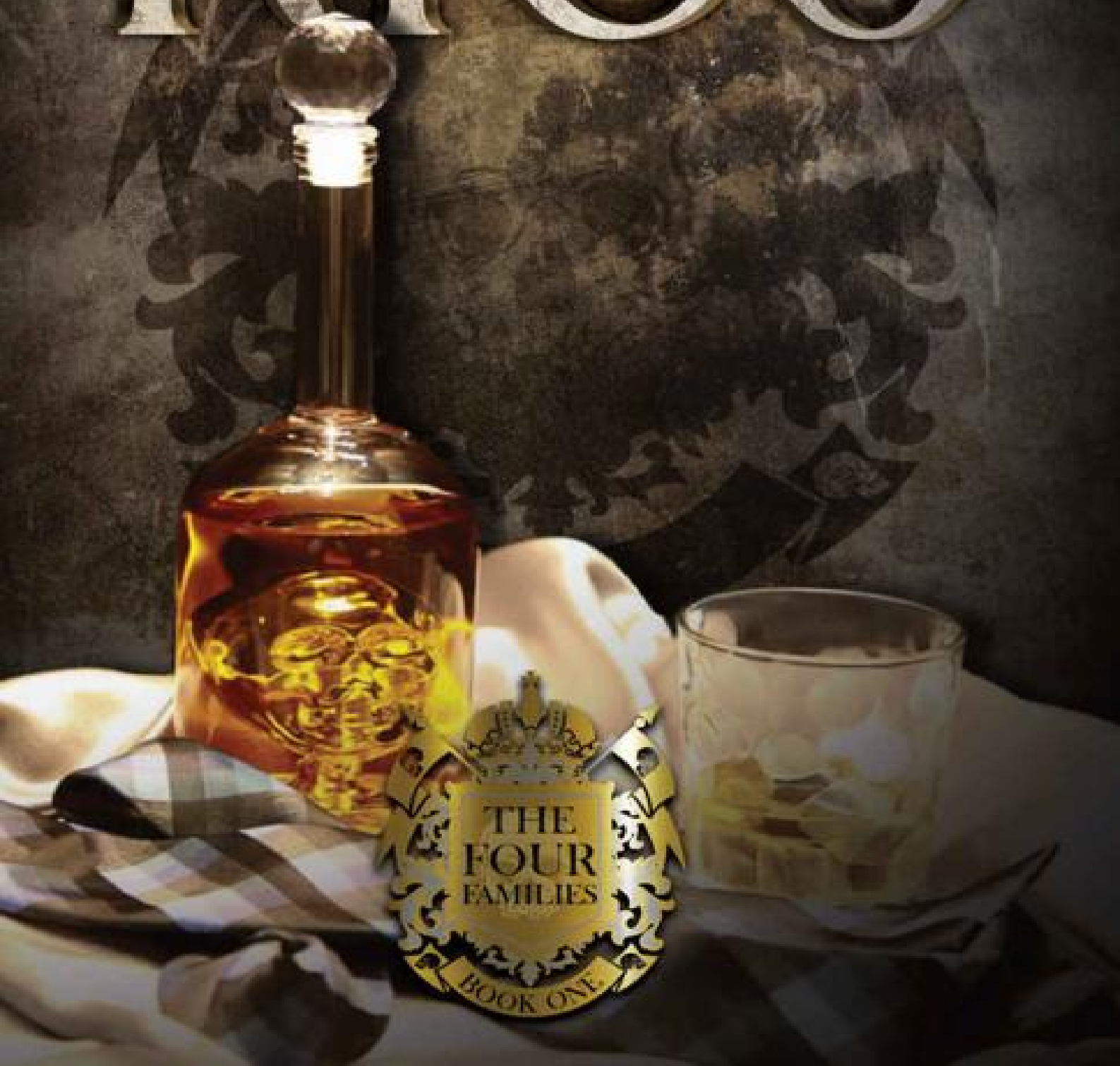


CEE BOWERMAN

RICO



Rico
The Four Families: Romano
Cee Bowerman
CLBooks, LLC



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Cover design by: Sweet 15 Designs
Cover photography by: Jessica Johnson
Professionally edited by: Chrissy Riesenber
Printed in the United States of America

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COMING SOON

About the Author

Cee Bowerman Master Book List

The Rojo, Texas Universe

Texas Knights MC

(completed)

Home Forever

Forever Family

Lucky Forever

Love Forever

Texas Kings MC

(completed)

Kale

Sonny

Bird

Grunt

Lout

Smokey

Tucker

Kale & Terra (Novella)

John & Mattie

Bear

Daughtry

Hank

Fain

Grady

Stoffer

Luke

Clem

Conner Brothers Construction

(completed)

Finn

Angus

Mace

Ronan

Royal

Tavin

Chess

Rojo, TX

(completed)

Rason & Eliza

Atlas & Addie

Jazmyne & Luc

Kari & Levi

Noah & Tallie

Nick & Cindy

Marcus & Reagan

The Tempests

(completed)

Wrath

Creed

Loki

Styx

Thorn

Freya

Sin

Lonestar Terrace

(in progress)

1005 Alamo Way

Cee Bowerman's Stand Alone Series

Time Served MC

(in progress)

Boss

Hook

Chef

Preacher

Captain

Bug

Santa

Kitty

Rodeo

Stamp

TS in NY

The Four Families

(in progress)

Rico Romano

Springblood

(in progress)

One More Day

The Donovans

(in progress)

Drink It Up

Pull It Up

Pretty It Up

Curl It Up

The Rojo, Texas Universe
in Chronological Reading Order

Home Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 1

Forever Family: Texas Knights MC, Book 2

Kale: Texas Kings MC, Book 1

Sonny: Texas Kings MC, Book 2

Bird: Texas Kings MC, Book 3

Grunt: Texas Kings MC, Book 4

Lout: Texas Kings MC, Book 5

Smokey: Texas Kings MC, Book 6

Tucker: Texas Kings MC, Book 7

Finn: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 1

Kale & Terra: a Texas Kings novella

John & Mattie: Texas Kings MC, Book 8

Angus: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 2

Bear: Texas Kings MC, Book 9

Lucky Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 3

Daughtry: Texas Kings MC, Book 10

Mace: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 3

Hank: Texas Kings MC, Book 11

Fain: Texas Kings MC, Book 12

Love Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 4

Rason & Eliza: Rojo, TX, Book 1

Ronan: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 4

Grady: Texas Kings MC, Book 13

Atlas & Addie: Rojo, TX, Book 2

Royal: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 5

Stoffer: Texas Kings MC, Book 14
Jazmyne & Lucius: Rojo, TX, Book 3
Wrath: The Tempests, Book 1
Luke: Texas Kings MC, Book 15
Tavin: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 6
Kari & Levi: Rojo, TX, Book 4
Creed: The Tempests, Book 2
Noah & Tallie: Rojo, TX, Book 5
Loki: The Tempests, Book 3
Styx: The Tempests, Book 4
Thorn: The Tempests, Book 5
Chess: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 7
Clem: Texas Kings MC, Book 16
Freya: The Tempests, Book 6
Sin: The Tempests, Book 7
Nick & Cindy: Rojo, TX, Book 6
Marcus & Reagan: Rojo, TX, Book 7

Reading Order for the Tenillo Guardians Crossover Series

Boss: Time Served MC, Book 1

Sin's Enticement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 1 by Ciara St James

Hook: Time Served MC, Book 2

Executioner's Enthrallment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 2 by Ciara St James

Chef: Time Served MC, Book 3

Pitbull's Enslavement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 3 by Ciara St James

Preacher: Time Served MC, Book 4

Omen's Entrapment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 4 by Ciara St James

Captain: Time Served MC, Book 5

Cuffs' Enchainment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 5 by Ciara St James

Bug: Time Served MC, Book 6

Rampage's Enchantment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 6 by Ciara St James

Santa: Time Served MC, Book 7

Wrecker's Ensnarement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 7 by Ciara St James

Kitty: Time Served MC, Book 8

Trident's Enjoyment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 8 by Ciara St James

Rodeo: Time Served MC, Book 9

Fang's Enlightenment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 9 by Ciara St James

Stamp: Time Served MC, Book 10

Talon's Enamorment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 10 by Ciara
St James

Time Served In New York: Time Served MC, Book 11

Ares Infidels In New York: Ares Infidels MC, Book 11 by
Ciara St. James

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I'm so glad to have you here with me in this new adventure into the mafia romance world. As with all of my other series, the main storyline for each of my characters will center around family and finding that special person to spend their life with. Of course, there will be plenty of drama and adventure, but that is just a side quest that's going to push them together so they can learn to navigate what life throws at them together rather than on their own.

All of the main characters in the Four Families series have been mentioned multiple times in my Time Served MC series, and their alliance was explained in Book 11, Time Served in New York.

You met Vincente and Antonio, Paula's brothers, in Paula and Hook's love story. In this series, their sons, Cento and Tonio, have taken their place in the family business and formed an alliance with their cousin, Zach Campana, Paula's son. Luca and Matteo Russo, Stamp's twins, were mentioned in previous books, but readers met them in his book.

That leaves us with the Romanos, Frankie's family, who are at the center of the first three books of the Four Families series. In this book, you'll follow Rico while he finds his happily ever after and get to know his brother Ziggy and daughter Constance, who will both get their own stories this year.

I'm excited about this adventure into the mafia world and happy to be writing alongside Mirrah McGee and Ciara St. James who are introducing their own mafia families to their readers and hopefully to you too. You don't have to follow their series to learn anything new about my characters, but they will pop up here and there in their stories just like their characters will make appearances in mine.

I've had so much fun researching New York City for this series, and I'm excited to tell stories about a new place and people who may seem vastly different from what I've written before but are really the same kind of people at heart - men and women who believe that family is the most important treasure they'll ever have and the love they receive from the person they choose to live their life with is worth everything they might have to go through to keep them by their side.

Thank you so much for joining me on this new adventure. I appreciate you and can't wait to share more stories while we explore a whole new world together.

Happy reading,

Cee

The Four Families Positions of Power

Romano:

Boss – Rico Romano

Underboss – Ziggy Romano

Consigliere – Relio Romano

Consigliere – Vino Romano

Russo:

Boss – Matteo Russo

Underboss – Luca Russo

Consigliere – Dino Russo

Consigliere – Prince Russo

Campana:

Boss – Zach Campana

Underboss – Simmy Campana

Consigliere – Cam Campana

Consigliere – Chi Campana

Moretti:

Boss – Cento Moretti

Underboss – Tonio Moretti

Consigliere – Sal Moretti

Consigliere – Baz Moretti

PROLOGUE

A FEW YEARS AGO

RICO

“Since we’re all here, shall we begin?” I asked as I looked at the nine men seated around the table.

I paid close attention to the three youngest members of the group, trying to assess whether they were comfortable or had reservations about sitting at a table with men they’d been taught were their sworn enemies since birth.

Zach Campana had arrived with his uncles, Vincente and Antonio Moretti, and their two sons, Cento and Tonio. I was sure he was wondering why he had been included in this meeting. Luca and Matteo Russo, identical twins who were as close to Zach as brothers, were also obviously curious as to why they’d been invited.

“Twenty years ago ... Hell, five years ago, this meeting would have been impossible without gunfire and bloodshed. I asked all of you here on the first day of the new year so I could make a proposal that will change our lives and the lives of everyone in all four of our organizations for years to come.”

Vincente Moretti, the oldest person at the table and the man who had helped me and my brothers come up with this plan, was sitting next to his brother. He leaned forward and focused on Luca and Matteo. “I’d like to thank you for putting your faith in me and your friendship with my nephew and for joining us today.”

“What exactly are we doing here?” Matteo Russo asked.

“The Russo dynasty belongs to you. You know that, right?”

“Uncle Don ...”

“Your great-uncle took control after your father was sent to prison with the understanding that he’d mentor the two of you until you were old enough to take over,” Vincente explained. “I bet he didn’t tell you that, did he?”

They shook their heads.

“Are you ready to take your rightful places as the head of your families?” I asked Zach, Luca, and Matteo.

“My father ...” Zach started to say something, but his voice trailed off. Everyone in our circle knew that Zach Campana had rebelled against his father, his paternal grandfather, and Vincente and Antonio’s father, his maternal grandfather, because of the abuse his mother had suffered at their hands.

Paola Moretti, Vincente and Antonio’s younger sister, had been forced to marry the Campana heir. Zach Campana was the result of that union. She’d finally escaped the marriage by going to the police with proof of the physical abuse she’d suffered for years, but she was then ostracized by her father and her in-laws for getting the law involved in a ‘family matter.’ She’d only escaped with her life because of her brothers’ influence. With the help of my sister, Francesca, she was able to begin a new life in Texas.

Only a select few knew that she was alive and well after her husband and father faked her death. My sister had mentioned that her brothers and son kept in touch with her and visited as often as they could.

Matteo Russo leaned forward and raised his eyebrows, lifting his hands, asking a silent question of both Luca and Zach.

“All my life, I was raised to hate everyone in this room, including my own uncles, just because of their last name. I’ve had to hide my connection to Luca and Matteo, and they’ve had to do the same, hiding their friendship with me from everyone in their family,” Zach admitted. “We’ve been ...”

Zach paused and blew out a breath, probably unsure if he could trust the people around him with sensitive information.

Luca Russo chimed in and said, “For years, we’ve been waiting to take our place from my uncle and get Zach out from under Old Man Campana’s thumb.”

“And your father?” I asked Zach.

Zach scoffed. “He’s too busy worrying about his next piece of ass and the best way to blow through his monthly allowance to even consider taking the reins from his father. My grandfather knows that and seems to think I’m going to turn out like my father who is too weak to stand up to him.”

“When you say ‘take your place,’ what exactly do you mean?” I asked Luca.

“Technically, I’m the oldest, so it’s mine for the taking,” Matteo corrected. “When we overthrow Uncle Don, I’ll take the lead, and Luca will be my underboss.”

“And how exactly do you plan to overthrow Don Russo?”

“We’ve slowly been undermining his power by turning his men against him,” Matteo admitted. “Over the years, we’ve become tight with the majority of his soldiers and placed personal friends of ours in the organization strategically, knowing that they’d be loyal to us rather than Uncle Don and his minions. There are several captains that have suffered at Don’s hands, and I know that when push comes to shove, they’ll side with us. In return, we’ll let them *retire* rather than kill them like we plan to do with the ones who are faithfully loyal to our uncle.”

“You’re planning to kill your uncle?”

Luca chuckled. “No, we’re going to take away his power and let him live with nothing but his memories and regrets.”

“I want to avenge my mother, and if I have to get rid of my grandfathers to do that, I will.”

I glanced over and saw the shock on the faces of Zach’s uncles and realized that his cousins were smiling, so they must already know about his plans.

“This works well with the discussions that my brothers and I have had with your uncles, Zach,” I admitted. “We’ve been working under the radar together for a few years now, while we watched to see what kind of men you were going to become.”

“Since you included us today, I’m going to guess that means we passed whatever tests you had along the way.”

I nodded in response and wasn’t shocked when Antonio Moretti admitted, “We’ve been in close contact with your mother and stepfather for years. With their help, we’ve encouraged the friendship that developed between the three of you, just like the one that has grown between me and my brothers and the heirs to the Romano empire.”

Vincente Moretti, Cento’s father and Zach Campana’s uncle, spoke up. “The world has changed since our grandfathers and fathers fought wars in the streets with the other families in New York. The government has ways of listening and watching that we can’t sus out, no matter how hard we try. As much as the elders may hate it, we’ve developed a new vision for our future and yours, too, hopefully.”

“And what’s that?” Zach asked.

“Rather than spend our blood, money, and time fighting each other, we propose that the friendships we’ve made with each other can lead all four families on a different path and change the way we do things going forward,” Antonio answered.

“Instead of the four families working against each other, we propose that the bosses, underbosses, and consiglieres work together as a corporation,” I explained. “Don’t get me wrong - this is still about position and bloodline, and overall, it’s still rooted in power. However, the elders of our families have wasted so much time trying to take power away from each other that they haven’t looked toward the future.

“They’ve been blind to what could be because they’re too busy trying to keep the glory days alive of extortion and running numbers and drugs to hold onto their power. They’ve

run the risk of prison time, death at the hands of people who want to usurp their power and take over their territories, and as we've discussed, fighting between family members who should be their most loyal allies."

"I've got no loyalty to my father or either of my grandfathers," Zach said firmly. I could see fire in his eyes and knew that this young man had been planning his revenge for a lot longer than we'd given him credit for.

Matteo confirmed, "We've been planning to work with Zach since we were 10. That may not seem like a long time, but when you consider that we weren't supposed to talk to him, it shows our dedication. What you're proposing sounds more ... businesslike than what we were considering."

"What were your plans?" Antonio asked.

"To kill my father and grandfather and take my place at the head of the family," Zach said simply, without any emotion.

Luca smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes as he added, "We're going to let Uncle Don wallow in his own arrogance as we cut him off and watch him choke on his frustration when he realizes there's not a fucking thing he can do."

"Our fathers are going to step down so we can take our family in a new direction. Our first order of business will be to leave our grandfather as powerless as he left our aunt when he sold her into marriage with Zach's father," Cento said with a grim expression.

Tonio smiled wickedly when he said, "There's no need to kill him. His own arrogance and stupidity will be his downfall."

"Same with Don," Matteo said with a smirk. "He'll have no protection other than his own instincts. We won't have to hurt him. He'll do something stupid and someone else will do it for us."

"You have been planning this for a while. I have no doubt you'll be successful, but with our help, you have a guarantee," I assured the younger men.

“And with ours,” Cento Moretti said as he leaned back in his chair and looked around the table. “We can do this together more easily than we ever could alone.”

“I think we’ve come to an agreement, gentlemen,” I said with a smile.

“We’re going to become legitimate businessmen?” Cento asked.

Zach laughed and nodded as he looked at his best friends and then studied the expressions of the men around the table. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Matteo tilted his hand back and forth as he grinned. “*Mostly* legitimate.”

“If we’re united, we can control what comes in and out of New York,” Luca surmised.

“And we’ll have three less enemies to worry about,” I reminded them. I reached for the bottle of Scotch in the middle of the table and poured us each a glass. Once I passed them around, I held mine aloft and said, “To the Four Families.”

The men lifted their drinks as they repeated my sentiment and then we all drank to seal our new agreement.

“Now that we know who’s going to be in charge of each territory, we’ve got a few decisions to make,” I said as I picked up my pen and rested my hand on the pad of paper in front of me.

“Like what?” Luca asked.

I smiled and answered, “Exactly how legitimate do we want to be, and who can we trust to help us get that way?”



LAST MONTH

BEX

“Make sure you slice the carrots and celery down the middle before you chop it. You know Harry,” Diana said as she rolled her eyes over her shoulder and then turned her attention back at the pot she was stirring before she said, “He’s worse than you kids about some things.”

“I’ve never understood his problem with vegetables. He does know they taste the same whether they’re in circles or chunks, right?”

“I don’t even try to understand it anymore. You all have your quirks. It’s my lot in life to try and work around them.”

“I don’t know what you did in a past life to deserve all this, Diana. You can be assured that you’ll be a saint in the next one, considering all the shit you put up with in this one.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad. You kids keep me on my toes as does Harry. I would probably get bored if things were different.”

“I noticed there’s someone sleeping in the guest room.”

“Harry met a young man who needed a place to stay until he gets his feet underneath him. He told me what he’s going through, and I suggested he bring him here.”

