with confusion. “I must be hearing things because it sounded like you said-”

“To marry me? That’s exactly what I said, darlin’,” Holt said as he drew her face down for a tender kiss. “And that’s exactly what I meant.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

Jimmy Torrance was in a good mood as he walked to his room. Rich Lady had made good on her promise of four hundred dollars for the work he’d done, and he couldn’t wait to get to the racetrack to spend it. Maybe he’d splurge and throw in a hooker or two. *Yeah, that’s what he’d do.*

When he’d first approached the lady, asking for change, he had no idea how big the “change” would be. She’d taken him to Applebee’s and allowed him to gorge himself on whatever he wanted, even insisting that he get some items to go. Then she’d checked him into a motel that was in his mind, high living and a huge step up from being homeless. But the room was only good until the job was carried out.

At thirty-five, he'd lost everything— his business and his wife and kids due to his gambling problem. Carol, his ex, divorced him and took the kids across the country to ensure he wouldn't taint them. *Fucking cunt*. That drove him to drink on top of all his other issues. Rich Lady told him he could have everything back if he played his cards right. All he had to do was help her teach some people a few lessons.

It wasn't a hard thing for Jimmy to do because he'd always felt people with money looked down on him, except for Rich lady. No, Rich Lady *respected* him. She'd even bought him a cell phone and a beat-up car that looked like shit but would keep him warm during the winter. All he had to do was help her with a minor problem with her husband and his mistress. So every day, he watched the pair leave the swanky condos and depart in separate vehicles. He'd already broken the man's car window and slashed his tire. Tomorrow, he planned on setting whichever car he drove on fire.

*“Jimmy, I trust you to use your good judgment in getting rid of HER.”*

Yeah, she made him feel like someone again by giving him a responsibility that she'd entrusted to no one else. And when he saw the uppity-looking black bitch standing on the sidewalk looking like she owned the whole block, he knew this was the opportunity he'd been waiting for. *How dare the slut steal Rich Lady's husband?!* He would get her back for the pain she caused his boss. He'd made his move, but the bitch was uninjured.

Disappointed, he confessed his failure to Rich Lady, but she quickly assured him that there would be other opportunities to complete his mission, and she believed he could do it. That made Jimmy feel good. No one had ever looked at him with the confidence Rich Lady did. *Yeah, his luck was about to*

*change he could feel it*, he thought with a grin as he inserted his key into the lock. And it did as soon as he closed the door and the heavy, metal link chain circled his neck painfully.

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Jimmy tried to scream as the liquid burn of the alcohol being poured on him stung his cuts and scrapes, but the chain around his neck proved to be an effective gag, as it tightened and his voice became a garbled, pain-filled grunt. He lifted his hands to weakly pry at the chain, but he faltered, crying out softly as he was reminded that four of his fingers were broken when the man ground the heel of his dress shoe on them as he tried to crawl away. His face and abdomen throbbed from being punched repeatedly with the linked metal, and the pain was so unbearable that he'd passed out.

“Come on, Jimmy Boy. I need you to focus now.” The man’s southern accent was coaxing and deceptively friendly as he tossed the bottle of Jack Daniel’s aside. In fact, Jimmy liked to think they could have been friends at one time. That the man was someone that would have come to the auto repair shop and shot the shit with him as he worked on his Jaguar or Mustang classic— if Jimmy hadn’t made the mistake of fucking with him and putting his hands on his woman.

He tried to focus on the man’s face as he stood over him holding the chain, but it was blurry due to his rapidly swelling eyes. Jimmy flinched as the man shoved his face closer and he was able to see the rage etched into every line of it. He tried to speak, but his words were so slurred that he had to spit bloodied saliva out along with a tooth. “*Weave lone! Ave done ‘nough?!’*”

For his efforts, he received a sharp kick to his ribs, and the excruciatingly jarring pain was enough to make Jimmy throw up. The chain tightened once again, only allowing a thin

stream to trickle out at a time. And he had no choice but to swallow it, almost choking on his own vomit as he fought for air. He started to cry, wishing the torture would end, but the man was unsympathetic. *“I haven’t done nearly enough, you sonofabitch! And I’m just getting started. My woman could have died along with our baby! Now, tell me who put you up to it! I want a name!”*

“Know no name! Know no name!” Jimmy tried to curl up and protect himself, but his ribs were on fire as he prayed for mercy from the kicks to his legs and shoulders. *Please God, get this fucking monster off of me!!!*

“Are you tellin’ me you don’t know the name, or you’re just not gonna give it?” the man asked calmly, not even out of breath from the beat down he was distributing. Jimmy cried and cried as the chain dug into his skin and his airway was constricted as he tried once more to speak.

“Spanic lay! Lack air! Short!” he gurgled, motioning to his chin for length and the beating stopped. He closed his eyes in agonized relief for the reprieve.

“Is this the lady?” the man asked tersely, shoving a cell phone in his face. Jimmy opened his eyes and nodded frantically at the picture of the Rich BITCH who’d set him up. He now wished he’d never set eyes on her.

“Yesss! Tha ‘er!” he sighed with relief, too weak to offer any more assistance to save himself. Unfortunately, it was short-lived as the man made another call, and the words he calmly spoke filled Jimmy with resigned dread. He’d watched enough action thrillers to know what they meant

“I need a clean-up crew. *NOW!*” The man gave the motel’s address and room number before hanging up. He turned back to Jimmy with a pleasant smile that didn’t thaw the ice in his eyes as he pulled a plastic bag from his pocket and placed it over Jimmy’s head. “This is for attempting to end *my* life because that’s what you would have done if she’d died.”