“I thought you two were going to start saving money so you can fix up the house and travel more after Harry retires.”

“That’s still a couple of years away, honey. I can’t turn away a child who needs help just because I want to redecorate my kitchen and take a cruise.”

“How old is this *child*?” I asked.

“He’s almost 18 - the same age you were when Harry brought you home to me.”

“What did he do?”

“Not him, his father.”

“Well, *that* sounds familiar.”

When I was 17, my dad used me in one of his cons, and when the cops swooped in, he literally left me holding the bag - an actual bag full of stolen jewelry he’d been trying to fence.

Luckily, Harry Goodman was the lead investigator on the case, and he knew I wasn't the real culprit. He convinced the chief of police that I was just a kid following her parent's lead and needed help rather than punishment. Then he brought me home to Diana just like he had at least a dozen kids before me and another dozen since.

"Any new information on your father?"

"Nothing really." Harry checked his rap sheet occasionally to see where he'd been, but there hadn't been anything new in a while.

"I always hoped he'd mend his ways and stop getting into trouble so he could be a good father to you and your brother."

"Rory and I are better off without Lenny Holland in our lives. Luckily, Shawna saw through my dad's bullshit and dumped him before he got her in trouble. She's a really good mom to Rory."

"Do you still talk to her often?"

"We call each other at least once a month to catch up."

"That's good."

"I thought about asking her if she'd like to bring Rory to Vegas once I get settled."

"I love the fact that you've taken all the *skills* your father taught you and turned them into a worthwhile career, but I still don't understand what that casino expects you to do for them."

"My dad started using me in cons before I could read, D. The fact that I can use that knowledge to trap con artists and recognize things a regular person can't is a bonus as far as my career is concerned."

"But Vegas?"

"I know you think I'd do better working for law enforcement, but they all laughed when I applied to the FBI. My name alone slams doors, but it can work to my favor in Vegas."

"I hate the thought of you moving so far away."

“Look at it this way - you guys can come stay with me in the winter when there’s snow here. You won’t have to spend money on a hotel stay, so you’ll have more to gamble with.”

“I’m not much of a gambler, but I’ve heard there are some great shows there.”

“When you and Harry come to visit, we’ll send him to the casino and I’ll take you to see the sights. There’s always something fun to do in Vegas.”

“And it’s just a short flight away,” Diana added.

“Exactly. I may be leaving the nest, but I’m not flying too far away.”

“I worry about all my kids, you know.”

“I know, Diana, and that’s why we all love you so much. You’re the mom we always dreamed of having.”

“You’re too sweet.”

I laughed as I scooped the vegetables I’d finished chopping into the bowl on the counter. “You’re the only one who thinks that.”



“Hey, kid. How was your Christmas?”

“Bex!” My little brother’s excited scream was so loud that I had to pull the phone away from my ear, but it made me smile, knowing I’d picked the right gift to send him for the holiday. “Thank you for my Xbox! I almost passed out when I opened it. Mom said she got a picture of the look on my face that she’ll send when she feels better.”

“Is she having a rough day?”

“Yeah, but she didn’t have a treatment this week, so I’m not sure why.”

“Well, I’m sure she’ll start feeling better soon. Is she able to talk, or should I call back later?”

“She’s planning to call you tonight. We talked about it earlier. Let me see if she wants to talk now instead.” I listened to Rory move through the apartment he shared with his mom, Shawna, and then heard him ask her something before he got back on the phone and said, “She’s awake. I’m gonna play one of my new games while you talk to her. Merry Christmas! Thanks again for the awesome gift!”

“You’re welcome, bud. Merry Christmas to you too.”

I set my wine glass on the coffee table and picked up the bottle to pour myself more while I waited for Shawna to get on the phone. I leaned back to get comfortable with my glass in hand while I listened to Rory talk to Shawna and then leave.

“Bex,” Shawna said, her voice raspy and weak. “Merry Christmas.”

“Hey, lady. You don’t sound too hot. Are you okay?”

Shawna didn’t answer my question. Instead, I heard her sniff before she said, “I was going to call you this evening to talk, but I wanted you to enjoy Christmas with your family first.”

“I did. I got home not long ago. What’s going on?”

“My latest scans came back and ... I’ve decided to stop the treatment.”

“Why? Is the cancer gone?”

“It’s too far gone. There’s nothing more they can do.”

Tears filled my eyes as I choked out, “Shawna, I’m so sorry.”

“I need your help, Bex.”

“Anything. What can I do?”

“I want you to take my son and give him a good life. I need to know he’s going to be taken care of when I’m gone.”

“Shawna,” I whispered. “I thought ... We talked about this before but I never ... Oh Shawna.”

“You said that if anything happened, you’d raise Rory. Is that still true?”

“Yes. I’ll do it.”

“Don’t let his father take him, Bex. I want my boy to have a better life than that.”

“He will. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Can you come to New York?”

“It might take me a day or two to make arrangements, but I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

“Hurry, Bex. I’m not sure how much longer I can hold on.”

1.

RICO

I adjusted my tie, tilted my head back, and took in a deep breath. I held it to the count of five and then exhaled slowly. I could already feel the pressure of the day building behind my eyes, and it hadn't even started yet.

Well, it hadn't *officially* started since it wasn't even eight in the morning. However, my day had begun five hours ago when I got a call from Sam Frank, head of hotel security, letting me know that the two entitled socialites who'd been staying in their father's permanent suite had brought home half the bar after closing time and hosted one hell of a party.

Normally, that wouldn't have been an issue, considering the soundproofing measures we'd taken during the renovations and the astronomical fees we charged for housekeeping to clean up afterwards.

Because of the incredible renovations and the Fifth Avenue address in Midtown Manhattan, The Costello was residence to visiting dignitaries from all over the world, celebrities, politicians, and rich people with more money than sense, like the father of the spoiled little shits that interrupted my sleep with their antics last night.

Princess A called 911 when Princess B started 'freaking out,' causing some of New York's finest to come by with paramedics that took the young woman to the hospital. Of course, the police were more interested in the cocaine they saw on the table than the overdosing girl, and hotel security called me to come downstairs and answer a few questions for the myriad of officers who were meandering around the hotel.

The last thing me or my associates needed was more scrutiny from the police, but for a few hours, that was exactly what we had. Luckily, after questioning the other people in the suite, they'd found that the girl purchased the drugs from the bartender, so my staff and I were in the clear.

I was more than a little relieved when I found out that they hadn't been partying at one of the bars we owned.

Thank God. I didn't want to have to off anyone today, but if one of our bar employees had been selling coke to customers, I'd squeeze that into my schedule. It wouldn't take much effort for me to go on a killing spree at this point. After dealing with the cops for hours, I was tired and irritable and then had the joy of dealing with two moody teenagers and a cranky preteen over breakfast.

I opened my eyes when the elevator stopped on the floor that housed our offices. As I waited for the door to open, I reflected on my schedule this morning. Coffee, a few minutes of peace, and ... my mother-in-law.

Fuck this day.



"Is she gone?" my brother, Ziggy, asked as he peeked around my office door.

"We had a conference call scheduled half an hour ago. Where the fuck have you been?" I barked.

"I was not about to come in here and put myself in her crosshairs." I stared at my brother like he'd just sprouted horns as he shut the door behind him and walked in with an exaggerated shudder. "She terrifies me."

I had to admit, my mother-in-law had always scared me too. There was no way someone could be that nice without ulterior motives. When I married her daughter, who was *nothing* like her mother, I'd been convinced that Carla Brunetti was plotting something big. I was sure that the woman was going to snap one day and slit my father-in-law's throat while he was sleeping or poison the punch at one of those fundraising committee meetings she was forever attending. Any day now, the news would break about the classy old Italian woman who snapped and took out an entire generation of do-gooders by serving her guests finger sandwiches filled with arsenic during a brunch on her patio.

“What did she want?”

“She’s convinced I’m lonely and wants to set me up with a nice widow.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That I wasn’t interested.”

“When’s your date?”

I sighed before I mumbled, “I’m meeting them at the club for brunch on Sunday.”

The only thing that saved my brother’s life was that he didn’t laugh out loud. Instead, he pulled his lips between his teeth and nodded solemnly before he asked, “Want me to shoot you in the leg so you have an excuse to cancel?”

“I’ll let you know.” I shook my head in defeat and reached for my phone before I asked, “Where are Relio and Vino?”

Azeglio and Aurelio, or Ziggy and Relio as everyone had called them since we were kids, were twins. They were nothing alike, from their looks to their temperament. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear that our mother had lied when she said that Relio shared our DNA. Where Ziggy was more like me, quick to anger with no problem calling for someone’s execution or taking care of the issue himself, Relio had always been the peacemaker of the family along with our cousin, Gavino. That’s why, when I’d started making plans to wrest control of the family from our father, I’d decided to make Ziggy my underboss and appoint Relio and Vino as the consiglieres of our organization.

Depending on the situation, I could either send Ziggy to take out someone’s knees or send Relio to have a sit-down and come to a peaceful agreement. Vino had the same skill with words and could read a room just like my brother.

That wasn’t to say the two men didn’t have a breaking point and weren’t capable of the same violence when necessary, but they were less likely to anger than me or Ziggy and only rarely resorted to using weapons rather than communication.

“Relio is at a doctor’s appointment with Gabrielle. Hopefully, they’ll be able to find out if it’s a girl or boy today.”

“And Vino?”

“He’s at the first committee meeting for the new community center,” Ziggy explained with an evil grin. “By the time he gets finished rubbing elbows with the mayor, deputy mayor, and commissioners, he’s gonna need a drink or two.”

“Or we could just let him shoot somebody.”

“Are you offering a sacrifice?”

I pretended to sort through the papers on my desk before I said, “I’m sure I have a list of candidates somewhere.”

“I have my own list that will interest you.”

I knew my brother wasn’t joking by the tone of his voice. When I looked up and saw his expression, I asked, “Did you find proof?”

Ziggy nodded. “Pauly gave Russo and Moretti the details about where Frankie and her girls were getting ready for the wedding. He had five soldiers in his pocket, and that’s how the two of them got past security and upstairs.”

“Are you sure there were only five?”

“I brought in all of the men who were working the hotel when they got through.”

“And?”

“I had help questioning them and ...”

“Who helped?”

“Zach and the twins showed up for a while, Cento and Tonio came over with their fathers ...”

“The old guys were there?”

“Yeah,” Ziggy said with an exaggerated wince.

“I thought they were out,” I snapped. “We agreed ...”

“I know. I know,” Ziggy said as he lifted his hand, trying to stop me before I lost my temper. “When they arrived, I asked why they were going to get involved. They said Pauly had been around for as long as them, and they were taking his involvement very personally.”

“How personally?”

“Well, I can attest that, retired or not, they haven’t lost their edge. Vincente can still swing a bat like a pro, and Antonio hasn’t lost his fondness for the blow torch.” Ziggy lifted his hand and rubbed his nose. I knew he was remembering what it smelled like when Antonio Moretti got involved in delicate matters like interrogation. I’d been there before and knew you never got over that smell. “Pauly knew exactly what was going to happen when the Morettis walked in, but he stayed strong and loyal even after they both took a turn with him.”

“Who the fuck did he think he was being loyal to? Don Russo and Frank Moretti are fucking dead. My sister’s friends made sure of that.”

“I know he had some information, Rico, but his body gave up before his will. There’s someone else working against us, but with Moretti and Russo dead, who could it be?” Ziggy asked as he studied my face, waiting for me to come to the same conclusion he had. I shook my head, and Ziggy shrugged. “It has to be him. We’ve eradicated anyone else who might even think they could take over.”

“Frank wants what we have and always has,” I fumed as I leaned back in my chair. “We have to find out who’s working with him.”

“He’s got a lock on the drug trade with the Canadians, and now he’s decided he wants a piece of the family business.”

“We’re not going to lose everything our family has worked so hard for because Frank is pissed that we cut him out!”

“No, we’re not, but depending on the weight of his influence, we could have more than a few rats left in our

organization. And there's no telling how many he's got in the others."

"Call a meeting."

"And tell them what?"

"That I should have killed my best friend when I had the chance because he's got help from the inside now."



"Tell me again why you didn't just kill this guy when you had the chance?" Zach Campana asked.

Ziggy and Relio looked uncomfortable until I answered, "He was my best friend and ..." I stopped for a second to gather my thoughts and sort out my emotions. Anger, jealousy, and nostalgia were flooding my mind. "There were and are other factors still at play here. After the blowup with our father, I assumed he'd go away to his little corner of the world and stay there, but I was clearly wrong."

"How long were you friends?"

"Since grade school. He was the best man at my wedding, and he's ... he *was* my oldest son's godfather."

"That's bad but also good in a way," Luca mused.

"How so?" I asked.

"If you guys were as close as brothers, then you know how he thinks."

"True," Matteo, Luca's twin, agreed. "But that also means he knows how Rico thinks."

"But he knew Rico before we all started working together, so we're unknown variables for him," Zach pointed out. "He knows Rico better than we do, but he doesn't know us."

Centio agreed, "The kid's got a valid point."

"I'm not a kid," Zach snapped for at least the thousandth time since we started this venture together. I had a feeling

Cento only said shit like that to rile him up, and Zach always took the bait. “So when it comes to dealing with this asshole, the six of us take the lead.”

Simmy Campana, Zach’s cousin and underboss who was a few years older than him, agreed. “Luca, Matteo, Cento, Tonio, Zach, and myself can deal with the decisions about how to deal with this bastard.”

“Oh, he’s a bastard,” Ziggy muttered. “That’s for sure.”

Simmy chuckled and said, “But I do have one question.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

Zach answered for him, “When it comes time for us to kill him, is that going to be a problem for you?”

I thought about how close I’d been to Frank Bovino until a few years ago when my entire world was turned on its axis. Killing him had crossed my mind more than once over the last few years, but I had never considered putting my thoughts into action even though he’d done the unthinkable.

That was going to have to end now unless I wanted to watch him undo all the hard work I’d put in with my brothers and the other men over the last few years.

“He needs to be put down like the dog he is,” Ziggy said firmly. “I don’t have a problem with it, and neither will Relio. When push comes to shove, Rico will be all in too. Protecting our families and all that we’ve built together will come before any emotions he might have about the guy.”

“Ziggy’s right. He’s never going to stop until he takes everything or we kill him. I know him well enough to see that.”

“So it’s either him or us,” Zach stated simply. “What do you think about letting us take the lead on any decisions when it comes to fighting fire with fire?”

“Burn him down,” I said firmly. “Whatever we’ve got to do. He’s not going to take anything else away from me ... from us. I won’t allow that to happen.”

“Now we have to find out who’s working for him,” Luca said before he leaned forward to rest his elbow on the table. He rubbed his forehead as he let his eyes drift closed. “I’ll think about it when my head isn’t pounding.”

“I have an idea,” Matteo said as he smiled. “We’ve got rats. The best way to get a rat to the trap is to set out bait and snap their neck when they get close, right?”

I nodded and saw the other men around the table do the same.

“We’ll start with your organization, Rico, and work our way through each of your captains to see who takes the bait. While we’re doing that, some might pop up in our own, and when they do, we’ll kill ‘em.”

“Let’s figure out a game plan and get started immediately, gentlemen,” Cento said as he leaned back in his chair, settling in for a long discussion.

2.

BEX

“What do you want to do today?” My little brother, Rory, shrugged and looked out the window at the passing traffic. As usual, he didn’t answer. The last few weeks had been harder on him than I could imagine and had made the usually cheerful kid sullen and almost unreachable. “Come on, Rory. Show me around. It’s been a long time since I explored Manhattan.”

“You lived here.”

“I was born and raised in the Bronx, but I’ve been gone for ... How old are you again?”

Rory rolled his eyes and reminded me, “I’m almost 12.”

“I knew that! I was just testing you.”

“Whatever.”

“I haven’t lived here since I was 16. I’ve been back to visit a few times, but I didn’t really explore that much.”

“Why are you here now anyway?” Rory grumbled.

“Believe me, kiddo, you *don’t* want to go into the foster care system. That’s your only other option at this point.”

“I could live with Dad,” Rory snapped as he glared at me.

I thought about giving him some lame excuse he wouldn’t believe but went with brutal honesty instead. “Do you know where he is?”

“No.”

“When was the last time you talked to him?” Rory didn’t answer, just went back to looking out the window and tried to tune me out. “I haven’t heard from him since he left me, and he hasn’t been on the cops’ radar in months. He could be dead or worse by now.”

“What’s worse than death?”

“Prison,” I said honestly.

“He’s too good to get caught,” Rory boasted.

“His arrests and convictions say otherwise.”

“Why would anyone want to kill him?”

The waitress’s eyes got wide when she overheard Rory’s question, but she didn’t say a word. She filled my coffee cup to the brim and walked off without so much as a peep. I had to give credit to native New Yorkers. If it wasn’t their business, they went out of their way not to get involved.

“Rory, you haven’t spent a whole lot of time with our father, and it’s clear you have a glimmer of hope, that sliver of faith, the rosy outlook that comes from watching too many Disney movies. Someday when you get old and bitter like me, you’ll fight to be first in line so you can kill him yourself. Until then, you can just believe that he’s a misunderstood genius and the world is out to get him.”

“Why do you hate him?”

“Because I lived with him until my 17th birthday when he disappeared into thin air and left me to the wolves in Kansas City.”

“There aren’t any wolves in Kansas,” Rory scoffed.

“Boy, there are wolves everywhere, you’ve just got to learn how to spot them.”

“Teach me something Dad taught you.”

“Why don’t you just go to school and learn things that will benefit you in life rather than drag you down?”

“School is boring.”

“If you think school is boring, you’d really hate prison.”

“You’ve been to prison?”

“Almost. I suggest you do everything in your power to ...”

“Not get caught!”

“An even better plan would be not to break the law in the first place.”

“I remember all the things Dad taught me when he visited.”

“That’s unfortunate,” I muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I cleared my throat and then coughed into my hand. “I’ve got a tickle in my throat.”

“Uh huh. Do you want to know what Dad taught me?”

“Sure,” I said, trying to muster up an ounce of enthusiasm. It would be generous to say our father wasn’t a good parent. A more accurate description of the man would be to say he was an appalling waste of space and oxygen. It was clear by the stars in Rory’s eyes that he would never believe that.

“He taught me how to read a room to find the easiest mark.”

“I bet he did. Was this before or after he used you for a job?” Rory shot daggers at me with his eyes. “Okay! Okay! Tell me what you see.”

“That couple in the corner are arguing, and her purse is hanging off the back of her chair. It’s unzipped, and I can see her wallet.”

I glanced over my shoulder, and sure enough, there was a pair leaning over their table immersed in an intense conversation. The pair didn’t seem to fit together at all considering the woman was carrying a Prada bag from this season, her heels had the coveted red soles, and the light glinting off the rock on her left ring finger could probably be seen from space. She didn’t look like any of the other customers in the diner, and she *really* didn’t look like she belonged with the man she was arguing with. He wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, and his hands were rough and calloused, stained with grease around the knuckles and cuticles. His jeans were threadbare and his work boots were scuffed and worn.

“I could trip and bump into her chair and have that wallet before I even finished apologizing to her,” my brother boasted as he watched their every move. “I think I’m going to ...”

“If your ass leaves that seat, I will drop you right where you stand, little boy,” I hissed as I leaned forward and pegged him with my stare. Rory’s eyes were as wide as saucers, so I took a calming breath before I finished, “You will *not* be stealing anything ever again if you know what’s good for you. Do you hear me?”

“Are you gonna turn me in if I do?”