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“Hey, Mom! What are you doing here???” Sidra exclaimed happily as she walked into Dominick’s living room and saw her mother, wearing an apron and holding a spatula, talking to her brother. They were all going to ride together to see Nero at his office this afternoon, but first, she was going to show him all of the music files she’d coded before Casey’s rampage.

“Well, what the hell does it look like I’m doing, Sidra Jane?” her mother sassed as she gave her daughter a hug and kiss on the cheek. “I’m making Nicky some breakfast! Want some sausage and eggs? There’s plenty. I’m feeding the guards as well.”

Sidra turned to a happy Dominick with a raised eyebrow. “*Nicky*? Since when do you make *Nicky* breakfast?”

Dominick turned flaming red with embarrassment at her sarcasm as Lena waved her hand dismissively at her daughter. “Chile, please! As soon as I got your message I hightailed it down here, and Ian was kind enough to grant me access. He’s in the kitchen making coffee. After everything Nicky has been through, I couldn’t leave the poor baby alone. He was in severe need of mothering! Especially after the heathen you hooked up with beat him up.” Lena gave Dominick an adoring smile before turning back to glare at her daughter. Her eyes looked her daughter up and down before she screeched indignantly, “SIDRA JANE BARTON, WHAT THE HELL IS THAT ON YOUR FINGER?!”

Her voice brought Ian running, and the second surprise of the day, Lucky, right on his heels! Sidra bypassed Ian and threw herself into Lucky’s arms where he crushed her to him with a bear hug. “*LUCKY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!*”

“Very nice to see you, Sidra?” Ian remarked dryly from behind her.

“DO NOT IGNORE ME, YOUNG LADY,” Lena warned tapping her shoulder.

“It’s a fat-ass ring!” Dominick exclaimed.

“Hey, kid! You’re looking good as always,” Lucky said, sidestepping her question.

Sidra gave him a suspicious look as she turned to Ian and hugged him as well. “My bad, Gandalf. How are you?”

“I’m doing very well, brat. Has Lena gotten around to telling you that she’s my newest client?” Ian asked smoothly, winking at Sidra to let her know he was trying to divert her mother’s attention. “We’re working on creating a new image for her. One that allows her to marry Lucky, her secret boyfriend of the last century, without getting stoned by her devoted anti-male female following.”

“WHAT?!” Sidra shrieked, swiveling to Lucky and punching him hard in the arm. “*You and my mother?!?*”

Now, it was Lucky and Lena’s turn to be embarrassed as Sidra glared at them disapprovingly. She pointed her finger at her mother. “So, *Ms. Man Hater*, what do you have to say for yourself??? And yes, it’s an engagement ring. Casey asked me to marry him, and I said yes.”

Dominick came forward and gave Sidra a hug.

“Congratulations, Sidra. I know he’ll do right by you. Hopefully, in time, things will be all good between him and me.”

“Thanks, Dom! I know Casey would like that as well,” Sidra said sweetly as she linked arms with him and turned back to address Lucky and Lena. “I’m waiting...”

Lucky nudged Lena. “This one’s all you. I wanted to come clean years ago and get married.”

“You’re not helping, Lucky!” Lena groused with a pout.

“How about we give them some time alone?” Ian suggested, taking the spatula from Lena’s death grip. “You’ll be fine, Tiger. Sit down with your cub while we finish breakfast.”



The men left, and Sidra motioned for her mother to have a seat on the sofa as she sat on the loveseat across from her.

Awkward silence ensued as Sidra stared at her mother with accusing eyes. “What the hell is going on here, Lena? You’ve got women all around the world talking shit about their men, ready to go to war for you, and you’ve had a man the entire time??? You’ve made a mockery of your own relationship! And what about Casey?” Sidra mimicked her mother’s voice perfectly. “*Baby, don’t marry him! You deserve better! Men ain’t shit!*”

“Just because I was wrong about one thing doesn’t mean I am about the other! Look what Casey did to Dominick! If he’s capable of violence like that, then he certainly doesn’t need to be around my baby!” Lena said self-righteously.

“Mom, if someone hadn’t interfered at Avery’s wedding, I would have done worse to Nina for trying to lie on my man, so you can miss me with that shit, alright?” Sidra returned seriously. “Let’s not forget who threw tantrums loud enough for the entire block to hear every single time Nero left. You embarrassed and humiliated me to no end growing up. Did you even know the neighborhood kids called me “Care Package” because of the way you used to set me out on the stoop? To argue and plead for a man to love us? Don’t forget the lectures that you gave me about trying to be more appealing so he’d stay, as if just being myself wasn’t enough?! Or how about the way I had to distract the family and show out, making my cousin dislike me whenever we arrived so you could pull yourself together just to function? *Do you remember any of these things?!*”

Ashamed at her daughter’s words, Lena looked down at her hands clasped tightly in her lap. “I understand it was hard for you-”

“*Hard for me?! You made it damn near impossible for me to love, let alone, like you!*” Sidra cried angrily. “My man has never made me feel that way! I’ve never had to act like a

fucking show pony for him to love me or doubt that I was enough! And yet you sit up here and try to disrespect him at every turn. *Our shit's not perfect, but it's ours! Not yours. Ours.* I'm going to marry him and have his babies. I hope you can find a way to be a part of our happiness, but I certainly will not hold my breath waiting."

Sidra stood up and walked over to her mother who was quietly wiping away her tears. She leaned down and kissed her mother's forehead. "Please think about what I've said. I'm going to see if they need any help in the kitchen. We've got a big day ahead of us. When dealing with Nero, you can't come unprepared."