“I’ll turn you over my knee and bust your ass until you can’t sit down for a week.”

“You wouldn’t.” I held Rory’s eyes until he saw just how serious I was about the issue, and I felt a second of relief when he looked away and slumped down in his seat. “It’s illegal to hit kids.”

“It’s frowned upon for parents, but it’s expected for siblings.”

Rory thought about that for a second and then looked at me with fear in his eyes. I had to bite back a smile because I knew I’d gotten my bluff in and had him right where I wanted him.

“My friend Aaron’s big sister used to hit him every time he made her mad.”

“Stealing of any kind would make me mad. You don’t want me to get mad, do you?”

Rory ignored my question and asked, “Can we go home yet?”

“No. We’re going to spend the day together seeing the sights before we have to leave in a few weeks.”

“Why do we have to leave?” Rory whined.

“I can’t afford to raise a kid in New York, and I have a job waiting in Vegas.”

“I don’t want to move. I like our apartment and ...”

“You’ll like our condo in Vegas even more,” I interrupted. “The leasing agent sent me pictures. I can show them to you when we get back to the apartment.”

“Will I have to go to school?”

“Yes,” I said firmly before I added, “You’ll be there every day, no excuses.”

“What if I’m sick?”

“I wouldn’t suggest it.”

“Or what?” I stared at him with a blank expression, and Rory scowled. “Whatever. You’re not my mom.”

“I am well aware of that, little brother, and I’m not trying to be. However, I am the only adult in your life who is in a position to raise you, so you’re stuck with me.”

“Dad could raise me.”

“Sure he could. He did a bang-up job raising me, didn’t he?” I asked sarcastically before I took a final sip of my lukewarm coffee. “That was a rhetorical question, by the way.”

“What does rhetorical mean?”

“That you need to go to school and pay attention.”

Rory rolled his eyes. “I used to think you were cool but now ...”

“You finally realized I’m awesome?” I interrupted as I stood and took the check off the end of the table.

“Whatever.”

“Come on, kid. Let’s go do the tourist thing and see the sights. There’s no telling when we’ll get back this way.”



“What do you mean you’ve never seen the original?” I asked as I stared at Rory in shock. I looked back at the women

who'd starred in the recreation of one of my favorite childhood movies and said, "The guys were great, but Rick Moranis made that film."

"Who's that?"

I looked back over at Rory and in my best imitation said, "Honey, I shrunk the kids."

"What kids? How did you ..."

"Oh. My. God. I have so much work to do."

"How would you shrink kids?" Rory asked. His eyes got wide and he asked, "Are you planning to starve me? Is that why you wouldn't get me a hotdog from that ..."

"Did you see that guy's fingernails? Besides, we ate lunch two hours ago. There's no way you're already hungry."

"I'm always hungry," Rory mumbled. "My mom kept snacks in her purse for me."

I thought about all the necessary items I carried in my backpack and realized I should probably add some power bars or something. Apparently, my little brother was a bottomless pit willing to eat anything. He'd probably start gnawing on my arm if I didn't feed him again soon.

"Do you think they have a snack bar here? I want popcorn and some pop."

"I doubt it. I'd bet the last thing Madame Tussaud or any of her employees want is people walking around with buttery fingers touching the figures before they spill their drink on some Hollywood icon's shoes."

"This place is boring," Rory complained, even though he'd been just as enthralled as I was until about thirty seconds ago.

"Come on. It's not that bad. And I think we're almost to the Marvel section. I wonder if they'll let me take a picture with Thor."

"He's not the coolest Avenger."

"He may not be the coolest but ..." I let my voice trail off and sighed. My brother wouldn't appreciate my thoughts on

the god of thunder, just like I really didn't like the way he ogled the Kim K figure we'd passed a few minutes ago. I asked, "Who do you think is the coolest?"

We were passing a window that looked out onto 42nd Street when movement caught my eye.

"What the fuck?" I gasped as I saw a man dragging a boy Rory's size by the arm. The boy was fighting him tooth and nail, and as I watched, he opened his mouth and bit down on the man's hand that was wrapped around his wrist.

Another man staggered toward them holding his stomach as a red bloom grew on his otherwise pristine white shirt. Without even giving it a second thought, I sprinted toward the door and out into the street. As I ran toward the struggling child, I acted on instinct and veered around the pair, coming up behind the man who was lifting a gun to take another shot at the wounded man.

I jumped on the gunman's back to throw off his balance, hoping to give the boy a chance to escape. I wrapped an arm around the kidnapper's neck and squeezed as I used my other hand to claw at his face and eyes. Together, we fell, and I twisted my body in the hopes that he'd land beneath me, giving me the upperhand.

There was a horrifying pop as the man's head hit the concrete bench next to the curb, and he went limp underneath me as I scrambled away. The boy was kneeling beside the bleeding man as tears streamed down his face. I dropped down to my knees on his other side as I told Rory, "Get my phone and call nine one one."

The man I'd thought was unconscious reached up and gripped the front of my shirt. In barely more than a whisper, he ordered, "Take him somewhere safe. There are more coming."

"More ..."

The man pulled me closer and growled, "Get him out of here." He turned his head toward the boy and ordered, "Run, Fred. Now!"

“I can’t leave you,” the boy wailed.

The man looked back at me and gasped, “Please. Help him.”

I heard tires screech close by and lifted my head to look at the car, hoping beyond hope that it was the police. It was clear that the men rushing toward us weren’t there to help, so I jumped up and dragged the boy back toward the door of the museum where a group of tourists were piling out to watch the drama unfold, their cameras at the ready as if they had noticed a film crew shooting a movie scene rather than a real crime in progress.

“Rory! Get lost in the crowd,” I yelled as I reached for him. He ran toward the crowd, a few steps in front of me and darted behind a portly man and his equally large companion. I was falling behind because the boy I held onto was resisting, trying to get back to the man on the ground. “Come on, kid. We’ve gotta do what he said.”

“But ...” I glanced down and saw the boy’s eyes widen when he saw the men running toward us. He immediately changed tack and darted ahead of me, following Rory through the crowd.

I was suddenly yanked backward and realized one of the men had caught up with me and had me by my backpack. I shrugged to get out of the straps and dashed away, leaving the man literally holding the bag as I ducked into the crowd and scrambled to follow my little brother.

Apparently, he’d practiced this skill with his mom because he was much better at it than I’d imagined. He scurried around the back of a bus that was parked at the corner, taking him out of the line of sight. I saw he’d dropped his coat and was urging the boy to take his off too. I did the same thing and then grabbed the boy’s hand and pulled him close beside me as I calmly walked across the street with Rory on my other side.

“Don’t look back,” I hissed as we melded with another bunch on the sidewalk whose view of the drama had been blocked by the city bus. “Stay inside the crowd.”

“Where are we going?” the boy asked as he swiped at his tears.

“Anywhere else,” I said cryptically, resisting the urge to make sure we weren’t being followed. “You can trust us.”

“No, I can’t,” the boy said miserably. “I can’t trust anybody.”

“Left or right?” Rory asked when we neared the intersection.

“Left. It’s a one-way, and we can watch the traffic,” I said to my brother before I asked, “Who are we running from, kid?”

“Who was the man that shot your dad?” Rory asked before he glanced over his shoulder. “It’s clear so far.”

I nodded as the boy shocked the hell out of me by answering, “Mark was the one with the gun. He was one of my guards. The other guy wasn’t my dad; it was Donny, my other guard.”

“Guards?” I asked.

“Who were the other men?” Rory asked at the same time.

“I’m not sure,” the boy answered as he looked over his shoulder. He shivered, and I saw fresh tears fill his eyes before he swiped them away. “They weren’t my dad’s men, though. I know that.”

Sirens filled the air, and I wondered if they were finally arriving at the scene of the crime or if anyone had even called 911 as they watched the scene unfold.

“You got a phone, kid?” I asked, realizing that mine was in my bag along with all of my cash and credit cards.

“No, and my name is Freddy.”

“Well, Freddy, I’ve got no fucking idea what to do with you now, because we’ve got no money and no phone.”

“Take me home. My dad will be worried.”

“Where is home?”

“The Castello.”

“I’m a tourist. I need an address.”

“I don’t know my address,” the boy admitted sheepishly.

“Do you know how to get there?”

“Sort of. Do you know how to get to the Park?”

“Central Park?” I asked, trying to recall the map I’d looked over while we were at the diner.

“Yeah,” Freddy answered, his tone of voice suggesting that he didn’t understand my confusion. To a native New Yorker, there was only *one* park. “If you take me to the Park, we’ll be able to see my building.”

“I think we’re going in the right direction,” Rory said as he got closer to the street and looked ahead. “There’s a bunch of trees up there.”

“The only trees around here are at the Park,” Freddy said as I tried to look around the crowd.

“Well, I wanted to see the sights and experience the real New York again before we left,” I mumbled as I peered over my shoulder, scanning the crowd for the men I’d seen on the street. “I guess this is one way to do it.”

“I wonder if Donny’s okay,” Freddy said as he looked back over his shoulder.

“I heard sirens a minute ago and then they stopped. It sounded like they were behind us,” I lied, trying to reassure the kid. I wasn’t prepared for a meltdown right now. I needed to get him to safety and then get me and my brother as far away from the situation as possible for my brother’s safety. I’d complained that Rory didn’t have enough friends, but making pals with a kid who required armed guards and was in danger of kidnapping wasn’t what I’d had in mind.

“Are you rich or what?” Rory asked bluntly.

I pushed at my brother’s shoulder and said, “That’s rude.”

“Well, he’s got guards. Only rich people and criminals have guards.”

I took in the kid beside me and studied what he was wearing. I knew his shoes cost at least a couple hundred dollars, and his school uniform screamed money too.

My brother was on the right track but had forgotten something so obvious, considering the city we were in.

Rich criminals, like mobsters, often had guards too.

If that was the situation and someone had tried to kidnap this boy, there might be some sort of shit going down at home he wasn't aware of yet. I couldn't exactly drop him off at the front door of the place and let him walk into another dangerous situation.

Well, I could, but I didn't feel right about it.

“What is this castle place?”

“Huh?”

“Your house or whatever,” I said impatiently.

“The Castello.”

“Is it a condo or ...”

He shook his head and interrupted, “It's a hotel.”

“You live in a hotel?” Rory asked with wide eyes. “That's so freaking cool. Do you get room service?”

Freddy shrugged. “Sometimes, when my dad's working or just doesn't want to cook.”

“Is your dad usually home at this time of day?” I asked.

“His office is in the building, too, so he'll probably be there. If he's not, one of my uncles or one of his associates will be.”

“Associates?” I asked. That clinched it. The kid was a mini-mobster.

“Yeah. They work in the building and have their own floor just like we do.”

“You've got a whole floor?” Rory asked, his mouth dropping open in shock.

“Sort of. My uncle Ziggy’s apartment is on our floor too.”

“You have an uncle named Ziggy?” Freddy nodded.
“What’s your dad’s name? Bugsy?”

“Rico.”

“Of course it is,” I mumbled as we stopped at the crosswalk.

The Park was across the street from us now, and Freddy looked up and pointed at a tall building. “That’s The Castello.”

I sighed, trying to figure out the best way to do this. I didn’t want to drag this kid into a bad situation, and I *really* didn’t want to get Rory into one either.

As the light changed, I said, “We need to find a place for you guys to hang out while I find your dad. I want you to stay together, and if I’m not back in twenty minutes, you need to find a cop and tell him what’s going on.”

“I want to go with you,” Freddy said urgently.

“I get that, kid, but I’ve watched enough television and movies to know that if something happened with you on the street, then something else might be going on with your family. I don’t feel right letting you go in until I know for sure it’s safe.”

Freddy didn’t argue, but Rory turned around and looked at me with fear in his eyes. “Do you think there are gonna be more armed men inside?”

“I’m flying by the seat of my pants here. I have no idea what’s going on. We should have seen a cop by now, don’t you think?” I asked as I looked around. I spotted a huge statue surrounded by tourists and said, “Here’s the plan. I want you to stick close to this statue until I come back.”

“Okay,” the boys said in unison.

I pointed at a digital clock on a building across the street and said, “If I’m not back in twenty ... no, give me thirty minutes. If I’m not back by then ... Shit. I have no idea.” I thought about it for a second and said, “Stay by the statue, and

if I don't come back, I want you to look around for a cop. If you can't find one, walk up to a woman who's got kids with her and tell her you're lost. If you don't see a woman with kids, find a gray-haired old lady. Don't leave with *anyone* but me. Got it?"

"What if they find us?" Freddy asked with fear in his voice as he looked at the strangers around us.

"Fight as hard as you can and start screaming 'stranger danger' or some shit," I ordered. I was completely out of my element here and terrified I was doing this all wrong. I had to ask, "They still teach that in school, right?"

Rory and Freddy nodded.

"Okay. Thirty minutes," I reminded them as I pointed at the clock. "If I'm not back by 5:02, find a cop, a mom, or a grandma."

"Got it," Rory said firmly. "We'll be here."

"You good?" I asked Freddy. He nodded, but his eyes told me he was terrified. I felt like I should reassure him, so I said, "You're doing great, kid. I'll find your dad, and then you'll be fine, okay?"

"My dad will fix it."

"Or Ziggy, right? Are you sure I can trust him?"

"There are a few, I think. Ziggy, Relio, Luca, Matteo, Zach, Simmy, Cento, or Tonio. Any of them but ..." Freddy's voice trailed off and tears filled his eyes. "I think we can trust them, but I don't know for sure."

"Rico or Ziggy. Those are the only ones I'll talk to, okay? If I can't find one of them, I'll come back and we'll make another game plan."

Freddy nodded, and I pulled him under one arm to give him a reassuring squeeze as I did the same thing with Rory on the other side.

I glanced over at the clock and said, "5:07 now, right?"

"Right."

“What’s your last name, Freddy?”

“Romano. My dad is Federico Romano.”

“Got it.”

3.

BEX

I did what I'd seen actors on television do a million times and darted between cars to get to the massive hotel across the street from the Park. It was so tall that I almost lost my balance trying to see the top of it and wished I had my camera so I'd have a piece of this adventure to look back on.

But that wasn't going to happen since my camera was in the backpack I'd left the man holding after he tried to grab me. I pushed through the revolving door of the fancy hotel and came to an abrupt halt when it delivered me out into the marble foyer.

I had a flash of memory come to me of walking through this foyer with my dad ages ago, but it flitted away almost as quickly as it came. Of course, that could have something to do with the sharply-dressed woman walking my way with a stern look.

"Welcome to The Castello. Is there something I can help you with?"

"I'm here to see Mr. Romano." The woman's well-manicured eyebrows rose and I clarified, "Federico Romano."

The woman tilted her head and gave me a fake smile before she asked, "Do you have an appointment?"

"I don't, but if you'll just point me toward his office, I'll give him a quick message." I looked around for a clock but didn't see one, so I asked, "What time is it? It's very important that I talk to him right away. I'm on a strict deadline."

"If you'd like to leave your name and number so you can go to your next ... appointment, I'll make sure and get it to Mr. Romano's assistant."

“Honey, I get that you’re the first line of defense to keep the riffraff like me out of this joint, but I’m not going anywhere until I talk to Mr. Romano in person. Believe me. He’s going to want to hear what I’ve got to say.”

“That’s doubtful,” the woman muttered.

“You think? Even if it’s about his son?” The lady’s entire demeanor changed, and her eyes darted off to the side before she gave an almost imperceptible nod in my direction. I lifted my left arm and tapped my wrist as I snarked, “Tick tock, sweetheart. We’re running out of time here.”

“Please come with me,” the woman said as she abruptly spun around and hurried farther into the hotel.

I glanced over my shoulder toward the Park, praying that I was making the right decision leaving the boys there alone, and then rushed to catch up with the snooty woman so I could get this taken care of and be on my way. My impulsive reaction to help that boy in the street was putting my little brother in danger, and I’d vowed to his mother to keep him safe. The quicker I got the mini-mobster delivered, the quicker I could get my brother and I as far away from this situation as possible.

She stopped in front of a bank of elevators, and I skidded to a halt next to her, out of breath and wondering how she could move so fast in heels that high. “Is there any way you can just call him down here? I’ve really got to get back outside within just a few minutes.”

“You can let him know you’re in a hurry as soon as we get to his office,” she hedged. She waved me past her into the elevator where a dapper gentleman was holding the door open. I smiled at him as I entered and then turned to say something else to the ice queen. The door started to close with her on the other side, and when I jerked forward to put my hand out to stop it, the man growled as he pushed me against the back wall of the car. “What the hell?”

“You’ve got two choices, sweetheart,” the man said in a heavy New York accent. “Shut the fuck up and be still until it

comes time to answer some questions, or I'll *make* you shut the fuck up."

"Who the fuck do you think you are putting your hands on me?" I bluffed, pretending I wasn't terrified as the elevator rose toward what was probably going to be my horrific death at the hands of this oversized goon. "Don't threaten me, asshole!"

The car came to a stop and I saw that we had passed the regular floors and gone to the penthouse. I looked back over at the scowling neanderthal next to me, and then the doors started to open.

I had a split second to think that the man standing in the open doorway was, by far, the most handsome man I'd ever seen. But once I got a good look at him and took in his demeanor, I changed my mind. While he may have been statuesque, he was much too chilling to be considered anything but unnerving.

"Where is my son?"

I backed up in fear at the barely-controlled rage in his voice, but the goon gripped my upper arm and jerked me toward the homicidal man.

I tried to wrench my arm away, but his grip was like steel, and I only hurt myself more. I asked, "Are you Federico Romano?"

"You know goddamn good and well who I am," the man in the suit snarled. And then every muscle in his body tensed until I could see the tendons rippling in his neck as his face came within inches of mine as he roared, "*Where the fuck is my son?*"

"Listen, guy. Your kid is fine and will be for the next few minutes, hopefully."

"Where is he? Who's got him?" Federico asked, this time his voice was so low it was a sinister growl.

"Obviously, you know what happened earlier, so you know he's in danger, or at least he was."

“Take her into the equipment room and get some answers before I fucking choke her to death.”

“Sure thing, boss,” the muscle man said as he started to drag me down the hall.

“No!” I yelled as I turned to try and keep an eye on the man in the suit. “Freddy told me I could only trust two people!”

“Wait.”

The ogre stopped in his tracks and spun me around to face his boss.

“Where is my son?”

“I have to know that you’re one of the names he gave me,” I said pleadingly. “If you are his father, surely you understand.”

“One of my men was killed in front of my son and the other isn’t likely to make it through surgery. My son was in the middle of a fucking shootout and you want me to show you some goddamn identification?”

“Yes. I do.” I watched the man reach behind him and prayed he was going for his wallet and not a weapon. “If you’re one of the men on the list, I’ll take you to him.”

“You’ll tell me where he is and sit your ass right here until I know he’s safe.”

“No. My little brother is with him and he won’t go anywhere with you, meaning he’ll be there all alone once you collect your son. If you are the man I’m looking for, then I’ll take you to him and we can part ways.”

“If you’re lying to me about my son being safe, I’ll slit your throat myself.”

“I have no doubt,” I mumbled as I looked down at the wallet in the man’s hand. He flipped it open, and I leaned closer, resisting the pull of the goon still attached to my arm. “Federico Romano. You’re one he said to find.”

“Let’s go,” Mr. Romano said as he walked toward the open elevator.

The guard followed him, dragging me at his side as I yelled, “Let me go!” and tried to yank my arm out of his grip again.

“Sam.”