She'd almost reached the kitchen door when Lena's wobbly voice reached her. "I'm on board, Sidra. Your happiness really does mean everything to me. And I'm going to tell the truth about my branding."

Sidra faced her mother with a smile. "Well, that was fast!"

"Hell, life is too short to hold on to anger, especially when Lucky makes me so happy." Lena tossed her braids over her shoulder confidently as she walked up to her daughter and grabbed her left hand. "Good God, that *is* a fat ass rock! Your man did good, babygirl."

"Yes he did," Sidra agreed. "So the truth, huh? Well, I've heard it'll set you free or something like that..."

"Yes, it will, but even better than that is the fact that America loves a good comeback!" Lena cackled as she pushed the kitchen door open. "Poor Nero. He's in for a rude awakening. Ian's had lawyers looking into our contract and found several loopholes that will enable all of us to be set free from his scheming. I can't wait to see him today. But I'll wait until after your meeting with him."

"Dear God, help us all," Sidra whispered as Lena called out to Lucky.

"Baby, I'm gonna need a diamond bigger than the one Sidra's rockin', got it?"

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*How could he tell Sidra that her own sister tried to have her killed?* The question spun around and around in Casey's mind as he drove to Nero's office. And in response, he'd killed the only person who could confirm it aside from the crazy bitch herself. But he needed to look in Nina's eyes and see the insanity for himself before he took her out. *How had he never seen it? SO FUCKING STUPID! He'd grown up with crazy and should have been able to feel, smell, and hear it from a hundred miles away!* Her beauty and oscar-worthy performance of portraying a sane woman had blinded him and nearly cost him the love of his life. She wouldn't be allowed a second chance at revenge or at life. Casey didn't think he could reveal the truth to Sidra. Just this morning, she'd given him a slow, lingering kiss before leaving, and he recalled her last words to him:

*"Wish me luck, boo. The goal is to find a common ground where we can all co-exist without hostility. Anything more than that would be a friggin' miracle," she said wistfully as she laid her head on his shoulder as he pulled her close and massaged her stomach.*

*"Are you gonna tell them about Bean?" he asked cautiously, biting his tongue to prevent himself from ordering her not to.*

*"No!" And her adamant answer filled him with palpable relief. "Enough people know for now. But I would like to have the baby be in a room where Mommy is not dropkicking some common sense into her aunt."*

Like hell would Bean ever be in a room with Nina.

Casey pulled up to Santos, Santos, Lawry & McCoy and quickly got out of the car. He strode into the building and up to the receptionist's desk where he was greeted warmly by its matronly occupant.

“May I help you, sir?” she asked him in a professionally crisp voice.

“I’m here to see Nina Santos.” His voice brooked no opportunity for her to deny him.

“I’m terribly sorry, but she is out to lunch at the moment,” she coolly informed him.

“How is that possible? I’m actually here for the meeting that Nero is supposed to be holding in the conference room,” Casey informed her as she shook her head negatively.

“I do apologize for the inconvenience this has caused you, but that meeting has turned into a luncheon at The Capital Grille,” the receptionist replied apologetically.

“Thank you for your time,” Casey nodded and quickly left. A sense of wrongness overcame him. Something wasn’t right, so he called Darby.

“What’s up, bro?” Darby greeted him amiably. “Do me a favor? Next time you have somethin’ brewin’, keep me posted instead of goin’ all half-cocked. That’s how good men die, ya know? Tuck said you really put in work with that fool.”

“We can discuss that later. Can you get Dominick’s team to The Capital Grille? I have a really bad feeling in my gut,” Casey explained as he started his car, reversed it, and sped out of the parking lot. The uneasy feeling was surging through him now as he zigzagged in and out of traffic.

“Case, what’s goin’ on?!” Darby demanded to know. “Where’s Sidra?!”

“She’s supposed to be at the restaurant with Dominick, meeting Nero and Lena,” Casey yelled as he cut a driver off to get on the freeway. His phone beeped, and he saw that it was Sidra calling him. “Let me call you back; this is her!”

“Baby, I’m on my way there. Is everything okay?!” he asked frantically, but Sidra didn’t answer. “Sidra, answer me!”

There was still no answer, and then he heard muffled voices followed by gunshots and screaming.

“**Noooooo!**” he roared and floored the Jaguar’s accelerator.

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*An Hour Earlier...*

“I see you brought an entourage,” Nero greeted Sidra and Dominick snidely as he watched Lena, Lucky, and Ian take a table close to the private dining room. Sidra noticed the way his eyes lingered on Lena, drinking in the sight of her hungrily. He paid no mind to the downright lethal stare Lucky was giving him. “Lena is as lovely as ever.”

“Could you focus on the fact that your estranged son is standing right in front of you for one second?” Sidra snapped her fingers loudly in his face, uncaring of the other patrons whose attention was now on the noisy trio.

“Yes, of course,” he offered apologetically and held his hand out to Dominick with a jovial, “How are you, son? It’s been a long time.”

Dominick stared at the man whom he’d practically enslaved himself to and felt nothing but loathing and disdain. For once, it wasn’t self-inflicted, and he couldn’t believe that he’d allowed another person to control his happiness. After spending time with Sidra and her family and friends, he felt more...centered. Especially with Ian. Listening to the other man share his memories and experiences while Lena spoiled him silly was like finally singing the perfect pitch or finding the quintessential beat on an elusive song. He’d longed for a mother’s love for practically his entire life, and Lena was an amazing surrogate, and so was Lucky in the paternal role.