With just that one word, the burly man let me go. I reached over and rubbed my arm as he put his phone to his ear.

“We’re coming down. Be ready.” He put the phone back in his pocket and said, “I’ve got men waiting downstairs. They can follow you. There’s a car waiting.”

Just then, the elevator door opened, and I was faced with a wall of terrifying men in suits. Their sizes ranged from huge and impenetrable like the man who’d been holding me to fit and muscular. Even with the difference in sizes, they all had one thing in common: their murderous expressions. Mr. Romano waved toward the open door and ordered, “Lead the way.”

I took off at a brisk clip toward the front of the hotel and heard a crowd of footsteps behind me. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw that the men had surrounded Mr. Romano, and it reminded me of the times I’d seen the president walking in public surrounded by Secret Service agents.

The revolving door spit me out onto the sidewalk along with the men. I took off toward the street and immediately had a man on either side of me, so close that my shoulders were touching their arms. We wove through traffic, and this time no one honked at us, as if they knew better than to mess with the men behind me. Once we were in the Park, I crossed the grass and hurried toward the statue. As soon as I came around it and spotted Rory and Freddy, I heard the man behind me gasp.

“Dad!” Freddy screamed and sprinted our way.

Rory jogged behind him, and as soon as he was close enough, he threw his arms around me. I held him close and

felt him shiver and worried that I'd left him out in the cold for too long with only a hoodie.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Rory whispered as held me tight. "We were scared that something bad was happening inside and you'd get hurt trying to find his dad."

"No worries. I found him right away, and we got back here as quickly as we could," I lied. When Rory pulled back to look at me, I smiled and said, "I've had enough adventure for one day. What do you say we go home?"

"I'm cold. Can we take a cab?"

"I don't have ..."

"Mr. Romano asked that I take you back to the hotel to warm up while I arrange for a driver to take you home," a voice offered from behind me. I turned around and stared at the man in shock. Sam, my captor who had definitely left bruises on my arm, was all hospitality and helpfulness now. It was all I could do not to punch him in his benevolent face.

"I need a bathroom," Rory said bluntly.

I sighed and nodded at Sam before I tucked Rory under my arm and began walking back to the hotel. All but two of the well-appointed thugs, other than Sam, were gone, and they'd whisked Mr. Romano and Freddy away imperceptibly.

"We'll go inside while you find someone to drive us home, but I'm still pissed about what happened before, just so you know."

"I apologize and assure you it won't happen again."

"What did he do?" Rory asked.

"He bumped into me and didn't bother to say excuse me," I lied as I shot daggers at Sam.

"Do they have food there? I'm starving."

"We've got food at ..."

"I'll escort you to the restaurant. Mr. Romano will be happy to get you whatever you like."

“I don’t think we’re dressed for that,” I said honestly. “Just get us home.”

“Please, Bex! I’m starving, and you said you wanted to see Manhattan. Let’s see a fancy restaurant,” Rory urged. He looked at Sam before he asked, “They have burgers, right? Not just caviar and stuff?”

“You don’t even have to look at the menu. Just tell the server what you want, and the chef will make it for you.”

“I want brownies and pizza and ...”

“You’ll be fine with a burger,” I interrupted. “The sooner we get home, the better.”

“Really? He said I can have *anything*, Bex.”

“Burger,” I hissed.

“You suck.”

I resisted the urge to yell at my brother, and when I heard Sam’s bark of laughter, I had to resist the urge to yell at him too.



RICO

“What’s going on, Dad?” Freddy asked the second the elevator door slid shut. I still had my arm around his shoulders, and only realized I was crushing him against my side when he started to squirm. “Is Donny going to be okay?”

“I don’t know yet, son. They were rushing him to the hospital.” I was surprised he didn’t ask about Mark but didn’t want to get into it right now, so I avoided mentioning his name. The door opened, and I waited until two of my men had checked the hall before I walked out pulling Freddy close behind me. “Get inside and stay with Mona. I’m going to talk to your Uncle Ziggy.”

I waited outside the door until Freddy had gone in with my men who I had no doubt were loyal to me. I’d known them for

years and knew I could trust them to watch over my son along with my housekeeper, Mona, who would protect any of my children like a mother bear protecting her cubs.

“Where are the boys? And Constance?”

“Luca and Matteo got to them first. They pulled them out of practice and took them to their mom’s jewelry store since that was the closest safe location. Constance was in class and she ...” Dario trailed off and sighed before he said, “She refused to leave the campus, so her guards had to use ... um, alternate means of persuasion.”

“Alternate?”

“Sully threw her over his shoulder and carried her out.”

I closed my eyes and let my head fall forward as I took a deep, calming breath. All four of my children were safe for now, but Freddy had been through trauma that would probably affect him for years to come. Hopefully, Donny would pull through, but I would have to help him work through Mark’s death since he was close to both men.

“Where are they taking Constance?”

“They were in the parking garage a few ...”

I heard my daughter’s voice as the elevator slid open, and I turned to face her just as she said, “I don’t know what’s going on, Dad, but I *will not* ...”

I put my hand up and interrupted, “Someone tried to kidnap Freddy off the street.”

“Oh no! Is he ...” Constance’s anger turned to fear, and I shook my head.

“He’s here. I haven’t had a chance to talk to him yet, but I was about to go inside.”

“Is he hurt?”

“No, but Donny was shot, and Mark is dead.”

Constance put her hand over her mouth as tears filled her eyes. “Did he see it happen?”

“I don’t know yet, but I assume so. I was just checking to make sure the rest of you were safe, and now I’m going to go inside to talk to him.”

“I’ll come with you. Where are Nicky and Vigo?”

“They’re safe with Luca and Matteo. Once we figure out exactly what’s going on, they’ll bring them home.”

“I didn’t know what was going on and ...”

“I apologize, sir. I had to ...”

Constance interrupted Sully as she shook her head, “I was being a brat. I should have just done what you asked, Sully. I’m sorry. I know you were acting on orders, but I didn’t think ... I didn’t know ... Oh God.”

Constance burst into tears, the adrenaline gone now, replaced with fear for what could have happened to her brother. She shook her head and took a shuddery breath as she wiped her cheeks. Her entire demeanor transformed as she channeled her sorrow into anger. She put her shoulders back and lifted her chin before she gave me a sharp nod and turned to leave the apartment.

I glanced at Sully and gave him a tight smile before I said, “Thank you for bringing her, whether she wanted to come or not.”

“I know he told you never to touch me, but in this case, there’s no need to apologize,” Constance said as she narrowed her eyes and pointed at Sully and then her other guard, Park. “But I will *not* be carted around like a sack of potatoes ever again.”

“You will if that’s what it takes to make you safe,” Park said flatly with a shrug.

Constance huffed and stormed toward the door. I could hear her mumbling under her breath, and even in such a stressful situation, it was hard not to smile. Once again, I felt my choice of guards for my daughter had been validated. She could be headstrong and difficult, but it seemed that neither of them cared as long as she was safe.

“I’m going to keep Constance here. One of you should stay here in the hall, and the other needs to get with Dario for instructions. He’s securing the building in case there’s another attempt.” I started walking toward the door and then turned to look at my daughter’s guards. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

Both nodded solemnly before they turned back to Dario.

I walked into the apartment and turned left from the foyer to step into the kitchen where I could hear Freddy and Constance. Freddy hopped up from the floor where he was sitting with the dogs and charged into me at full speed, wrapping his arms around my waist as I clutched him to me, resting my chin on the top of his head.

“I was so scared, Dad.”

“I know, son. I’m sorry to have to do this right now, but I need to ask you some questions about what happened today. Did you see ...”

“Mark.”

“Right, I know, son. I’m sorry he’s gone, but ...”

“No, I mean Mark tried to kidnap me, and Donny fought him. He shot Donny and was dragging me away.”

I heard Constance’s horrified gasp as I put my hands on Freddy’s shoulders and looked into his eyes. “Mark?”

Freddy nodded. “He wasn’t supposed to be working today. I was with Donny. Since it was Friday and I aced my math quiz, we were going to get something to eat and play some games at the arcade until you got off work. Mark was there waiting for us when we got out of the car. I thought he was there to hang out, but he told Donny he was sorry and then pulled out his gun.”

“Holy shit,” Constance whispered. When I glanced over, I saw that her hands were in front of her mouth as if she were praying, and there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Donny pushed me behind him and said, ‘No, man, don’t do this to the kid,’ and then Mark shot him.” Freddy was

crying now, and he swiped at his tears before he said, “Donny pushed me toward the door, but Mark caught me and started dragging me away. He was going to shoot Donny again, but Bex jumped on him, and I was able to get away. We ran to Donny, and he told her to take me and keep me safe. We ran into the crowd with her brother while the two men ...”

“What two men?” I barked.

“They were chasing us and grabbed her bag when they got close enough. She let it go, and we kept running. She didn’t have any money since it was in her bag along with her phone, so we walked here. She made me stay in the Park with her brother because she didn’t want me to walk into a trap.”

“Fuck,” I hissed as my mind raced, imagining Freddy’s terror when one of the men he trusted - one of the men I’d trusted with his life - betrayed us.

A vision of the woman who had faced my rage and threats, never faltering in her protection of my son by giving me any information until she knew it was safe, filled my mind.

“You should have seen her, Dad! She jumped on Mark and clawed at his face until he let me go. She had us take off our coats and push into the crowd. I don’t know why we had to leave our coats but ...”

“It was because the people chasing you would be looking for the color of the coat and not the clothes underneath them,” I interrupted.

“That was so smart! Then she walked us down this one-way street so she could see the cars that were coming, and when we got to the Park, she made us promise to stay together. If she didn’t come back by a certain time, we were supposed to find a cop, a mom with a baby, or an old lady who looked nice.”

“Why didn’t she just bring you home?” Constance asked.

“She said she was worried that something bad might be happening here since Mark was supposed to be my guard. She wanted to make sure it was safe to bring me inside. She said if

she couldn't find you or Uncle Ziggy, we'd figure out another plan."

"Who is this woman?" Constance asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I never even asked her name."

Constance's mouth opened in shock and she asked, "You don't know? But she saved Freddy!"

"Shit." I looked at the floor and shook my head. I never considered getting her information at the time because I was focused on Freddy and making sure my other kids were safe.

I hadn't even thanked the woman.

"Her name is Bex, and her brother's name is Rory. His mom died, and they can't find his dad. Bex is his sister, and she's going to take him to Las Vegas with her as soon as the judge says it's okay. You have to find her, Dad. Not just so we can say thank you, but she lost her money and her phone. We should at least ..."

"I'll take care of it. I wasn't thinking about anything other than you guys, and I treated her ... well, I wasn't very nice to her," I hedged, not wanting to admit the threats I'd thrown at her. I could tell by the look on Constance's face that she had some idea. "I told Sam to get someone to drive her home. I'll find out where she lives and thank her personally and then invite her to dinner so Freddy can thank her too."

"At least," Constance muttered.

"And I'll replace her phone and cash."

"And her bag too," Freddy reminded me.

"Yes. Her bag too. First, I need to get in touch with the Russo brothers to see when they're going to get Nicky and Vigo home. Once I have all of you safe in one place, I'll check with the hospital about Donny's condition."

"I guess I'm staying here tonight?" Constance asked.

"At least through the weekend," I said firmly.

“But I have ...” Constance started to argue but stopped, took a deep breath, and nodded as she blew it out slowly, rethinking her plans in light of the current situation. “I’ll hang out with Freddy while you find out about Nicky and Vigo.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Find this Bex woman and thank her.”

“And get her number so I can hang out with Rory again. He was really cool.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I assured them. I hugged Freddy and then kissed my daughter on the forehead before I pulled her in for a hug too. “Love you guys.”

“We’re all okay, Dad,” Constance whispered as she held me tight. “Love you too. Please be safe.”

“Of course.”

When Constance tilted her head and stared at me with a blank expression, it reminded me so much of her mother that I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. Instead, I walked to the front door, ready to get my boys home and find my little boy’s savior.

She was an angel, and I’d treated her horribly. It was time to rectify that.

4.

BEX

“Thanks for the ride!” Rory called out before I smiled at the driver and then glared at the goon who had been assigned to accompany us. I’d had enough of the whole mobster thing, so much so that I’d probably never be able to watch one of my favorite movies again without having flashbacks that made my eye twitch. I had just slammed the door of the Town Car when the silent one opened his door and got out.

“I’ll walk you up,” he said before he shut the door.

“That’s not necessary.”

“I insist.”

“Of course you do,” I said sarcastically. “Listen, thanks for the ride and all, but I’d rather not have the neighbors thinking I associate with ... Well, you get what I’m saying, right?”

The handsome man raised his eyebrows and shrugged before he said, “I’m still going to walk you to the door.”

“Hurry up, Bex! It’s cold out here.”

It was freezing, and we didn’t have coats now. After the day we’d had, I decided that I wasn’t going to think about that problem right now. To quote Scarlett O’Hara, “I’ll think of it all tomorrow.”

“You do have your key, right?” I asked Rory.

He nodded as he reached into the neck of his hoodie and pulled out the leather string that held the key to the security entrance along with a key to our apartment. His mother had trained him to wear it every day so he wouldn’t get locked out when he went down to play in the area between the buildings. Today, I appreciated her effort because my keys were in my bag somewhere on 42nd Street, and I was *not* in the mood to deal with the cranky, creepy building manager.

Rory unlocked the security door, and the guard held it open so I could walk in ahead of him.

“Okay, we’re in now. Thanks.”

“Thank you for helping Freddy this afternoon. Be assured that your heroism won’t be ignored.”

“Oh, it already has been, but I’ll give him a pass because he was obviously terrified for his son’s safety.”

“It was a stressful day for all of us,” the man mumbled before he said, “Thank you for your help. Someone will be in touch soon.”

“No need for that. We’ll be moving in a few weeks, and this will all become a ... not so fond memory.” I smiled at the uncomfortable look on his face and added, “Thanks for the ride.”

The man nodded and then let the door close before he turned to walk back to the car.

I watched him for a second, even in my sour mood, noticing just how good-looking and fit he was. When I turned to follow Rory down the hall, he was looking down with confusion. I looked over his head to the apartment door, and my heart lurched when I realized his key was turning too easily.

“That’s weird ...” Rory let out a grunt when I grabbed him by the hood of his shirt and yanked him back toward me. “What the ...”

“Our door is open,” I whispered as I spun Rory around and aimed him toward the front door of the building. I heard the door behind me swing open and screamed, “Run!” right before an arm wrapped around me and pulled me into the apartment.

For a split second, I panicked, and everything I’d ever been taught about self-defense flew out the window. I heard my mentor’s voice in my head, and my muscle memory kicked in.

“Dead weight is harder to carry. Go limp and it will pull your attacker forward and off-balance, then you come up

fighting like a wildcat.”

I let my entire body go lax. The man behind me grunted and bent forward until my feet touched the ground. The second they did, I used that to my advantage and pushed up as hard as I could. I heard a loud clack as his teeth snapped together as the top of my head hit his chin. He was stunned and loosened his grip on me. I spun around and grabbed his balls at the same time that I bit down on his neck, grinding my teeth together to inflict maximum pain.

The man inhaled sharply and rose to his full height, but I hung on with all my might. He reached up and yanked the hair at the back of my head as his other hand clutched at my neck. I used my free hand to scratch his face, and every time he hit me, I ground my teeth together to inflict more pain.

Suddenly, he was perfectly still, and for a second, I wondered if he was about to try and use my own trick against me.

“Let her go,” a voice ordered. The man took his hands off of me immediately, but I didn’t let go of him. “Ma’am, step back.” I could barely hear the man over the sound of my own frantic heartbeat, and his words didn’t fully register until I realized the barrel of a gun rested against my attacker’s forehead just inches above me. “You can relax now. I’ve got this.”

I recognized the voice as belonging to the guard that accompanied us to our apartment, so I let go and scrambled behind him as he held the man at gunpoint.

“What the fuck?” I screamed as I wiped blood from my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Get in the car with your brother.”

“But I ...”

“Get in the car!”

“Then what?” I yelled back. “He’s in my fucking house!”

“I’ll take care of this.”

I sprinted out of the building and down the steps toward the waiting Town Car. The back passenger door opened, and I dove inside before my brother pulled it shut behind me. I reached for Rory and saw that his eyes were wide with shock as he studied my face.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Why are you bleeding?”

I shook my head and swiped at my mouth again before I asked the driver, “What do we do now? Did you call nine one one?”

He moved his arm, and I heard a click behind me right before the car shook and the trunk slammed shut. The man who’d rescued me opened the door I’d just come through and asked Rory, “Can I borrow your key, buddy? I want to lock the apartment before we go.”

Rory nodded and yanked the cord over his head before he handed it over. The man was gone in the next instant, and my brother and I sat there, staring at each other in shock.

“What happened in there? Where’s the man who grabbed you?”

I knew without a doubt that he was in the trunk. What I didn’t know was whether he was still breathing or if there was blood spatter all over our entryway. I realized that I didn’t care either way at this point. My adrenaline was fading fast.

My guardian angel slid into the car next to me, nudging me closer to my brother as he pulled the door shut. The car started moving, and I watched the man’s profile as I waited for him to say something ... *anything* ... about what had just happened.

“Where are we going? Is that man still in our apartment? What did he want? Why did he grab Bex? Did you kill him? Did he take my XBox? What about ...”

I squeezed Rory’s knee. He seemed to get my unspoken message to stop talking, so I asked the man, “Where are you

taking us?”

“Mr. Romano asked that I bring you back to the hotel. He’ll be waiting there to let you know what’s going on.”

“And then what?” The man shrugged, and I wanted to punch him. Instead, I said, “Thank you for helping me.”

“No problem.”

Rory took my hand, and I could feel him trembling. I put my arm around his shoulders and pulled him against me as I leaned down and whispered, “It’s gonna be okay. We’re safe now, alright?”

“Why is this happening to us?”

“We were at the wrong place at the right time, and now we’re experiencing the fallout.”

“Is this all because you helped Freddy?”

“I think so,” I said as I looked at the guard. He gave an almost imperceptible nod, and I sighed. “I won’t let anyone hurt you. I promise.”

I understood my little brother had complete faith in me to take care of him when the next thing he said was, “I’m still hungry. Can we get something else to eat?”



RICO

“Do you think this is a set-up?”

“If it was, I can’t see what Frank would think it would accomplish other than sacrificing someone who’s loyal to him.”

“I was talking about her,” Ziggy corrected. “It seems a little too convenient that she just happened to be there, gets in your good graces, and then Frank’s men are after her and she needs to be rescued. He’d know you’d bring her here.”

“And then he’d have someone inside that we’d never suspect.”

“Exactly.” Ziggy sat with his thoughts for a second before he said, “How else would he know where she lives?”

“When they were at the restaurant earlier, she felt bad that she didn’t have money for a tip even though the meal was free. She mentioned that she lost her bag in the scuffle ...”

I interrupted Sam, “Freddy said that the men grabbed her backpack so she shrugged it off to get away.”

“That would explain why she didn’t have her wallet and how they found her address.”

“Ziggy’s right, but why would he go after her?” Sam asked.

“Frank will go after anyone who gets in his way, whether it’s necessary or not. There might not be any other reason than to make her pay for interrupting his original plan. He’s a devious bastard when crossed.”

“He never forgets a slight, no matter how small,” Ziggy agreed.

“Interrupting today’s plan was more than a small slight in Frank’s eyes. That would have taken a lot of time to prepare, considering how long Mark has been with us. I’d imagine he’s livid right now.”