After meeting him for the first time, Dominick could see why Sidra had never sweated Nero's fucked up mentality too much.

"I'm not your son," he said quietly. "Shall we proceed?"

They entered the private dining room and sat down at the elegantly set table. Nero started the conversation with a look of remorse. "Let me start by apologizing for my reprehensible behavior that you both have suffered due to my cowardly actions. I realize that my poor treatment of you has severely impacted not just your lives, but Nina's as well." He held his hand up to protest their frowns. "Please, hear me out. My spoiling and over-indulgence of her has created a monster that I can no longer control. I had suspected this for a while, but your words at our last meeting confirmed it, Sidra.

There is no way to ever make up for the way that I've hurt you, and for that, I don't expect you to ever forgive me, nor will I forgive myself. Dominick, it kills me that I'm responsible for the repressed way that you have lived your life. I should have accepted your sexuality, but instead, I rejected you because I was raised to believe that homosexuality is a sin." Nero gave his son a beseeching look. "I want you to know that I am proud of the man you've become and would gladly stand behind you."

Sidra wondered if Dominick was enjoying the Kool-Aid Nero was serving him. Nero was a master of word games, and he'd yet to say he would come out and publicly acknowledge that he not only had a son but a gay one at that. Idly, she wondered if Dominick knew the difference. Apparently, he did.

"WOW. Thank you for your generous support of who I am," Dominick said, sarcasm oozing from every word. "That would have been great to have when I was scared and so confused about everything that was happening to me. I needed my father, but you robbed me of both of my parents! Now, I don't want or need shit from you. What you do owe me is an apology for treating my mother like a common whore. You owe her a face-to-face apology!"

“As I said, I cannot change the past. What’s done is done,” Nero reiterated stiffly, his olive complexion turning ruddy with Dominick’s scathing assessment of his “apology”. *This was a bad idea.* He shouldn’t have listened to Sidra, but he hoped to appease the pair with a few well-chosen words. He would now have to go the distance. The door opened behind him, and he assumed it was the waiter with their meals. He opened his mouth to speak, but his hot-headed son wasn’t done.

“That’s not enough for me! I want the words! I *need* the words! I want you to go to the nursing home and beg for her forgiveness!” Dominick roared abruptly, standing to his feet and knocking his chair over. He leaned over the table and stuck his index finger in Nero’s face. “I couldn’t give a shit that you refuse to acknowledge me as your son! BUT YOU WILL APOLOGIZE TO MY MOTHER!!!”

“ANOTHER SANTOS BASTARD?!” Nina shouted from the open doorway. Her normally pretty face was an ugly, distorted mask of fury as she stared at her father with flames of hatred in her eyes. Then she focused on Dominick, the man she thought would be her accomplice in breaking up Casey and Sidra. He was her brother! So, he’d known who she was when she offered him sexual favors and never said anything! But her downward spiral of humiliation wasn’t quite complete until she noticed Sidra staring at her with pity.

*Beautiful Sidra, who could do no wrong in Nero’s eyes. Oh yes, she knew. He tried to hide it, but Nina knew how he really felt about the two of them. No matter how hard she tried, she would never measure up to that puta! Sidra could stand on her own two feet and refuse all Nero had to offer. She was gainfully employed and had a wonderful, loving, and supportive man. But she wasn’t supposed to have all of that. Sidra wasn’t even supposed to be alive, but that incompetent buffoon Jimmy had failed in his attempt of killing her. But that was okay because Nina had a gift for him to ensure that his next attempt would be successful. She’d tried to call him but received no answer. She would just have to go visit him when she was done here and give it to him.*

Then Nina noticed Sidra's new accessory on her left finger, and her rage boiled over, making her incoherent of speech.

She was marrying the man who was meant for Nina! Never had she hated someone more besides Dominick for making a fool of her. *Oh, how he and Sidra must have laughed behind her back! Was she being Punk'd? She would show them that she was no one's fool and would have the last laugh.*

*IMBECILES.*

"Nina, calm yourself and close the door!" Nero commanded as he too rose from the table to address his eldest daughter. "Yes, Dominick is your brother. I...dated his mother briefly in college before marrying your mother."

"Did you know he existed?" she asked her father, and he gave her a compassionate look that meant he did. "So, you knew I had an older brother who lived in the same city but said nothing. You never thought we would run into each other? *Do you also know I tried to fuck him???*"

"You should not be throwing yourself at men to begin with, then that would not have been an issue. Besides, Dominick is a homo, er, gay," Nero said contemptuously. "Please, let us all sit and discuss my plans for us all."

"And what 'plans' are those?" Nina demanded, pulling on her father's sleeve. "What do you think you will be doing? Do you honestly intend to go public and acknowledge these two?! You will make the Santos name the laughing stock of D.C.! I won't be able to go anywhere and hold my head high!"

"You propositioned a man to break up your sister's relationship and held your head up just fine then!" Nero retorted. "If you must know, I am going to include them in my will. It's the right thing to do."

*SMACK!* Sidra couldn't believe it when Nina slapped Nero. She stood up, not liking where this was going. She tried to get Dominick's attention, but he was too wrapped up in the drama going down in front of them as an enraged Nero struck Nina to the floor with a ferocious slap of his own.