“Especially since it showed his hand. He knows that we’ll take even more care to protect Freddy ... all the kids in the future.”

I glanced over at Sam to see if he caught Ziggy’s slip of the tongue, but he didn’t react. Instead, he agreed, “That’s true. The other kids are bigger and could put up more of a fight, so he’d consider Freddy the weak link. I’ve got the security team on high alert and brought in an extra set of eyes to watch the monitors.”

We turned to face the car that was driving toward us through the private parking garage, waiting for it to come to a stop before we moved closer. Park was the first one out, and

Freddy's rescuer was right behind him. The boy that scrambled out behind her looked so much like my son that it was almost eerie. He strangely didn't favor his sister much at all.

Freddy's protector was about five foot four and solidly built. I could tell by her body shape that she worked out but also enjoyed good food. That might bode well, considering I had a lot to make up for and my daughter was convinced that my love language was cooking. I still wasn't sure what that meant, but I know all my best thinking happened while I was in the kitchen, and I truly loved sitting down to a home-cooked dinner with my kids as we caught up on our day. That was something my wife had never enjoyed, probably because she considered a meal to be three bites of bland chicken breast and a scrap of lettuce.

The woman's light brown hair was tousled, falling just past her shoulders, and I could see that parts of it were matted with blood. There was more dried blood on her chin and near her nose. I wondered how badly she was injured before Park was able to get to her.

"This place is so cool," the boy said as he looked around the garage. "Look at that car, Bex!"

The woman, Bex, glanced at the car the young man was excited about and raised her eyebrows. I could see her assessing its worth before she looked back at me.

I took a step closer to her and extended my hand. "I know we've already met under rather stressful circumstances but ..."

"You threatened to slit my throat."

Ziggy coughed and cleared his throat, and I heard the boy gasp.

"I apologize for the way I treated you. I'd like to start over, if we can."

The woman looked at my hand and frowned before she clasped it with her own and said, "Bex Holland."

"Federico Romano," I introduced myself, taking note of her firm grip. I tilted my head toward Ziggy and said, "This is

my brother, Ziggy, and you've met Sam and Park, of course."

"Park?" she asked, glancing at Constance's guard who had come to her defense not long ago. She grinned as she studied the man. "I would have guessed Bruno or something more gangster-like. Park sounds like a frat boy's name."

Park scowled at her, and I heard Ziggy cough again, probably trying to cover his laughter.

"Is Freddy here?" the boy asked.

"He's upstairs. Sam will you escort ... I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Rory Holland," the boy said as he stuck his hand out to shake mine. I introduced him to my brother who also shook his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"And you," I said with a smile, impressed with his manners. "Sam, will you escort Rory upstairs to hang out with Freddy and Constance while I talk to his sister?"

"Of course. Come on, big guy."

Rory looked at me and then the men around us before he shook his head. "I'll stay with Bex."

"It's okay, Rory. Go see your new friend, and I'll come get you in just a bit." Rory looked at his sister in question, and she smiled at him with a reassuring nod. "Go on. It's okay."

The four of us watched Sam and Rory get into the elevator and were silent until the doors closed.

"Ms. Holland, I ..."

"Did I just lie to my brother?"

"Excuse me?"

"I told him I'd see him in a bit and everything was going to be okay. Was that a lie?"

"Why would it be?"

"I'm well aware that there's a body in the trunk of that car, and I want to know if that's my destiny too."

“You must be mistaken. There’s no one in the trunk,” I lied.

“Bullshit. I’m not an idiot, Mr. Romano. I know that your bulldog didn’t leave the man bleeding out in my apartment because I felt the car move when he dropped his body into the trunk. Let me just say that I’ll forget *all* of that and pretend I’ve never met any of you if you’ll just let my brother and I live and move on.”

“And how will you do that? You’ve got no money, identification, or phone. It’s not safe for you to go home right now.”

“I don’t know how I’ll manage, but it’s obviously not safe to be involved with your ... whatever this is either.”

“I’d like to invite you to be my guests until we can make other arrangements.”

“Your guests or hostages?”

“You’re welcome to take your brother and leave, but I wouldn’t suggest that. The person who organized my son’s abduction and then sent the man to your apartment won’t stop until he finds you. Considering he has your ID and personal items, that won’t be hard for him.”

“Why would he do that, though? Because I helped a kid?”

“Because he’s unstable and you got in the way of his plans. It’s as simple as that. My son tells me that you’re moving soon.”

“To Vegas,” Ms. Holland confirmed. “I have to wait for Rory’s custody paperwork to be approved by the court and pack our apartment, but we plan to leave in the next few weeks.”

“I’d like to help you with all of that, and while I do, you are welcome to be a guest in my home.”

“You’re going to just let us stay in a room here?”

I was just as surprised as she was when I answered, “No, you’ll be staying in the penthouse with my family.”

5.

BEX

I tried my best to get a read on Mr. Romano, Rico, his brother Ziggy, and their friend Sam. Park was an open book. He oozed hostility, and you didn't need my skills to see that he was filled with barely-restrained savagery. However, there was an honesty to his facial expressions and voice that assured me he wasn't there to hurt me.

Ziggy Romano was not nearly as intense as his brother. His demeanor felt casual in comparison with him even having to stifle his laughter at something that was said. I could see by his appraising eyes that he wasn't completely docile, his eyes studying me until they shot over to his brother in shock at his invitation.

Since I'd met Sam before, I had a better baseline on his demeanor. He was relaxed compared to how tense he'd been when we met and then later when he entertained us at the restaurant. He seemed shocked that Rico would invite us into his home but shrugged it off as his gaze went back to the car we'd arrived in.

The car that had a subdued, possibly dead, assailant in the trunk. Since none of them had admitted he was there, I still wasn't sure if he was alive or dead and found that I didn't care either way. The man had attacked me with intent to injure and would have hurt my brother, too, if given the chance. His health and well-being weren't very high on my list of concerns.

Rico Romano was a harder study. He looked surprised by his own suggestion, but there was sincerity in his body language. I could sense a dark tension in the man just from the lines and creases on his face, but he spoke to his employees with respectful authority. I could appreciate that in a person in a position of power, and I was sure his employees did too.

Was employee even the word used to describe mafia members? I'd have to research that now. I was curious about their specific vernacular. Apparently, I'd be spending some time around that particular subgenre, so I'd probably get plenty of experience and knowledge in the coming days.

"If you'll come with me, I'll take you upstairs and show you around," Rico said as he turned and motioned toward the elevator.

As we were walking away, I heard Sam ask, "Is Bex your real name, Ms. Holland?"

"Maybe," I answered, not willing to give up my real name to make it easier for the security guy to look me up. "Ask the man in the trunk where he put my ID. When you find it, you'll know."

Rico was still chuckling at my non-answer when he scanned a keycard that would take us to the penthouse. As the elevator started to move, he turned and apologized with a sincere expression.

"I'm sorry for how I treated you earlier, Ms. Holland. I hope you understand that my son's safety was my main concern at the time. You're not in any danger from me or my associates now."

"I don't have kids of my own, but I'm very protective of Rory. I get where you were coming from, and I won't hold it against you, Mr. Romano."

"Call me Rico," he insisted. "You might not hold it against me, but you won't forget it happened, I suppose."

"Not likely. The first time someone threatens to kill you sticks. You can call me Bex. It makes me feel like a school teacher when people call me Ms. Holland."

"Thank you for saving Freddy today, Bex. Most people wouldn't have jumped into the middle of a gunfight, but you did it to save a little boy you didn't even know. The fact that you were able to safely escape and lead him back to me is admirable. It's a true feat to be that calm and collected in a situation such as that. It says a lot about you."

“Like what?” I asked as the elevator came to a stop.

Rico waited for the doors to open and then rested his hand on my lower back to nudge me into the hall. “Most people wouldn’t think to shed their coat so it’s easier to get lost in a crowd.”

“I’m not like most people.”

“I’m beginning to see that.” Rico nodded at the two men stationed in the short hallway outside the elevator and then motioned toward the door to the left before he said, “That’s my brother Ziggy’s suite.” He guided me toward a door on the right as he said, “And this is my family’s.”

Rico put his thumb on a sensor beside the door and pushed it open before he stepped aside and let me walk through. I smiled at the guard standing next to the door and he nodded in response, his expression never changing before he walked back toward the elevator.

“If you’ll give me your sizes, I’ll get some clothes for you and your brother,” Rico said as we walked down the hall. I couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of an established mafia boss strolling through Target pushing one of their red carts as he tried to find a bra that would fit me. “Why is that funny?”

“Just the idea of you shopping is enough to crack me up.”

“Why?”

“You live in the penthouse at one of the most exclusive addresses in the city, so I can’t really see you mingling among the commoners at the mall.”

Rico gave me a mysterious smile and then asked again, “Your sizes?” I decided to roll with it because I really needed some fresh clothes, so I told him my sizes. “And Rory’s?” Once I’d given him that information, he pulled his phone out and sent a text before he smiled at me again. “We should have a selection for you to choose from within the hour.”

“Ah. That makes more sense.”

“What?”

“You sent a minion to do it. I should have known.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t just live in the penthouse, I own the building. You may not believe me, but I’ve done a fair share of *mingling* in my day, and I’m not afraid to do it again.”

I heard his emphasis on that word and knew he was implying something more intimate than shopping, but I let it go and replied, “Maybe the commoners should be afraid of you.”

“The ones that know me personally know that there’s nothing to be afraid of as long as we’re all on the same page.”

“I feel like that’s a threat.”

Rico tilted his head and smiled again, but it felt predatory rather than sincere. “I’ve only known you for such a short time, but I’m positive there’s nothing common about you, Bex Holland.”

“Hello?” I heard a voice call out right before a stunning woman came around the corner and stopped in the doorway. She smiled at me and said, “Hi. You must be Rory’s sister.”

I passed Rico and the immaculate staircase and walked through the foyer toward the woman as I smiled. Assuming she was the woman of the house, I said, “You must be Mrs. Romano. I’m Bex Holland.”

The younger woman threw her head back and laughed before she said, “I’m not Mrs. Anything yet, but I am a Romano.” She stuck her hand out to shake mine and introduced herself, “I’m Constance Romano.”

My facial expression must have shown my shock, and Rico said, “This is my daughter. Constance, this is the woman that saved Freddy today.”

Constance’s expression changed in an instant, and tears filled her eyes before she took me into her arms and whispered, “Thank you so much.”

I patted her back awkwardly and said, “I couldn’t let someone hurt a child.”

Constance leaned back and earnestly said, “We’re forever in your debt, Ms. Holland. If there’s ever anything you need,

just come to one of us, and we'll make it happen."

"Thank you, but that's not necessary. Letting us stay here until we figure out what I'm going to do is more than enough."

"You're staying here?"

"Constance, please show Ms. Holland and her brother to the guest rooms. There should be a delivery within the hour so they'll have some clothes and toiletries since their stay was ... unexpected."

I looked at him and snorted at the understatement before I turned back to the woman and said, "One of the bad guys was in our apartment when they took us home."

"Oh no." Constance studied my face and asked, "Did he hit you?"

"No," I said, drawing out the word. I touched my face and grimaced when I felt something near my mouth. "Shit. I probably need a tetanus shot or something."

"Is that blood?"

I nodded before I clarified, "It's not *my* blood."

Constance's eyebrows rose before she said, "I'll show you to the bathroom so you can clean up."

Rico spoke just then and said, "I've got to take care of something downstairs." I glanced over and saw a grim expression on his face and somehow knew this had to do with the man in the trunk. "I'm not sure how long I'll be, but Constance and the boys will make sure you and your brother are comfortable."

"I will," Constance assured him.

Rico leaned over and kissed his daughter's cheek before he nodded at me and then turned to leave.

"Come on," Constance said. "You can freshen up in your room, and then I'll give you a tour of the house."

I followed her through the foyer, more than ready to have a second to myself so I could process the events of the day. I was proud of myself for holding it together this long, but I

knew I needed a few minutes before I exploded. Thinking and rethinking the decisions I'd made today made me want to sob uncontrollably. I couldn't help but worry that my future was absolutely fucked. My life had turned into a roller coaster, and I was more than ready for the ride to stop.



RICO

I walked through the door that Dario held open but stopped short just inside the room.

I instantly recognized the man hanging from the hook in the ceiling, and my mind was flooded by a barrage of childhood memories that included Bartholomew Lewsted. Bart was the first friend I'd made at the boys' school I'd been sent to after my mother was killed. I'd cut off contact in college when he'd been expelled for drugging a sorority girl at a party. What he'd done was unconscionable, and when he'd come to me asking for my help to afford an attorney since his family had cut him off, I'd laughed in his face. Then, with my brothers' help, I'd beaten him within an inch of his life for what he'd done to that innocent girl.

Bart's previously white button-up was dark red, and he had an ugly wound on the side of his neck that I could see from across the room. There was so much blood, I wondered how the man was still alive.

"It looks like he got mauled by a bear," Relio said from where he was sitting against the far wall.

"Park said he only had to hit him once to knock him out," Ziggy explained.

"How'd he get that?"

I remembered the blood smeared on Bex's face and whispered, "Holy shit."

"What?" Ziggy asked.

I walked closer to the unconscious man and studied the wound. "That's a bite, but it's not from a bear. Bex did that."

“The girl that saved Freddy?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow,” Relio said with a bark of laughter. “I’ve gotta meet this woman and be careful to stay on her good side. She’s like a rabid honey badger.”

“Honey badger don’t give a shit,” Ziggy joked, referring to that video that had gone viral a few years ago.

I ignored their laughter and pulled my phone out to call Park. Once he was on his way down to the room in the basement where we were holding Bart, I set the bag I’d been holding on top of the counter amid bottles of cleaning products and common tools one might generally find in a mechanical room.

I reached over and flipped a switch to turn on the exhaust fan before I pulled out a small brown jar. I walked closer to Bart and lifted the jar up to his face and took a deep breath before I opened the lid. Within just a second, Bart’s head reared back and he gasped. I quickly resealed the jar while I waited for him to look at me.

Bart’s eyes darted around the room, touching on Relio and Ziggy before settling on me. To his credit, he showed no emotion even though I was sure he understood what was about to happen.

Without a word, I walked back to the table and set the jar aside before I grabbed a package of disposable coveralls. I glanced over my shoulder at my brothers and asked, “Are you going to stay for a while?” When they answered in the affirmative, I tossed them a package of coveralls and shoe covers before I started pulling the coverings over my own clothes.

I was putting the second shoe covering on when Relio asked, “Are we having lunch on Sunday?”

“I’m game,” Ziggy answered. “Whose turn is it to host?”

“I think it’s Rico’s,” Relio answered. “We’ll be there.”

“We’ll have to make it a little later than usual since I’ve got to meet Ann’s mom at the club for brunch. If I’m cooking, are there any requests?”

Relio hummed in thought before he said, “Gabby’s birthday is Tuesday, and I’m planning to take her out to dinner, but I’d like to do something to celebrate while we’re together.”

“Then neither of you get a say in what I’m cooking. I’ll get in touch with her in the morning and let her plan the menu.”

I heard Relio groan. “That means we’re gonna have some weird food combinations. This pregnancy has turned her into a mad scientist when it comes to eating.”

I snickered as I remembered how disgusting some of Ann’s cravings were when she was pregnant with our children. Ziggy chimed in and said, “Peanut butter and pickle sandwiches.”

“Nasty,” Relio hissed.

“One evening, when Ann was pregnant with Constance, I made shrimp and lobster ravioli with a lemon cream sauce, but I couldn’t eat a bite of it after I watched Ann squeeze half a bottle of yellow mustard over her serving and stir it all together.”

“That should be considered a felony,” I heard Bart chime in and was amazed by the balls on the man, considering he had to know what we were here for and what the three of us could do, especially after what happened during our last encounter.

“I know, right?” I responded, rather than let him know how irritated it made me that he could even think of joining in when we talked about our families. “Did your wife ever have any cravings?”

Since I was finished suiting up and had my purple nitrile gloves on to avoid getting my hands dirty, I pulled out a box of gauze squares and gauged the size of the wound on Bart’s neck before I selected one of the larger pieces.

I grabbed a bottle off a nearby shelf and poured a liberal amount of the liquid on the gauze as I asked Ziggy to cut me a

long strip of duct tape.

“How long?” Ziggy asked as he pulled the roll off the shelf.

“I want to cover that hole in his neck so he doesn’t bleed out before we’re done with him.”

“Gotcha.”

“That bitch probably gave me rabies or some shit,” Bart complained.

When I turned around to face him, I saw Relio inspecting the gaping wound. “Shit. You can see her teeth marks.”

“I noticed that,” I said as I stepped closer.

“We all know you’re gonna fuckin’ kill me, Rico. Why are you gonna doctor me up first?”

“It’s quite simple. I’d rather not leave it where the medical examiner can take a mold of those teeth marks if they just happen to ever find your body.”

“So you’re gonna let them heal?”

“Nah.” I gave him my most sincere smile. “I’m gonna burn them off.”

Relio wrapped his arms around Bart to hold him still while I slapped the wet gauze on his grisly laceration. Ziggy wrapped the duct tape tightly around Bart’s neck to hold the gauze in place.

Bart’s agonized scream echoed around the room as we stepped back to watch the man squirm and swing from the hook that held him a few inches above the floor.

“What’d you put on that?” Ziggy asked conversationally.

“Drain cleaner.”

Relio nodded as he voiced his approval. “Good choice.”

“Thanks.”

6.

BEX

I opened the door of the bedroom I'd been shown to by Constance and peeked into the hall. The apartment was completely silent. I assumed from the late hour that everyone was sleeping, but I couldn't stay in bed any longer. I tossed and turned for almost two hours after I called the credit card companies to report my cards as stolen and then I used Constance's laptop to cancel my debit card and order a new one to be delivered to the hotel.

During the time I spent changing all of my passwords and going through the steps needed to get my old cards canceled and new ones issued, I tried to figure out a plan to get me and my brother out of this situation we'd been thrust into and the danger we now faced.

For a split second, I'd almost regretted jumping in to help Freddy, but that quickly dissipated. I could never stand by and watch a kid get hurt. Even with the turmoil it had caused us, I wouldn't do anything differently if faced with that same situation other than hold onto my bag rather than let it lead the goons straight to our apartment.

I heard movement behind me and looked over my shoulder to find two large dogs and a smaller one watching my progress from the mouth of the hall.

"Do you need to go outside?" I asked in a whisper. The dogs perked up and jumped into motion, passing me to stand at the sliding glass door just off the kitchen. I opened it just wide enough to walk through and stepped out into the chilly air to watch over the dogs.

Rico had left his daughter to show me around after I arrived, and I was more than a little glad he hadn't done it himself. Constance had been kind enough to pretend she didn't notice my slack-jawed shock at the extravagance of the penthouse.

I watched the dogs sprint up to the second level of the balcony. The second level. Of the freaking balcony, for God's sake. I was so out of my element in this place.

I followed them up the stairs to their play area that was more posh than any dog park I'd ever seen and then turned to take in the lights of the city while they did their business on the artificial turf there for just that purpose. I was more than chilly when the three of them joined me by the glass railing, so I quickly led them back down the stairs and inside so I could shut out the cold.

As the dogs meandered around the dimly-lit space, I looked around, taking in details that I hadn't noticed before. The first floor of the penthouse was larger than the house where Harry and Diana had raised a herd of children, some of them theirs by birth but mostly of them foster kids or strays like me.

From the balcony door, I looked to the right and saw a small dining table. There was a backpack hanging from one of the chairs and an abandoned pair of shoes underneath it. I guessed that the shoes must belong to one of the older boys I'd met tonight, either Vigo or Nikky, since they were much too large for Freddy. I surmised that the backpack must belong to Constance since it was a paisley pattern in blue and teal. There was a pile of Legos on the windowsill behind the banquette on the other side of the table, and I saw a soccer ball tucked behind one of the pillows at the end.

The scene that would be commonplace in most homes seemed odd when surrounded by such opulence.

My gaze landed on a door just slightly ajar with a sliver of light coming through. I walked towards it, then stopped to listen for signs of movement behind the door. When I didn't hear anything, I used one finger to push it open and gasped when I saw that it was a pantry almost as big as the bedroom I'd been assigned. "Oh. My. God."

The shelves at eye level on the right hand side were full of clear plastic containers that held at least twenty different types of cereal, and there were baskets of snack cakes, chips, protein

bars, and assorted candy next to half a dozen varieties of Pop-Tarts.

“If Rory finds this place, I’m going to have to scrape him off the ceiling,” I muttered as I perused the other shelves.

Glass jars and plastic bins held everything from cornmeal to pasta to cinnamon sticks. I walked further into the room so I could explore the grocery store this family had inside their house and my jaw dropped when I noticed every container had a printed label on the front for identification. There was a jar that held enough fresh nutmeg to get a room full of hippies to hallucinate, so many cloves that I could decorate more than a dozen Christmas hams and still have half a jar left over, and there was enough yeast for me to bake bread to feed all of Manhattan and most of the Bronx. Six different colors of peppercorns, separated into their own glass jars, lined the shelf next to jars of black and green cardamom.

I gasped when I saw the next glass jar. It held at least three fistfuls of Tahitian vanilla beans that were probably worth more than my monthly car payment.

The shelf below that had so many baking spices that it made me feel light-headed. I looked around, wondering where they kept their flour and other basics so I could dive into my happy place. Finally, I saw them ... giant bins underneath, labeled according to their contents - white flour, whole wheat flour, white sugar, organic cane sugar, steel-cut oats ... the containers stretched in a line as far as the eye could see. Okay, not really that far, just far enough away that I couldn’t read the labels.

“Butter, milk ... buttermilk ...” I mumbled to myself as I turned in a slow circle looking for a refrigerator that might hold what I needed. I curiously tilted my head when I noticed that the back wall of the room looked different somehow. I reached out to touch the seam between the panels and a handle popped out. I inhaled sharply with surprise and absolute awe when I opened the door and revealed a walk-in stocked with even more. “Well, that settles it. I’m never leaving. I’m gonna gain eight hundred and eleventy-nine pounds. They’ll

have to use a crane to get me out of this place. I am here to stay.”



RICO

When Ziggy and I exited the elevator, we stopped in our tracks. Six of our men were in the hallway, some sitting on the floor, some leaning on the wall, all of them with a plate or napkin in hand.

“What’s going on, guys?” I asked as they shot to their feet as if I’d walked out of the elevator holding a machine gun.

Sully, Constance’s guard, was the first to finish the bite in his mouth, but it was hard to concentrate on what he was saying since I was more focused on the crumbs dusting his beard and the front of his shirt.

“The woman told me to find some people to eat all of this, so I called the guys up here.”

“The woman?” Ziggy asked.

“Bex,” I said simply.

Ziggy moved closer to Alonzo, his daughter Ziva’s guard, and studied the food on his plate. He picked up a cookie before he pointed at something and asked, “What is that?”

“Bread pudding?” Alonzo answered, although it was more of a question.

“Oh shit,” Ziggy mumbled through a mouthful of cookie. “I’m gonna marry that one.”

“I know, right?” Evan, my son Vigo’s guard, asked eagerly. He held his plate out toward me and said, “Try one.”

“What kind is this?” I asked as I picked up a cookie.

“I haven’t tried it yet, so I don’t know.”

I took a bite and closed my eyes in ecstasy. I had a feeling of frenzied craving that made me think that if I didn’t get two

dozen more of these and a half gallon of milk in the next three minutes, I might die.

“So you’re all just hanging out, having a midnight snack?”

Alonzo shrugged and then nodded. “Yeah.”

Sully finished chewing his next bite and added, “Occasionally, she opens the door and hands us more, so we just sort of ... wait.”

I glanced at the decorative table that one of the men had been leaning against and saw a stack of empty dessert plates I recognized as my own. “How long has she been at it? It’s almost dawn.”

“The first batch came out just after midnight,” Sully said before he took a bite of the bread pudding. His eyes closed, and I knew he’d lost his train of thought.

“She’s cooking in your kitchen,” Ziggy realized as he slowly turned and looked at my front door.

I passed the men in the hall, not blaming them for congregating there. Only two were on duty, and if six of them were loitering in the hallway, then that was even better. It wasn’t my problem they’d lost sleep tonight. A new day would start soon, and they’d be the ones paying the price.

I scanned my thumb to unlock the door and walked inside with my brother right behind me. The smell of yeast bread, cinnamon, and other spices engulfed me, and my stomach let out a loud growl as I heard my brother hum with anticipation.

I was very particular about my home, not only because my children’s safety was my priority but also because it was my sanctuary. A select few other than my siblings and children were allowed inside. I made sure to leave my business out in the hall, along with most of our security team and other associates.

My bedroom and study were two of the only places in the world where I could truly be alone with my thoughts, and my kitchen was where I went to unwind and recharge. During the remodel, I had worked with some of the best designers to streamline it to my specifications, only buying the highest

quality equipment just like I made sure to buy the highest quality ingredients to create the food I served to my family.

Now this woman, a guest in my house, had invaded my space and turned it into a bakery. I cringed at the thought of the mess she'd made and wondered how I could get her out and keep her out for the duration of her stay, which was getting shorter by the minute at this point.

I rounded the corner expecting the worst and found the woman with her hair piled on top of her head, wearing one of my oldest son's T-shirts that reached almost to her knees and a pair of sweatpants that were miles too long and rolled up around her ankles. She was dancing around my pristine kitchen in her bare feet as she moved to the sounds coming through her earbuds.

"Well isn't that a sight to see?" Ziggy mumbled as he stepped up beside me. "Is she using a blowtorch?"

"She's making crème brûlée," I explained as I watched her caramelize the sugar on top of one of the ramekins on the tray in front of her. As soon as she was finished with the last one, she pulled out the silverware drawer and grabbed a handful of spoons before she picked up the tray of ramekins and turned toward us.

Bex let out a strangled yelp, and the tray in her hand started to tip. Ziggy sprinted across the room, moving faster than I'd ever seen him, and rescued the food from falling as the spoons she'd tossed in the air fell like confetti around her.

"Got it!" Ziggy gasped before he blew out a relieved breath and stared down at the desserts. He grabbed one of the spoons that had landed on the counter and walked in my direction as he said, "I'll deliver most of these on my way home."

Bex pulled out her earbuds and stared at me in shock as she tried to catch her breath. She glanced at the windows and seemed surprised when she saw the first rays of sunlight peeking over the horizon. She looked back at me and said, "You're back."

“You’re cooking.”

“I didn’t think your housekeeper would mind as long as I cleaned up after myself.”

“I don’t have a housekeeper.”

“Really? Who does your laundry?” She answered her own question with, “I guess there’s laundry service in a luxury property like this.”

“I do my own laundry and the kids do theirs.”

“Other than being a criminal mastermind, you’re truly a triple threat.”

“There’s a lot to unpack there. I’m not sure if that was an insult or a compliment.”

Bex tilted her head and smiled impishly before she turned and peeked through the window on the oven. Assured that everything was okay inside, she turned back to me and asked, “Why are those men standing in the hall when this place has more seating than most restaurants?”

I was still trying to figure out the triple threat comment, so I answered her question without thinking. “No one needs to be inside while we’re just hanging out as a family unless they’re specifically invited. This is our home, not a boardroom.”

“A boardroom? They never meet in a boardroom in the movies.”

“Who?”

“Mobsters.”

“Why would you think I’m a mobster and not a businessman?”

Bex laughed as she hopped up on the counter and crossed one leg over the other. Her foot instantly started moving back and forth like a metronome as she studied me. “You’re obviously a very successful *businessman* since you can lie to me with a perfectly straight face.”

“I didn’t lie. I asked a question.”

“What irritates you more - that I’m in your kitchen or that I fed your *employees*?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and said, “That I’m not in bed sleeping right now.”

“What happened to the man in the trunk?”

“What man in the trunk?”

Bex examined my face for several seconds before a smile broke across her face. “You’re really good.”

I couldn’t help but let my gaze drop again. The sight of that little foot swinging back and forth, with the hot pink toenails and the tiny tattoo above her pinky toe, was having a strange effect on me. I countered, “You have no idea. Did the clothes not fit?”

“I’m sure they’re fine, but I didn’t feel right baking in a nightgown that cost more than my first car, so I raided the laundry room and found something more suitable. Besides, I can’t afford any of that.”

“The clothes are yours, no payment necessary. If they’re not your style, I’ll have others delivered in the morning.”

“More clothes? Do you know how much the rack they brought up is worth? Or even one pair of those shoes?”

“Not nearly as much as my son’s life,” I said firmly. “Wear whatever you want because they all belong to the two of you now.”

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence as Bex decided whether or not she would accept the gifts until she cleared the air by asking, “Are you hungry?”

“Ravenous.” Again, I hadn’t thought before I spoke. I wasn’t talking about the hunger in my stomach. I locked eyes with Bex again and saw that her eyebrows were raised in question and her cheeks were flushed. “Do you know where I can find a snack?”

Bex gulped before she nodded. I ran my hand over my mouth, trying to give myself a second to gather my thoughts,

but I became distracted again when she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and her eyes darkened with lust.

The timer on the oven started beeping, breaking the tension that had developed between us. The mood was lost as she hopped down and rushed around the island to check on her creation.

I couldn't help but let my eyes drift over her body as she walked away. Even through the baggy clothes, I could tell that her body was meant to be worshiped. My cock had been hard since she hopped onto the counter, and it was almost painful as I imagined cupping my hands on her round ass as I ...

“Earth to capo,” I heard Bex say.

“Capo?” I asked with a snort. “I don't think so.”

“Is that an insult?”

“A caporegime is someone who is in charge of a crew.”

“If you're not a capo, then what are you?”

“My friends and family call me Rico.”

“You know what I mean. What's your position?” Images of her beneath me, gloriously naked with her hair mussed and lips swollen flickered through my mind, and I got distracted again. “Sit down, Mr. Romano. Since I took over your precious space and used your supplies to make all of this, serving you is the least I can do.”

Again, my brain went straight back to indecent thoughts, and I bit back a groan as I sat down on one of the stools my kids usually occupied to talk to me as I cooked. I was truly off my game this morning, exhausted physically and mentally. I was wholly unprepared for the irresistible woman who had commandeered my kitchen.

Bex slid a plate of piping hot biscuits, the crock of butter, and a bowl of what looked like fresh jam across the island before she handed me a knife and a paper towel.

“There's plenty more where that came from too.”

I stared at the food in front of me and tried to remember the last time a woman had cooked for me. It had to have been something made by my sister, who enjoyed cooking as much as I did but rarely had the opportunity to cook for us since she lived so far away.

My wife, Ann, never cooked anything, relying on the chef that she insisted we hire to make freezer meals and other prepared dishes. She'd occasionally pop something into the oven, but even that task usually fell to me when I came home after a long day.

To anyone who didn't spend time in our house, she seemed like the perfect wife and mother who had everything together, paid close attention to her children's health and nutrition, never missed a game or recital, and sacrificed her time and energy to devote everything to her family. Many people, including my own sister, believed that she was greatly missed by me and my kids. Sadly, that couldn't have been further from the truth.

Ann rarely made it to any of the kids' games, hadn't attended a single school meeting or parent conference, and couldn't be troubled to keep track of where the kids were, let alone what they needed. On the off chance that one of them bothered her while she was in her room, she'd throw a fit worthy of a toddler until the kids just learned to avoid her at any cost.

Mona, the nanny who'd started working for us when Constance was just a few days old, still came over every day even though the kids were more than able to take care of themselves. These days, she helped me juggle their schedules, made sure there was always someone at home with them, and loved my kids as if they were her own grandchildren.

What Mona didn't do, however, was cook. That wasn't because she refused the task; it was because she was absolutely horrible at it.

What she did do, and had been doing for almost twenty-two years now, was help me keep my household running

smoothly and teach my kids how to be responsible humans rather than spoiled rich brats like their mother.

For that feat alone, I'd be eternally grateful to the woman I had developed a close friendship with over the years.

"Are you on keto?" I looked at Bex and realized I'd been studying the layers of the biscuit for so long, I'd made her uncomfortable. "If that's the problem, I have a great recipe for crustless quiche muffins."

"This is homemade?"

"Yes."

"I've never seen a homemade biscuit with layers like this. French pastry, yes, but not regular biscuits."

"I learned how to make them from my foster mother. She runs a very successful bakery back home."

"Where is home?" I asked as she walked around the counter to sit down beside me.

"A million miles from New York, that's for sure."

"Is her recipe a family secret, or can you teach me how to make these?"

"I can teach you."

"Let's eat first."

"You want me to teach you today?"

"Do you have at least three dozen biscuits made to go with an industrial-sized vat of this jam?"

"No."

"Have you met my older sons?"

Bex laughed just as the sun broke over the horizon and lit up the kitchen. If I was the kind of man that believed in that sort of thing, I'd probably think that the rays of light highlighting the planes of Bex's face, making her even more beautiful and intriguing, were fate shining through the window to make me so enthralled with her beauty that I couldn't resist leaning forward to kiss her.

Lucky for both of us, I didn't believe in shit like that.

7.

BEX

I was pleasantly surprised that Rico wanted to learn how to make homemade biscuits. That didn't fit with the pre-conceived notion I'd always had of what a mobster was like. Of course, I'd met a few with my father during my childhood, but they were nothing like Rico. I didn't know him well, but I couldn't imagine any of my father's associates had ever had their hands in biscuit dough or spent time chatting and laughing while they helped in the kitchen.

In the mafia romance books I'd read, and I had to admit that they probably numbered in the hundreds, I couldn't remember ever coming across a character who had spent time cooking for his family. As a matter of fact, it seemed like most of the families ate food made by either the matriarch or chef.

As I watched Rico move around the kitchen as I talked him through my crustless quiche recipe, his knowledge of where the utensils and all of the supplies were kept convinced me that he wasn't a stranger to this part of the house.

As he explained each of his children's likes and dislikes, food allergies, and odd fascination with certain condiments, I was amazed to discover he was a completely hands-on parent. Of course, in the movies, TV shows, and books I'd read, family was of the utmost importance to a mafioso.

However, that usually meant that they were willing to die for them or kill for them, not that they were willing to get their hands dirty working butter into a flour mixture.

"Where's the kids' mom? Did you ever work in the kitchen with her?" I asked as I watched him stir sugar into the saucepan of berries we had just finished washing. I immediately regretted my question when Rico's entire demeanor changed.

His posture straightened as his smile disappeared. He slowly shook his head and quietly said, “She died a few years ago, but when she was alive, she couldn’t be bothered with anything domestic. Her mom has probably never even boiled water, so she didn’t teach her any skills, and Ann was never interested in learning.”

In for a penny, in for a pound, I asked, “What *was* she interested in?”

“Shopping. Hiring contractors to redecorate the house every few years. Spending time at the club with her *friends*.” I didn’t miss the sneer that came with that last word and knew that he had no respect for whoever it was that Ann had called friends. “From the outside looking in, it seemed like she was a devoted wife and mother who spent her time making elaborate meals and spending quality time with her family, but that wasn’t really the case.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t even know her.”

“No, I’m not sorry she was that way, I’m sorry that you and the kids had to live like that.” Rico looked stunned, so I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t believe I just told you all that. Even my own sister doesn’t know our marriage was a sham.”

“I won’t tell anyone, obviously.”

“Obviously?”

“Well, I’m not going to tell anyone about the man in the trunk, so why would I blast your personal business?”

“I’m not sure where you got the idea that there was someone in the trunk.”

“You are a very convincing liar, Mr. Romano.”

“Maybe I was lying about my wife to garner sympathy from you.”

“Doubtful.” I realized that Rico was feeling vulnerable because he’d shared something so personal to him. I needed

to do the same and hopefully make him a little more comfortable about having disclosed such intimate details to me. “My mother took off when I was almost 5, so I barely remember her. After that, my dad took me with him wherever he went. We lived off of greasy diner food and convenience store junk food more often than not. When I was 17, I went to live with a family who ate dinner together every evening. It was night and day compared to how I was raised, but it was something I’d always secretly dreamed about.”

“You dreamed about family dinners?”

“Just having a family in general.”

“That’s sad. Is that where you learned how to bake?”

“And cook. When I moved in, all I knew how to make was ramen in the microwave. I couldn’t even scramble eggs without burning them, but there was something about Diana that drew me to her from the start. Since she was almost always in the kitchen, that’s where I hung out.” I laughed softly at the memory and said, “She had to teach me how to peel potatoes and safely use a knife to chop onions, but pretty soon, I was her sous chef. Prepping the ingredients for whatever she was going to cook began to come to me naturally. Before long, I was learning how to make simple meals and became comfortable enough to start creating things on my own.”

“And the baking?”

“She owns a bakery and goes to work every morning at three. Since I wasn’t in school and loved spending time with her, I asked to go in with her and learned how to help. I studied for my GED in the evenings and worked at the bakery during the day until I started college. Even then, I scheduled my classes for the afternoon so I could work with her in the mornings.”

“What happened to your father? I assume that’s Rory’s father too?”

“He took off in the middle of the night, and I haven’t spoken to him since.”

“So they adopted you?”

“No. I was already 17, so there wasn’t any point in it. I was their foster child until I became an adult, but they had made me part of the family, so we’ve stayed close.”

“And they live in Vegas?”

“Oh no. They’re in Kansas City.”

“Then why are you moving to Vegas? Do you need some adventure or what?”

“I’ve got a job waiting there.”

“Doing what?”

I thought about my response for a second and then simplified it and said, “Security.”

Rico turned his head my way and looked down his nose at me, pointing out my shorter stature without saying a word.

“Don’t underestimate vertically-challenged people, mister.”

Rico laughed. “Are you gonna gnaw people into submission?”

“Maybe,” I retorted with a smirk. “If that’s what it takes.”

Once we had the fruit simmering, we moved on to the biscuits. I was amazed at what an apt student he was. He’d rolled up his shirtsleeves to keep them clean, and his strong hands used the rolling pin as if he’d been doing it all his life.

The man was full of surprises, and the longer I spoke to him, the more I started to like him. I was even beginning to trust him, which was the scariest part of all.

I was laughing at something Rico had just said when I heard the front door open and close. A few seconds later, Mona, the lovely older woman I’d met last night, appeared in the doorway and stopped short when she saw what was going on in the kitchen.

“Good morning, Mona,” Rico greeted before he nudged me with his elbow and asked, “Now what?”

“Fold the dough again, turn it, and then do it all once more.”

“Good morning,” Mona answered as she slid onto one of the stools across the counter from where I was working with Rico. “This is a ... pleasant surprise.”

“Looks like we’ll be serving you breakfast this morning, so you won’t need to cook anything.”

“Mona doesn’t cook,” Constance said as she came down the spiral staircase in the corner of the room. “She loves us too much to see us suffer like that.”

“Who usually does the cooking?”

“Dad.”

I slowly turned and studied Rico’s profile. “You were serious?”