*“You dare to put your hands on me, after all that I have done for you, you selfish, ungrateful, overgrown child?!”* Nero fumed. *“You are dead to me! You are fired, and do not bother going back to your house that I pay for because the locks will be changed before you even get there! Get out of my sight!”*

Nina staggered to her feet, and Sidra was alarmed at the maniacal look in her eyes. She laughed wildly as she wiped the thin trickle of blood from her nose. “I’ve kept your dirty secrets for the majority of my life and have been a good daughter to you and my mother. You remember her, don’t you?! She was the woman who cried over you as you mourned not being able to be with your black *family!* I have always been loyal to you, and this is how you repay me??? By not telling me there was *another* Santos bastard, and now I have to share with them what is rightfully MINE?! Fuck you! I don’t think that will be happening, Nero The Great!” Nina spat venomously.

Sidra grabbed her phone and called Casey. He would worry if some shit went down, and he knew nothing about it. She grabbed Dominick’s elbow as Casey answered. Sidra didn’t have a chance to respond as Nina pulled a gun out of her purse and aimed it directly at a stunned Nero.

*“You’re going to give me what you owe me! You are my father and Cecelia’s husband!”* Nina cried her face a twisted mask rage filled anguish. *“We will be a family again with no outside interference. The way it should have always been!”*

She fired the gun twice, hitting Nero once in the chest and the head, killing him instantly as Sidra screamed at the sight of blood and brain matter spattering from Nero’s now lifeless body. Outside of the private dining room, chaos ensued, and she could hear Lena screaming her name.

Next, Nina confronted her siblings with a sad yet eerie smile as Dominick attempted to shield Sidra with his body. *“He’s MY father, not either of yours. You will never have him! He belongs with me and my mother!”*

And then Nina pointed the gun at her head and fired. *SPLAT!* Her lifeless body hit the ground with a dull, sickening thud.

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Casey listened to Sidra calmly recount the murder/suicide with brilliant clarity to a police detective. He hovered over her, looking for signs of shock, but she was surprisingly calm if just a little sad. Casey decided to step in. “I think you have everything you need, Detective. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to take my fiancée home now. She’s pregnant and needs her rest.”

The detective side-eyed him but wrapped it up. “Thank you so much for your cooperation, Ms. Barton. If you can think of anything else, you have my card.”

Sidra allowed Casey to escort her to the entrance where her mother, Lucky, Ian, and Dominick sat in the lobby as her brother finished giving his statement. “Hey, guys.”

“How are you feeling, babygirl?” Lucky asked gruffly, giving Casey a grudging look of respect. They’d met earlier when Casey stormed on the scene and scuffled with cops as he tried to get through the melee to reach Sidra. Lucky had been hovering above Sidra, rubbing her back when Casey introduced himself with, “*One, take your hand off of my woman before I fucking break it off. And two, who the fuck are you?!*”

Ian and Lena had quickly gotten between the two men and smoothed things over.

“I’m okay; it’s just unfortunate that so many poor choices were made that led up to this,” Sidra said sadly as she rubbed her eyes and leaned into Casey who drew her protectively close.

“You can’t miss what you never knew,” Dominick offered listlessly. “I feel like Nina, in her selfishness, offered us a new

start.” He looked at Lena and smiled shyly when she winked and smiled wanly at him. “I say we take it and not look back.”

“I agree,” Lena said, her expression was stark in her sadness. “I wish it hadn’t ended this way and that you two were able to resolve your differences with Nina.”

In Casey’s opinion, everything had ended perfectly. Now, he wouldn’t have to kill the bitch or have her every move monitored until the end of time. “If anyone needs to talk to someone, I know a really good therapist.”

“I wouldn’t mind talking to someone,” Dominick spoke up and addressed him. “I’ve got tons of shit to get off my chest and work out.”

Casey reached into his pocket and pulled Dr. Laura’s card from his wallet. “She really knows her stuff and is extremely patient. She’s been our family therapist since I was really little. Seein’ as how we’re gonna be family, it only makes sense that you go and see her and get the family discount.” That caused a small chuckle from the group, bringing some much-needed comic relief to everyone.

He finished his statement by offering Dominick his hand. Sidra watched as her brother slowly shook it. “Man, I wish I could find the words to express how sorry I am for bein’ an ass, but I don’t think I can. Just know that I regret it with all my heart.”

“We’re square as long as you take care of my sister and treat her right,” Dominick stated.

“You’ll never have to worry about her,” Casey said confidently as he kissed Sidra’s forehead and then looked at Ian, Lucky, and Lena who gave him approving smiles. “That’s my lifetime promise to her and all of y’all.”

## **Epilogue**

*Whiskey Row*

*Three Months Later...*

It was a beautiful crisp fall morning and the sun shined brightly as the red, orange, and gold leaves swirled around with the cool breeze and crunched beneath the trio of men's boots as they walked through the cemetery. The last time they were here together had been for the burial after their lives were forever changed. They walked silently, being respectful of those who were resting eternally until they reached the back row and the large heart-shaped, granite tombstone engraved with the words they could recite in their sleep.

*Here lies Moira Aileen Sullivan,*

*Beloved mother to Jackson, Darby, and Casey.*

*May you rest in eternal peace.*

*You are gone but never forgotten, for*

*death leaves a heartache no one can heal,*

*while love leaves a memory no one can steal.*

Darby replaced the old arrangement of flowers with the new one Avery created this morning. Clearing his throat, he spoke first, and as always when they spoke to her, their voices took on an Irish lilt and vernacular. "Hello, Ma. ***How's the form?*** (*How are you?*) Bet you never thought to see us all together again, eh? But you know we're all good and back in The Row for good. Isna right, boyos?"

"Aye, Ma," Casey said fondly. "We were right ***banjaxed*** (*shattered and broken*) with your death and didn't know how we'd go on. Particularly me. But there's no need to fash yerself; we've had a good support system, we 'ave. Ian, Vivienne, and Alexei really stepped up to the plate and made sure we walked the right path, and in doing so, it led us to the loves of our lives."

“He’s right, Ma,” Jack chimed in affectionately. “Our women have brought us not just a happiness that we never imagined but peace and adventure as well. There’s never a dull moment to be had with them or our kiddos.” He clasped Casey on the back with a grin. “Speaking of kiddos, baby boyo here has some news.”

“I dinna think he had it in ‘im, but he’s a slick one he is,” Darby elbowed his younger brother who was beaming with pride.

“I’m joining the fatherhood club,” Casey said proudly. “Next time I come, I’ll bring my woman. You’ll love Sidra. She’s feisty and kind with a big heart.” He ignored Darby’s cough, which sounded a lot like ‘don’t forget crazy’. “Sidra’s pregnant, Ma. So this will be grandbaby number four for ya. Accordin’ to her, one’s enough, but she doesna know me too well if she thinks that was the end of that discussion.”

They stayed a few moments more, and this time was easier than it had ever been because they were all in a good place in their lives and had let go off all bitterness, anger, and pain, which left behind only the good times they’d shared with Moira. And then they left with the kiss to the tombstone and their customary farewell, *Mo ghrá, go deo agus i gcónaí ag* (*My love forever and always*). Until next time, Ma.”

The walk back to Jack’s Range Rover was a lighthearted one, with each man thinking of how good it was to be free of their past.

“So, how are the renovations goin’? Darby asked Casey.

“They’re goin’ great; the new flooring was put down, but I have a feelin’ once Sid sees it, she’s not gonna be feelin’ it,” Casey remarked with dread. “Never mind that she insisted on it.”

“Pregnant woman’s prerogative to change her mind,” Jack replied with a chuckle. “I dare you to protest if she says

somethin’.”

“Unlike the two of you, I ain’t scared of my woman,” Casey taunted his older brothers.

“That’s cause you’re as crazy as she is. Which is not necessarily a good thing,” Darby pointed out reasonably.

“You say *to-ma-to*, I say *to-mah-to*,” Casey tossed back.

“Yep, a match made in heaven,” Jack said with a laugh. “She’s definitely brought you over to the dark side.”

“It’s not so bad there,” Casey admitted with a chuckle. “Happy Hour is ‘whenever the fuck’ o’clock, and they serve milk and cookies at bedtime.”

“Jesus be a fence,” Darby said shaking his head and they shared a laugh.

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“Babbbyyy, I’m home!” Sidra called as the elevator to the loft opened and she stared at the new ash gray wood that had been installed throughout the residence two weeks ago. It was very attractive, but it didn’t *look* like the flooring they’d discussed. Strong arms encircled her from behind to rest under her belly and draw her back against a hard-muscled chest as her husband whispered hotly in her ear, “Don’t even, Sid. They’re stayin’. I missed you so much; welcome home, darlin’.”

“I didn’t say anything!” she said defensively as she inhaled his familiar scent and tilted her head back to kiss first his neck and then his lips. *Mmmmm*. Her lips opened eagerly underneath his warm seeking ones and for her efforts, she was rewarded with a sharp kick from within her abdomen. “I missed you too!”

Casey smiled against her mouth. “I don’t think Bean likes what we’re doin’.”

“Bean is mad about the floors,” Sidra informed him as she turned around to face him, her eyes gleaming with approval at his bare chest and jeans with the top button undone. She ran her fingers up his six pack and across his pectorals. “*Oh, my... is this all for me?*”

“Yes, ma’am,” Casey drawled as he touched her straightened hair. “I like your hair. It’s givin’ me ideas.”

Sidra’s mouth flattened. “Do. Not. Touch. This. Blowout. You will be sleeping on the sofa for the rest of my pregnancy if you do.”

“Like you could sleep without me,” Casey quipped as he squatted in front of his wife and pulled her shirt up to press kisses on her rounded belly. “Hey, babygirl. Daddy loves you so much! Do you like the new floors too? What’s that? Don’t listen to Mommy because she’s bein’ hormonal right now? Okay, I’ll take your advice.”

“You’re the devil, Casey Sullivan,” Sidra said lovingly as she smiled down at him.

“And you’re just the angel I needed in my life, Sidra Jane Sullivan. I promise you these are the exact same floors that Ella had installed at her family’s hotel. She sent me all of the vendor information on it. Besides, you’ve been travelin’ for the last month promotin’ your new music so you probably forgot what it looked like.”

There was a slight possibility that he *could* be telling the truth. With the launch of her new music venture for children, *Sid’s Sticky-Sweet Beatz*, Sidra had been very busy. Her music and lullabies were highly popular and selling like hotcakes. Sidra had spent the last month talking about her music on Good Morning America, The View, Live With Kelly, and The Real. She’d also done interviews for Parents Magazine and Family Fun. She and her music were a hot commodity that everyone wanted a piece of but also because of the death of her sister and father and her famous brother and mother. The notoriety didn’t hurt in the least, but she refused to discuss any of that

stuff during her interviews and won people over with her talent and personality alone.

After the murder/suicide of Nero and Nina, the media had gone into a frenzy over Sidra and Dominick, especially when Dominick officially announced that he was gay. Nero's father-in-law had tried to prevent them from receiving any of his sorry son-in-law's assets. After a visit from Cruz Merada, the older man quickly changed his mind as Mauricio was familiar with the reputation of the Butchers of Aragon who hailed from the same region of Spain as him. The siblings took the Santos wealth and distributed it to various charities benefitting children and the LGBTQ community.