“Triple threat, remember?”

“What does that mean?” Constance asked.

“That means that not only am I damn good-looking, but I do my own laundry and cook too. Mere mortal men will never achieve my greatness.”

“And don’t forget about your humility,” Constance joked as she rounded the island to reach the coffee pot. “Are things calmer yet? I’d like to go home and get some study material.”

“Send one of the guys.”

“They didn’t get to go home last night either?”

Rico ignored his daughter’s question and motioned toward the dough in front of us before he asked, “Now what?”

“Cut it and bake it until it’s golden brown.”

Constance walked up beside us and watched her father and I work for a few seconds before she asked, “If you’re making biscuits, why does it smell like bacon and apple pie?”

“There’s quiche in the top oven and apple hand pies in the bottom one,” I explained.

“What’s a hand pie?”

“Pies you eat with your hands,” Rico said simply. “They gained popularity with miners who needed something simple but nutritious that they could take down into the mines with them.”

“How do you know stuff like that?” Constance asked her father before she shook her head and asked me, “The bigger question is how did you convince Dad to let you work in his kitchen?”

“Well, I didn’t ask. I couldn’t sleep, so I got up and let the dogs out. When we came back inside, I explored the kitchen and pantry and then started stress baking.”

“Stress baking?” Constance asked curiously.

“It’s a thing I do. It’s usually followed by stress eating,” I explained sheepishly.

Constance turned around and studied the clear containers that held an array of cookies, and Rico suggested, “Look in the refrigerator.”

When she opened the door, she gasped and pulled out a pecan pie. As she got a spoon out of the drawer, she said, “I’m a little stressed too.”

“Have you slept, Rico?” Mona asked as she opened one of the containers. She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes with a sigh before she selected a cookie for herself and handed one to Constance. “Get me a plate, Stan.”

“Not yet,” he said as he used a metal ring to cut the biscuit dough. “I will after we get breakfast finished.”

I couldn’t stop the yawn that escaped, and Mona smiled. “And you’ll sleep too.”

“I’m going to have to try. I’m exhausted, and I know Rory will be awake soon.”

“He’ll stay with me,” Mona ordered before she asked Rico, “Do we have free rein of the hotel or should we stay in the apartment?”

Rico looked thoughtful for a second before he said, “I’d prefer they stay locked up in here, but I know that’s not

feasible in the long run. I want a man on each of the boys if they leave the apartment with you, but stay in the building.”

“You’re going to have a guard for Rory?” I asked.

“I believe it’s necessary, especially if the boys are together. Anyone who doesn’t know Freddy well could mistake Rory for him. At a glance, the boys look like they could be brothers, and I don’t want either of them in danger.”

“I have some studying to do, so I’ll stay inside. I’m not sure how we’ll convince Nicky and Vigo to do the same.”

“Knowing them, they’ll wake up to eat, go back to bed for half the day, then get up and eat some more,” Mona told Constance. “By tomorrow, they’ll be climbing the walls, but I’ll suggest they go work out at the gym downstairs.”

“They don’t have practice or a scrimmage this weekend, do they?” Rico asked as he wiped his hands on a towel and walked toward the cabinet beside the door. He opened it and studied a calendar with writing all over it before he shook his head. “We’re all clear until school on Monday, but they’ll want to work out before then, I’m sure.”

“They’ll want to run.”

Rico shook his head and said, “They’ll have to use the treadmills in the gym.”

“Vigo says that’s like running on a hamster wheel.”

“How would he know? Was he a hamster in a past life?” I blurted. Rico snorted and then laughed, and his daughter looked shocked for a second before she laughed too.

Mona smiled and shook her head. “If I was one to believe in reincarnation, I’d say that all of those boys were Tasmanian devils at one point or another.”

“Are they wild?” I asked.

“Full of energy from the day they were born,” Mona explained.

“I was a calm baby that turned into the perfect child, so they weren’t expecting ... What?” Constance asked when Rico

and Mona started laughing.

“Don’t listen to her. She’s been drama since she arrived too,” Rico explained. “If I hadn’t been there to witness her birth, I would have assumed she was born wearing a tiara.”

“She may not have been born with a tiara, but Rico doted on her and remedied that within the first week. She didn’t have any hair then, but the horns did well at holding it in place. They still do,” Mona teased.

Constance leaned forward and took a bite of the cookie Mona was holding and smiled as she chewed. She tilted her head and said, “Be nice to me. I’m delicate.”

“So is dynamite,” Rico teased before he reached across the counter and touched her nose with a flour-covered finger. “But you’ll always be my little princess.”

Constance preened as Mona shook her head. “Incorrigible. Both of them.”

Watching the mobster and his daughter, along with someone who was not just an employee, but a beloved member of the family, was very enlightening. When I first met Rico, he terrified me. I was sure that he wouldn’t hesitate to kill me himself if I had something to do with the attempt to kidnap Freddy. The man standing next to me seemed like the polar opposite of my first impression, and it was difficult to rationalize that the two different personalities were part of the same man.

Studying people had always interested me, so much so that I’d turned it into a career. After just a few minutes watching Rico, Mona, and Constance, I was intrigued. I couldn’t wait to see how the boys interacted with the trio. Would Rico treat them differently since they were males? From what little I knew about his lifestyle and the behavior of men in positions like his, they seemed to treat females with kid gloves, but expect the younger generation of males to be tougher. I was very curious to see if that was the case with Rico and his sons or if he had an easy repertoire with them too.

As Rico slid the baking sheet into the oven, Constance asked, “Will you and Rory be with us for Funday, Bex?”

“Funday?”

“We spend the day with the family every Sunday. We’ve been calling it that since I was a kid.”

“I’d hate to impose,” I hedged, glancing at Rico uncomfortably.

“No imposition at all. You and Rory are welcome to join us,” Rico said over his shoulder as he washed his hands at the sink. “You can even give me a hand in the kitchen. We’ll be celebrating my sister-in-law’s birthday, so I was planning to bake her a cake. I’d appreciate your help.”

“You should definitely stay for Funday,” Constance encouraged. “Uncle Relio and Aunt Gabby always come, and Uncle Ziggy tries to make sure that the girls are always here ...”

“My brother has twin daughters - Ziva and Zara. They’re 15,” Rico interrupted.

“Even the other guys come over sometimes,” Constance finished.

“The other guys?”

“You haven’t met them yet,” Rico explained. “They’re some of my business associates.”

By associates, I assumed that Rico meant these ‘guys’ were also mobsters, but they were going to hang out on Sunday and have dinner with the family? It was another contradiction that I couldn’t wrap my mind around.

Obviously, Rico was a loving father, and I had to assume he wouldn’t let his children be around psychopaths. But then again, when I remembered the cold look of rage in his eyes when he thought I’d hurt his son, I had a feeling that he could be more than a little psychotic himself.

“I’d love to make a cake for your sister-in-law. Thank you for inviting us.”

“Of course. I told you to make yourselves at home, and I meant it,” Rico reminded me. He sighed and then told his daughter, “We’ll be eating a little later than usual because I have to meet Nonnie at the club for brunch.”

“She’s trying to set you up again?”

Rico nodded. “You won’t believe who she’s picked out for me this time.”

“That bad, huh?”

“You should come with me so you can run her off.”

“I can do that,” Constance assured him. She grinned wickedly and winked at Mona who had a strange little smile. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem at all.”

8.

RICO

I had just gotten out of the shower when I heard a text come in, so I wrapped a towel around my waist and went into the closet to grab my phone.

“Are you available? I’ve got news.”

Rather than return his text, I called Sam. When he answered, I skipped the usual greetings and asked, “What’s going on?”

“We have two guests downstairs that need your attention.”

After a couple of years working with Sam, I understood his coded language, so I asked, “Can you keep them comfortable while I have dinner with my family?”

“Of course. There’s no hurry. I just wanted you to know that I got them checked in, and they’re waiting to see you.”

“Please let the others know I’ll meet them downstairs at eight. That’s three hours from now. Do you think our guests will still be available?”

“I’ll make sure of it.”

“Thanks, Sam. I’ll see you soon.”

I set the phone on the counter next to the case that held my watches and sighed as I slowly shook my head. The *guests* that Sam was referring to weren’t here for the luxury accommodations. Instead, they were on a basement level in a soundproof concrete room, probably bruised and bleeding, while they awaited their fate at the hands of me or one of my brothers and associates.

As curious as I was about who Sam held downstairs, I couldn’t take care of business now. I’d wasted the majority of the day sleeping after the all-nighter I’d pulled dealing with Bart and then cooking with Bex when I got home. As

enlightening as that had been, getting to know the intriguing woman while we worked together and then when we were joined by the kids, I had to go to my room and sleep for a while.

I knew that Mona had stood watch over all the kids but especially Freddy and his new friend, Rory. Vigo and Nicky were mostly self-sufficient, and as Mona had predicted, they had spent the day napping between meals.

My older sons were very driven and excelled in academics along with whichever sport was going on at the time. They were integral members of the football and basketball teams and had each set records in cross country, but they really had a knack for soccer that had drawn attention from several colleges. After Nicky had a hard time adjusting to kindergarten and was held back, the boys had been in the same grade throughout their school career being that they were only eleven months apart. They looked enough alike that they could be mistaken for twins, but they couldn't be any more different.

By the time they were toddlers, it was obvious that Nicky had the more dominant personality. He took his role as the eldest son very seriously and was more than ready to step into a leadership role in the business when I decided to retire. Vigo was a lot like my brother, Relio, in that he was content to follow in his older brother's footsteps and took direction well even though he was quite capable of making decisions on his own when necessary.

Nicky and Vigo were very strong-willed and argued often, sometimes even coming to blows. However, if someone crossed either of them, they were a united front no matter what was going on between them at the time. Especially when it came to their older sister or younger brother.

Freddy, my cheerful boy, was full of life from the day he was born. Even though the parenting books said differently and Mona agreed with them, I was convinced that Freddy gave me his first dazzling smile when he was just a few days old. Constance was 10 when Freddy was born, and he promptly became her living doll. She spent countless hours helping to

take care of him and even insisted we put a daybed in his nursery where she could sleep.

Since Ann didn't want much of anything to do with the kids, she didn't mind that Constance had turned into a little mother to the baby. As a matter of fact, she encouraged it so much that I had to put my foot down and insist that Constance take time away to pursue her own interests.

Freddy had been her shadow until Constance moved out to go to college, and by then, our lives had changed dramatically with the death of their mother and the new direction I'd taken the family business.

I'd painstakingly chosen the men I'd assigned to protect my kids, and my mind was still reeling at how close we'd come to losing Freddy because of my decision to hire Mark. I wondered if he had always been a traitor or if something else had turned him into one. Had I done something that turned him against me? Was there something going on in his personal life that he was afraid to talk to one of us about? Was Frank blackmailing him about something?

There were so many questions, and they were causing me to reevaluate the other decisions I'd made about my children's safety. What if there were more of our personal guards working with Frank Bovino? How could I be sure that the men I'd put in charge of my family's protection would think of their duty to my children first rather than themselves?

Even as exhausted as I'd been this morning after breakfast, it had taken me quite a while to get to sleep because of the worries running through my head.

I had just pulled on a pair of sweatpants when I heard someone tap on my bedroom door. Since my personal area of the penthouse was arranged like an apartment, I had to walk out of the closet, through the bedroom, into the sitting area, and past my office door to answer the knock. On my way, I called out, "Come in!"

The door opened, and I was surprised to see Bex appear in the short foyer. Her eyes got wide when she saw me, and I had to bite back a smile when a blush covered her cheeks.

“Hey, sorry to bother you.”

“It’s no bother,” I said as I motioned for her to come in. “I was about to come out and join the world anyway. How did you sleep?”

Bex let her eyes rove my bare chest before she studied my face as she answered, “I guess I slept about as well as you did.”

“I look that bad?”

“No, you just look ... Well, maybe it’s something other than exhaustion. Is everything okay?”

Just as I’d done in the kitchen this morning, I opened up to Bex like I rarely ever did with anyone other than my brothers. “I’m worried about my kids’ safety.”

“You’re doubting their protectors, aren’t you?”

I blew out a breath as I nodded. “I don’t usually doubt myself.”

“I think if it was just your safety that was an issue, you wouldn’t be, but since it has to do with your kids, it’s probably natural.”

“Natural?”

“Well, as natural as things can be in your situation.”

“My situation?” I realized I was beginning to sound like a parrot as I motioned toward the couch in my small living area. Once Bex sat down, I relaxed into the worn recliner that had caused more than one argument with my wife over the years. As I pulled the lever to lift my feet, Bex laughed. “What?”

“That chair doesn’t exactly fit the aesthetic of the rest of the house.”

“You don’t like it?” I asked, oddly sad that she seemed to feel the same way Ann had.

Bex laughed again and shook her head. “I didn’t say that, I just said it doesn’t really fit the vibe. It looks comfortable, though. I bet it’s a good reading chair.”

“I napped with each of my kids in this chair until they were too big for it.”

“Knowing that, it just went from a worn-out recliner to a priceless heirloom.”

“Exactly!”

“Someday you can nap in it with your grandchildren.”

“It better be a while before I have any of those, but that sounds like heaven.”

I watched Bex tuck her legs underneath her as she relaxed against the arm of the couch, and I realized she was wearing a pair of pajama bottoms I’d bought for Freddy a few months ago.

“Still not ready to wear the clothes, huh?”

“I seem to have a lot in common with your favorite chair. I don’t exactly fit in here.”

“You fit in much better than I imagined you would when I extended the invitation.”

“I’m going to pretend that was a compliment rather than an insult,” Bex said with one eyebrow raised. She looked so perturbed that I couldn’t help but laugh. “Now tell me why you couldn’t sleep.”

“I’m worried about lunch tomorrow.”

“Amazing! You do have a tell.”

“What?”

“When we were talking about the man in the trunk ...

I shook my head as I interrupted, “I can’t believe you still think there was someone in the trunk.”

Bex gave me a bored look and continued, “I know you’re lying, but you’re damn good at it. A few seconds ago when you were talking about why you couldn’t sleep, I knew you weren’t telling the truth.”

“So what’s my tell?”

“I don’t think I’ll share that particular nugget of information with you, sir.” I laughed again, and Bex smiled. “I just thought it may help you sleep tonight if you got it off your chest.”

“I don’t think I’ll get much rest either way because I’ve got to take care of something as soon as we finish dinner.”

“I’ll start then,” Bex offered. “I’m worried about what’s going to happen with the apartment because Rory and I can’t stay here forever. They’re expecting me in Vegas as soon as the custody goes through, but if whoever that guy was looked around my apartment, he would have seen the information about the casino and our tickets laying on the table.”

“You’re worried that whoever he was affiliated with might come after you.”

Bex nodded and then pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear before she asked, “Did you mean it when you said that the bad guy would target me because I’d interfered with his plans?”

“Unfortunately, yes. He’s that kind of guy.” Bex looked so forlorn that I couldn’t help but add, “I’ve got more than a few connections in Vegas. I can have them watch out for you when you go.”

Bex shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“How will I explain to my new employer that I’ve got mob connections? What will they think if I start drama with their casino?”

“Sweetheart, how do you think Vegas came about?”

“I’d assume it was because of the railroad when people were going to settle the West.”

“That’s how it became a town, but it didn’t become the Vegas we know until Bugsy Siegel, a very well-known mob boss, opened the first resort on what’s now known as the Las Vegas Strip.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s still run by the mob!” I raised my eyebrows, and in a much more timid voice, Bex asked, “Is it?”

“I thought everyone knew that.”

“I thought that was Hollywood lore. I had no idea it was true.”

“Once something or someone is connected to the mafia, it’s almost impossible to get away from it.”

Bex laughed. “I’m almost sure I heard my father say that when I was younger. Now, here I am connected to the mafia anyway.”

“Do you regret helping Freddy?”

“No! I’d do it all again, but I’d try a little harder to hold onto my backpack this time.”

“I can see that.”

“Tell me why you couldn’t sleep?”

“I’m worried that there might be others on my security team who are crooked.”

“Have you seen any signs that might be true?”

“I didn’t see any red flags to warn me that Mark was a traitor, so I guess I’m just doubting my ability to judge a man’s character.”

“And you don’t know why he did what he did?”

“No. And I don’t know how long he’d been planning it. What if nabbing Freddy was part of his long game?”

“How long had he been with him?”

“Three years.”

“But he’d been alone with him repeatedly during that time, right?”

“Right.”

“That’s one helluva long game.” Bex sat pensively for a second and then suggested, “Maybe something happened recently that changed his loyalty.”

“As horrible as it sounds, I’d like to think that’s the case rather than think I’d been trusting my son’s safety to someone who’d been plotting against me for years.”

“Have him investigated. You’ve got people that can do that, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Look at his credit. Was he in over his head? Is someone close to him sick or in trouble? What about the other guard? The one that was shot?”

“They’re keeping him in an induced coma until he starts to recover from his injuries. They did surgery to remove the bullets, and the prognosis is not nearly as bad as we first thought.”

“That’s good.”

“I’m sure this may not be a popular opinion in your line of work, but have you considered asking the cops for help?” I raised my eyebrows in a silent question, and Bex giggled. “Considering my history it is crazy that I’d even suggest it, but maybe you could find a veteran cop to interrogate the men working for you. They can read people better than almost anyone and might be able to suss out who else is involved.”

“The PI I have would probably be able to do that.”

“Well, then use him. Are you sure you can trust him?”

“I’ve known him for years.”

“But you knew that Mark guy for years, too, right?”

“Shit,” I hissed as I pushed my chair back to recline a little more. I stared at the ceiling, pondering what to do when I realized I had another weapon, multiple weapons, in my arsenal that I hadn’t had before.

I sat up abruptly, and Bex’s eyes got wide. “What?”

“My sister’s husband owns a security company, and they’re friends with a private investigator.”

“Can he be trusted?”

I thought about the man I'd only talked to a few times and wondered how to best describe him to Bex. I didn't know a lot about him, but I did know that he wasn't the kind to be easily influenced. He didn't give a single shit about anyone else's opinion. Those qualities made him the perfect person for the job.

"Does your brother-in-law's security company have enough employees to cover your kids so they can at least leave the property?"

"It's not that kind of security. They install and program alarm systems and handle theft protection more than personal protection."

"Hmm. Maybe your brother-in-law and his friends can do it? I know they're not part of your ... team or whatever, but they're on the fringes, right? Their loyalty would lie with you."

"They live in Texas and all have colorful pasts that make it difficult for them to blend in on the best of days. I can't imagine any of them at a high school with the boys or sitting next to Constance during classes."

"It's too bad you can't hire from a different branch, you know? But then you'd have to worry about takeovers and loyalties and ..."

"A different branch?" I interrupted.

"Is that weird?" Bex asked as she stared at me. My mind raced. She asked, "Could you call in the Chicago Italians or the Pittsburgh Italians or ..."

"That's fucking genius! I'm sure the Irish and the Kosher Nostra will have men they can spare."

Bex held up one finger and said, "I thought that the different mafia groups didn't get along." She held up a second finger and asked, "Who are the Kosher Nostra?"

Mimicking her, I held up a finger and answered, "Normally, they don't, but the Four Families have developed a healthy relationship with the O'Sheerans and the Kosher

Nostra. We've formed an alliance for business purposes and sort of developed a friendship at the same time."

"Wow. That's very open-minded of you. I always imagined the mafia as hits carried out in Italian restaurants, but you almost make it sound like a legitimate business."

"It does sound like that, doesn't it?"