Lena's own admissions of being in a longterm relationship and having an affair with a married man were an explosive bombshell and bitter pill for her devoted fans to follow. Ian arranged her interview with Oprah where she admitted her truths and imperfections. She talked about being scared to live life with flaws and was soon given a reality talk show on the Own Network called *Living Lucky with Lena*. It was an instant hit, and she was now creating a wellness line to help individuals find inner peace. She and Lucky were planning a wedding ceremony for this winter. Lena was right; America did love a comeback.

"Maybe you're right," Sidra conceded to Casey. "It could have been the lighting as well. It was a busy time, and there was a lot going on; I think I'm just imagining things."

"Well, it *was* our wedding weekend. I'm surprised you even had time to notice it. Why don't you get changed so we can head to Darby and Avery's," Casey said as he took her coat off.

To get away from the media swarming around them, Sidra had accepted Ella's offer to stay at her place in the Pacific Northwest. Kismet Cove was a small, resort beach town on an island located in Washington state on the bay of Puget Sound. The Kemp family were hoteliers, and Ella had recently



acquired an inn that she was in the process of renovating alongside her former sister-in-law Davina. Ella had offered Sidra and Casey a newly renovated room, and it was there that they'd relaxed and reconnected amidst all the turmoil. On their second day there, they decided to explore the island on horseback and discovered a beautiful white church on a hill overlooking the beach. The vicar was kind enough to offer them a tour and spoke of the weddings he'd officiated in the lovely stained glass building with the large bell atop. It was charming, quaint, and perfect for Casey and Sidra.

After all of the drama of the last month and a half and in their relationship, they wanted something beautifully simple just for them. So they set their wedding date and were married two months later in the church, officiated by the ecstatic vicar. They kept the guest list to family and close friends only with Lucky walking Sidra down the aisle in a simple, floor-length spaghetti strap dress made of white satin and lace. Her curly hair was styled in a French braid crown that led to a side ponytail with a gardenia. Casey wore a linen, wheat-colored suit, and he also included Dominick as one of his groomsmen. Afterward, they celebrated with a festive clambake on the beach with their guests in summer attire of swimwear and t-shirts and cutoffs behind the newly-opened Siren Inn where their guests stayed.

"Need help with your back, Mrs. Sullivan?" Casey asked with a roguish grin.

"And my front too, Mr. Sullivan," Sidra purred as they walked down the hall to their bedroom, stopping in their favorite room along the way. In addition to their new careers, they'd also decided to reside in Whiskey Row full-time and bought Darby's loft, which they were transforming from a bachelor pad to a more family-friendly home. Although they had plenty of time until their baby arrived, Casey and Sidra had started decorating the nursery first.

They'd painted the nursery seafoam green and decided to do a beach theme in honor of their peaceful time on the island. Stencils of dolphins, seahorses, turtles, and coral adorned the

walls along with paintings of marine life by a local Kismet Cove artist. The dresser, crib, and shelves were made of sandblasted manzanita with crabs, octopuses, and sand dollars carved into them, and Uncle Guy had created a mobile made from driftwood and sandblasted starfish to hang above the crib. White chenille body pillows shaped like seashells were strewn in the reading area. Their favorite part of the room was the name spelled in cursive font of iridescent seashells above the crib. *Moira*.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Sidra said happily, running her hands lovingly along the smooth wood of the crib.

“You and me both,” Casey agreed softly, looking at the name lovingly.

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Dinner at Darby and Avery’s proved to be a lively affair as the family feasted on smoked sausage and chicken white bean chili with pepper jack cheese and jalapeno cornbread. The purpose of the dinner was to plan the Thanksgiving menu and guest list.

“Okay, we’re doing two turkeys. One traditional one, baked in the oven, and the second can be smoked or fried?” Avery called out to the large group. “Let’s do a show of hands on each, please.”

“Baby, let’s do both?” Darby called, and the men readily agreed.

“We can do three, Ave,” Noelle said. “Anything leftover will make a good stock for soup.”

“What about oyster stuffing? Any takers?” Sidra asked, and the idea was rejected. “Okay, so let’s do cornbread stuffing and dressing then. Any sweet and savory or just savory?”

“Can we do apples and cranberry with sausage in the cornbread one?” D.J. asked, and everyone turned to look at him. He shrugged his shoulders. “That’s what I heard Camille’s grandma is doin’ at her house this Thanksgiving.”

“You spend an awful lot of time Skyping with Camille,” Sidra teased her nephew as she ruffled his hair. “What does Mai Ling say about that?”

D.J. treated his aunt to a long-suffering look as he raised up to kiss her cheek. “I told her everything was strictly platonic, but who knows what she’s thinkin’? You know you women can be a handful.”

There were hoots and hollers in response to his comment, and then Guy spoke up from where he was feeding baby Jack. “I’m actually not gonna be here for Thanksgivin’. As you all know, Christmas is a pretty big deal for me, and I asked if the kids could spend it here in The Row, so Fern said yes, but she’d like for me to join them for Thanksgivin’.”

He ignored the speculative looks everyone exchanged and focused on baby Jack who whined loudly, eager for Guy to feed him faster.

“But you said we were gonna play the traditional football game the day after!” D.J. protested indignantly.

“And we will, brat. I’m headin’ back the next day,” Guy said as he lifted the baby and blew on his tummy, making him chortle with laughter.

“What about you, Dominick? Can we count you in?” Jack asked the singer.

“Yes, I’d love to come and thanks for including me. What should I bring?” Dominick asked, looking up from where he was coloring at the table with Ruby and Ian.

“Just yourself,” Vivienne said firmly. “Trust me, there will be more than enough food.”

“Yeah, Dom,” Casey agreed. “Be warned, though, I need all hands on deck three days before Thanksgiving. The *Take A*

*Stand* foundation is giving out Turkey's with all the fixins for dinner at the recreation center to families in need."

"Sounds good; definitely count me in," Dominick replied and turned to Ian who was coloring on the other side of Ruby.

"Will you be here for Thanksgiving?"

It was just a question, but lately, Ian had been sensing there was *something* more to Dominick's words and an undertone that he didn't want to examine too closely. Ian had helped him to navigate his way out of the closet and transition smoothly into society as a gay man. While Dominick was an extremely attractive man, Ian wasn't interested in being his Guinea pig relationship. Dominick was a regular client of the boys' therapist Dr. Laura and seemed to be doing well for which Ian was glad, but he had no intentions of playing the fool for someone with daddy issues.

"No, I'll be in Barbados," he finally said, pretending not to see the disappointment in Dominick's eyes as he bent his head to examine Ruby's coloring. "Clever girl! Now let's try staying in the lines this time, shall we?"

"Yes, no lines!" Ruby nodded her head enthusiastically and scribbled all over the page.

"Let's take a head count now then," Noelle suggested as Jack put his arms around her and helped himself to her cornbread as he distracted her with a kiss.

"Well, I'm speaking for Holt and Papa," Kat added as she came from the kitchen carrying a tray of individually-sliced apple pies garnished with maple cream to the table, and everyone quickly grabbed one. "They'll be here for sure."

"And when are they comin' back?" Casey asked as he accepted the bite of pie Sidra offered him. "I feel like those two are always gone."

Kat and Vivienne exchanged a worried look before Kat spoke. "Holt is due back from Sweden the day after tomorrow. His grandfather has been...ill."

It had been months since that evening by the lake when Holt had given her something to think about, but his offer was at the forefront of her mind with every kiss and touch he'd bestowed upon her since.

*"Marry me, Kat..."*

She knew if he took her, there would be no changing of her mind. It was a forever kind of deal.

"Lex will be here next week," Vivienne offered with a tight smile. "He's been in Europe on business."

Vivienne shivered, recalling his parting words to her.

*"Know this, Mrs. Romankov; there is nothing I will not do for you," His inky eyes blazing his love for her as he holstered his guns. "It is time I remind the world of that fact."*

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*Glasgow, Scotland...*

Ermines McNall shivered, feeling the cold through his thin shabby dress coat as he ducked in and out of corners, trying to make his way back to his hiding spot in the warehouse district. His mind was whirling a mile a minute as he ducked over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. With that little shit Magnus's disappearance, his days of being useful were a thing of the past. The troublesome ass had done what was needed and retrieved the necessary information Ermine's former employer had demanded but was now gone with the wind. There was no footage from the hotel or any of the intersections during the slaughter that took place in the penthouse. That was the most troubling part of the whole incident. Someone had leveled the playing field for the other team. Thanks to their assistance, Magnus had escaped and was able to delete all the files he'd created for them, leaving the Romankov bitch to have peace of mind for the time being.

And now Ermines was on the run and forced to go underground to stay alive. The expensive, lavishly decorated home of his was no more. His coat had once been a custom-made design but now served as a blanket of sorts to keep him warm. His red hair that he used to get cut for a couple hundred pounds was now a faded, black, long unruly mess and the recipient of a bad dye job. All his power had been stripped when Alexei Romankov put a bounty on his head, cut off his income and threatened to go to war with anyone who aided Ermines. His former gang, the one *he'd* founded and brought up in the crime ranks had turned their backs on him along with his former employer.

It started to rain and that added a new layer of cold to the already freezing temperature. Ermines wished he was sitting in nice warm pub with a pint right about now and a willing doxie on his lap, but he couldn't even afford to be seen. So busy shivering and huddling into his coat to keep warm and dry that he didn't even notice the dark, tinted car at the curb on his right until the last minute. Then the big blonde giant stepped out from the store archway on his left before Ermines could run, and he was shoved into the darkened interior of the vehicle. He inhaled the scent of rich leather as he came face to face with Alexei "The Wolf" Romankov. Ermine looked around frantically for an escape as the giant got in on the passenger side, and the dark-haired driver slowly pulled away from the curve.

"*Boo,*" the other man whispered sinisterly. Ermine's insides quivered as he stared into Alexei's glowing blue eyes, knowing his time had just run out as the divider slowly went up and Lionel Richie's "Say You Say Me" filled the car.

*Say you, say me say it for always  
That's the way it should be  
Say you, say me say it together  
Naturally*

Holt looked at Cruz with dry amusement. "Seriously?"

Cruz shrugged innocently, his dark eyes sparkling with twisted humor as they heard the frenzied tussling behind the divider.

“Just trying to set the tone for him. You know, give him a little inspiration and create an ambient setting.”

“The man tried to assist in destroyin’ his wife. I doubt he’s drawin’ a blank in the inspiration department,” Holt retorted, turning the music up as Ermine’s high-pitched scream of agony filled the car.

As it was a seedier neighborhood with an extremely high crime rate, the few people wandering about out in the bad weather tried not to pay any attention to the shrill cries of pain emanating from the car over the music.

*I had a dream. I had an awesome dream  
People in the park, playing games in the dark  
And what they played was a masquerade  
And from behind of walls of doubt, a voice was crying out...*

## **The End**

**Coming November 2016**

Alexei & Vivienne Romankov