Bex was clearly confused as her brows knit together. "Well, is it?"

"Is what?"

"Do you run a legitimate business that *pays taxes*?"

"I run more than a few of them."

"You know what I mean," Bex snapped. She frowned when I laughed. "That wasn't an answer, Rico."

"It wasn't?"

Bex's growl of frustration was the cutest thing I'd seen in a while. I had to push her buttons more often. Well, at least those buttons. I was resisting the other ones as hard as I could.

But the more time I spent with Bex Holland, the more everything seemed to get hard.



BEX

"I need more mozzarella," Freddy said as he stuck his hand out to take the bowl of shredded cheese from his father. Rico held onto it, and they had a momentary tug of war before Freddy said, "Please."

Once Rico let it go, he went back to creating his pizza, and I tried to concentrate on topping my own. The last few hours spent in the kitchen with Rico had made it even harder to reconcile the man I knew he was to the outside world with the man who created two kinds of pizza sauce from scratch, one

white and one red, made pizza dough without even looking at a recipe, and chopped, diced, cooked, and sauteed at least a dozen toppings according to what he knew his children preferred.

While I put together the ingredients for his sister-in-law's cake, Rico created the makings of a gourmet meal for four growing boys, a picky 21-year-old, and the two of us. He did all of that while holding at least three separate conversations with his kids, weaving around the dogs that were waiting for something to fall to the floor, and answering calls and texts.

I was exhausted just from watching him, but even more than that, I was amazed.

When I woke up and found that Rico was still sleeping and the kids were doing their own thing upstairs, I used the iPad someone had left on the table to do some research into him. I was stunned at the amount of information I'd found on him and his family.

There were mafia fan sites, and on more than one, Rico had his own dedicated page. I found pictures of him and his wife at charity events and some of him pushing a stroller or walking with a toddler on his shoulders. There were snapshots of him hunting Easter eggs in Central Park with his children when they were small and standing in line with them at a theme park. More recent pictures showed him jogging with the older boys or cheering from the sidelines of a sports field. I'd seen pictures taken by passersby on the streets and others taken by paparazzi who seemed to follow Rico wherever he went.

Pictures from a few months ago gave me a glimpse of his sister, dressed in a beautiful wedding gown, standing beside a man in a tuxedo who looked as out of place as I felt in Rico's home. The newlyweds were surrounded by Rico and his children, Rico's brother that I'd met and the twins I'd heard about, and another man and woman who I assumed was the other sibling and his wife I'd meet tomorrow. The stunningly beautiful woman was obviously pregnant and had one hand resting on her bump and her other on the shoulder of one of the small children standing around her.

Other more casual pictures had Rico standing with various men, and the people that posted them happily identified more than a few criminals, a handful of millionaire businessmen from New York City, and an anonymous dark-haired girl with pigtails and a huge smile.

The man was a celebrity of sorts, but right now, he was standing barefoot next to me wearing sweatpants and a faded concert tee that had seen better days. There was flour on his elbow and some on his shirt, and he was telling dad jokes that made everyone in the room laugh and groan at the same time.

That did not sync with the articles I'd read about him that talked about his ruthlessness inside the boardroom, the suspected crimes he'd been involved in over the years, the speculations about how his wife had died, or the hints that he had ties to other mob families and that, together, they ran the Eastern Seaboard from Florida to Maine. He even owned a baseball team here in New York. There were dozens of pictures of him sitting in the owner's box, laughing with his family.

There'd been more than a few write-ups about the Romano family's philanthropy jumbled in with the articles about their criminal enterprises. One paper covered Rico's arrest for assault, his subsequent release an hour later once the charges were dropped, and his attendance at a cancer benefit where he donated 50K all in one article because they happened over a 24-hour period.

It was hard to figure out which man was the real Rico Romano, and spending all this time with him wasn't making it any easier.

“Earth to Bex! Come in, Bex! Can you hear me?”

I lifted my gaze from my still-bare pizza and looked at my brother. “What did I miss?”

“After dinner, can we make marshmallow treats with different kinds of cereal?”

“Sure, but I'll have to see if there are enough marshmallows.”

“If you need anything like that, call the concierge. They’ll either bring some up from one of the kitchens or send someone out to get it for you.”

“Some hotel employee is going to be sent to buy marshmallows so the kids can make a snack?” Rico nodded, and I sighed as I shook my head. “That’s crazy. You don’t even have to leave the building, and you’ve still got anything you want at your fingertips.”

“Within reason,” Rico argued. “The kids can’t just call down there with every little request. They’ve got to go through me or Mona.”

“Is that a yes?” Rory asked.

“I guess. With their cereal selection I saw last night, we can make our own buffet of marshmallow treats.”

“Sweet,” Freddy said as he fist bumped my brother.

“Can you make more cookies too?” Vigo asked as he placed pepperoni on his pizza. “Those were so good.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw that the containers I’d stored the cookies in were all empty and looked back at him with wide eyes. “You ate all of those?”

“I ate some too,” Nicky said.

Constance snorted. “I tried to take an oatmeal chocolate chip, and Nicky growled at me before he took the whole container upstairs and slammed the door.”

“They made me crazy,” Nicky said in his defense. He nodded eagerly as he said, “I really want more of that kind.”

“That sounds like you’re volunteering to help her with the next batch,” Rico suggested slyly. “If you like them, you should learn how to make them yourself.”

“I’m down,” Nicky agreed.

“Will you teach me how to make the peanut butter kind?” Vigo asked.

“Sure.”

“And the two of you can clean up the kitchen when you’re finished,” Rico ordered. “I have to go downstairs and meet your Nonnie for brunch in the morning, but I’ll cook when ...”

“I thought you were going to the club,” Constance interrupted.

“We were, but I suggested we move it here so I’m not too far away from you guys. I’m sure she’d like to see all of you while she’s here.”

“We’ll come down,” Nicky assured him. After he asked what time they were meeting, he set an alarm on his phone and then set it aside. “Will you need a rescue call?”

“I’m trying to resist saying no and hoping you understand that my silence is really a yes.”

We all laughed, and Constance said, “We’ll rescue you, Dad. We need to have some input on who our step-monster is going to be after all.”

“I had a step-dad for a while, but he was kind of an asshole,” Rory said without thinking.

“What happened to him?”

Rory smiled at Freddy and said, “My mom figured out he wasn’t as nice when she wasn’t around, so she kicked him to the curb.”

“Good for her,” Constance said with a grin.

“She told me to use it as a learning experience so I don’t ever act like that when I get older.”

“That’s even better!”

“My pizza’s ready, so I’ll put it in. Rory, is yours ready for the oven?”

Rory nodded at Nicky and then looked at me. “What do I do now?”

“Pick it up and follow me, bud. We’re finished first so that means we eat first. How about that?”

Rory looked excited to have been invited to do something with the older boy, and when the pan he was carrying wobbled, Nicky reached out and steadied it. “Careful. If the dogs get it, you’ll be going hungry.”

“Damn moochers.” Rico sighed loudly while looking at the dogs and yelled, “Out of the kitchen!”

9.

BEX

“Are you sure you’ve got this?” I asked Nicky as he nudged me aside and took over at the sink.

“It’s not our first time on kitchen duty. Besides, you cooked.”

“I helped you guys cook.”

Vigo shrugged. “Either way, we’ll clean the kitchen. I’m sure you’ve got things to do.”

I laughed before I teased, “Sure. I’ll cure cancer and plot out world peace since I have a free minute.”

“You’re bored, huh?”

“I can only watch so much television before my left eye starts to twitch.”

“Do you like to read? Dad has some books ...”

I shook my head, and Nicky’s voice trailed off before I said, “Not my style. I looked them over earlier.”

“Hmm,” Vigo said thoughtfully. “You probably like the same books Constance and Mona talk about all the time.”

“Romance,” Nicky said in a breathy falsetto as he fanned his face. He pretended to faint, and his brother held him up, groaning dramatically at his weight.

“Which room is your sister’s?”

Still laughing, Nicky said, “Go up the main stairs and take a right. Her room is the last one on the left.”

I grabbed a plate and got an array of the treats I’d made with the guys before I left the kitchen and walked down the short hall toward the front door. I hadn’t been upstairs since I got here and was curious to see what the second floor was like.

I'd explored the first floor to my heart's content, except for the room that Constance had pointed out belonged to Rico while she gave me a tour of their home. If there wasn't a wall of windows on three sides of the penthouse, I'd almost think I was somewhere in the suburbs.

Well, if the suburbs happened to have a family home that belonged to a millionaire who had a kitchen with appliances a regular person hadn't even heard of and toilets with motion sensors that lifted the lid as you neared it.

The downstairs was wide open, and you could walk through from the front door into the kitchen area that was set apart from the table where we'd eaten. Not far away was a huge couch that was so fluffy and cozy, it was like sitting on a cloud. There were other areas with seating around the space, some close to the windows and others by the fireplace, but every part of the home was well-appointed while being inviting and comfortable.

The room I was staying in was larger than my first apartment with a walk-in closet big enough to be an extra bedroom. It had all the amenities a person could need, including a well-stocked bar, a mini fridge, a pod coffee maker, and a big screen mounted to the wall with surround sound.

One thing I'd noticed about the living area downstairs was that there wasn't a television anywhere. I assumed there was one hidden in the ceiling or one would pop out of the wall at the push of a button, but I hadn't seen evidence of that yet. When I'd talked to Rico in his suite earlier, I'd noticed that he didn't have a television in there either, or at least not in the sitting room where he had his comfortable chair. I wondered if he had something against electronics but shook my head when I remembered Rory talking about the game systems that Freddy had upstairs and the huge screen they fed into.

When I got to the top of the staircase, I was pleasantly surprised. Rory was sprawled on an L-shaped couch that looked even more comfortable than the one in the living room, and Freddy was in a huge bean bag that nearly swallowed his slender body. The boys worked game controllers as they

watched their life-sized characters run around on the wall. I stood there in shock for a second until I realized it wasn't the biggest television screen known to man but that the images were coming from a projector mounted to the ceiling.

“Sup Bex?” Rory asked without even glancing my way. “Did you bring more snacks?”

“No, these are for Constance.”

“She's in her room. It's down there,” Freddy said as he tilted his head in the direction his older brother had sent me.

I looked to my left and saw two open doors, and I could tell from the decor that was where Nicky and Vigo had their rooms. When I turned to the right, I passed a closed door. It was obvious from the Nerf darts that were stuck to the frame that was Freddy's room. Another open door looked like a guest room. I saw an unmade bed and assumed that was where Rory had slept last night. I made a mental note to remind him to keep the place clean and then kept walking and tapped on the second one on the left.

“Come in!”

I opened the door just enough to peek around it before I said, “It's me.”

“Hey, Bex. Come on in. Shut the door behind you, though. Sometimes, the boys get rowdy when they're playing their game.”

The door was almost closed when I heard Rory and Freddy start yelling, and I smiled when I turned around and looked at Constance. “I can see how that might get annoying.”

“I should be used to it, but since I've been in my own place for a while, I've become accustomed to peace and quiet when I study.”

I saw that she had her laptop open beside her and a notebook on her lap, so I asked, “Am I interrupting? I can go.”

“Oh no! You brought snacks, and I need a break anyway.”

I handed her the plate, and she bit her lip as she tried to decide which to try first. “I didn’t think to bring you anything to drink.”

“I’ve got water,” Constance said before she bit into an oatmeal chocolate chip cookie. Her eyes closed, and she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly before she asked, “You taught my brother how to make these?”

“I did.”

“That’s awesome. If you’re here long enough, I’d like to learn how to make that granola I ate this morning. It was delicious.”

“It’s easy. I can write it down for you.”

“Thanks,” she said before she took another bite. “What are you up to now that your cooking class is over?”

“I’m bored,” I admitted. “Your brothers said you might have something I can read?”

“Oh!” the younger woman said as she leaned forward to set the plate down. “I’ve got just the thing. I got a new e-reader for Christmas, and my old one is in my room. You can use that!”

“That would be so great.”

“My account is linked, so feel free to choose some books for yourself if you don’t find something you like in my library.”

“Romance novels?”

“The naughtier the better!” Constance walked into her bedroom and returned with an e-reader and charging cord. She handed them to me before she sat down and reached for the plate again. “You have to promise not to judge me for my book choices.”

“Of course not, but you have to promise the same.” I hit the button to turn on the tablet and smiled when the screen lit up. “Any suggestions on which one to start with?”

“Shoot. I’m horrible at remembering titles,” Constance said as she reached into her bag and pulled out a newer e-reader. “It’s about a fake boyfriend. A sort of backwards *Pretty Woman* storyline about a rich businesswoman who’s unlucky in love and hires a man to be her companion.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“It was really good,” Constance mumbled as she searched through the device. She told me the title, and I started to search for it when she gasped and whispered, “That’s perfect!”

“What is?”

“You can be Julia Roberts without the whole prostitution thing and rescue my dad.”

“From what?”

“My Nonnie,” Constance said with a sigh as she slowly shook her head. “She’s great, don’t get me wrong, but she can be so ... pushy.”

“About?”

“She was raised in a family that made their marital arrangements based on what the union could bring to the table rather than love. It’s no secret that she and my grandfather were in an arranged marriage. I think she may have been a little relieved when he died.”

“That’s sad.”

“What’s sad is that she taught my mom to feel the same way about marriage.”

“Really?” I remembered what Rico had said about the kids’ mother and her disinterest in anything domestic, but I didn’t want to give Constance any notion that he’d spoken about her.

“Dad’s never come right out and said it, but he and my mom married because of an agreement between my grandfathers. It wasn’t a love match by any means. Dad did his best to take up the slack, but me and my brothers knew early on that Mom didn’t really want us around. It was just expected that she’d marry my dad and pop out a few kids.

Once she did that, her job was done and she just sort of coasted through.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It is what it is. We’re really lucky Dad is such a good man. He did his best to make sure we were happy and didn’t really care that our mom wasn’t like other moms.”

“What does all of this have to do with me being your dad’s fake girlfriend?”

“Nonnie is convinced that we need a woman around. Okay, no, let me amend that. Nonnie thinks *I* need a woman around.”

“Why? You’re an adult.”

“I’m an adult who has no interest in marrying for money, position, or power. My dad would *never* allow that to happen, but in Nonnie’s world, that’s how it’s supposed to be. She thinks my life won’t be complete until I fulfill my duty.”

“That’s just wrong.”

“She found a nice, young Italian for me about six months ago, but when she tried to push the issue, Dad lost his shit. Since then, she’s pretty much left me alone. I was afraid she’d start in with Nicky and Vigo, but she’s focused on my dad instead.”

“That’s good for your brothers but sucks for your dad.”

“It would be easier to tell her no if she wasn’t so damn nice. She’s just so ... sweet.”

“Even though she wants to arrange your marriage like it’s medieval times?”

“Yes! She’s not the stereotypical grandma, just like my mom wasn’t a typical mom. Nonnie hasn’t cooked a meal or washed a dish in her life and was appalled when she found out Dad had chores for us around the house including rotations on kitchen duty.”

“That sounds perfectly reasonable. Diana kept a list of chores on a whiteboard next to the kitchen door. Everyone’s

chores, including Harry's, were listed for anyone to see."

"Who are Diana and Harry?"

"They were my foster parents. I lived with them for a few years, and it didn't matter how old I got ... if I was in the house, I was assigned chores. Nothing horrible, just dishes a few times a week and other little things."

"Nonnie couldn't imagine why we needed to learn how to mop or clean a bathroom, but Dad was insistent that we not turn into spoiled assholes who can't do anything for themselves. Uncle Ziggy's the same way with my cousins, and I can tell Aunt Gabby and Uncle Relio won't let that happen either."

"Your Nonnie is your mom's mom, right?" Constance nodded so I asked, "If your mom is gone, why does she think it's her place to find your dad a new wife?"

"Mom was her only child. Grandpa had kids with some other women, but Mom was the only one he ever recognized." My eyes grew wide with shock, but I managed to shut my mouth just a second after my jaw dropped open. "We're not supposed to know that either, but it's common knowledge. Anyway, Nonnie's got it in her head that Dad needs a wife. A good Italian mafia wife."

"Like the ones on that TV show?"

"Oh hell no. Bite your tongue, woman."

"I don't know your dad very well, but I can't imagine him with a woman like that."

"That would be horrible."

"How do you think that me pretending to be his girlfriend would help? Even if it did, I'm not going to be in New York for much longer, so after I leave, what would stop her from starting her quest again?"

"Probably nothing, but it will get her off Dad's back for a little while." Constance sat quietly as she chewed and thought and finally said, "I doubt it would work anyway. You're way too nice to be able to pull it off. Any woman who goes up

against Nonnie when she's on a mission needs to be able to fend off the barbs and insults she'd hurl her way."

"I thought you said your grandmother was nice."

"She is nice ... to us. I don't think any woman could have been married to my grandfather for that many years and survived unless she was a little evil. Luckily, it's never been aimed at us, just people that get in her way."

"Like your dad?"

"She knows better than that."



RICO

"I'm going to have a conference call with Holofcener and O'Sheeran in a few minutes, so I wanted to ask if any of you want me to request additional men on your behalf."

Ziggy shook his head and said, "Oliver and Alonzo are fine. They're related to my girls through their mother, and I know they would never stray from loyalty to their own family even if they could be pulled away from ours."

"Have you talked to them about it?"

"I didn't have to. They heard about Mark before I said a word, and if they could have killed him themselves, they would have."

Relio agreed, "My kids' guards are the same. We brought them in specifically to watch Gabby and the kids, and they've got no loyalty to anyone but us."

"Are you sure?"

"Gabby had a hand in choosing who watches our kids, and she selected the guards from a mama bear standpoint rather than a business one. I have every faith that she chose well."

"Shit, man, even I'm afraid of Gabby sometimes, but those guards she chose for your kids are downright terrifying."

Relio's wife had insisted she make the final decision about who protected her children, and she didn't care if the guard was involved in our business at all. As a matter of fact, she preferred that they not be. The choices she'd made blew us all away at the time, but they'd proven their worth tenfold already.

Rather than have her kids surrounded by scowling men with guns, Gabby had chosen mostly women for her kids' security team. They weren't part of our family organization, but they weren't just people off the street either. All but one was ex-military from one American branch or another. The head of the security team for Relio's family was an Israeli woman rumored to have been an assassin for the Mossad. I'd never admit it out loud, but her cold, calculating stare scared the hell out of me. When she smiled at the kids in her charge, it was from the heart, and that meant everything to Gabby and Relio.

"Vino's good since he and Angelia don't have any kids. Her guard is steady anyway."

"It's her brother, isn't it?"

"Yeah. He's here on a work visa," Relio answered.

"I think it's a good idea that you call in outsiders, Rico," Ziggy said sadly. "We're set with our kids, but yours are harder to pin down."

"And they don't have family watching out for them," I agreed.

"Have you thought about asking the other families? They might have some men they can spare for a while."

"They're reassessing their choices now since Mark was close friends with one of Zach's men and one of Luca's. The three of them even went to Vegas together a month or so ago."

"What about the Morettis?"

"Cento said he has one he knows is trustworthy, but that's not enough. I need four additional men at the very least, but I'd prefer eight so that each of my kids has two at all times. Especially Freddy."

“I told Gabby what happened, and while she’s worried, she was planning on keeping everyone close to home anyway since we’re so close to her due date. She doesn’t want a lot of random germs or people around.”

“That’s easy to do since most of them are so young,” Ziggy agreed. “Make your call, and we’ll go down and get with Sam. See you in a bit.”

I logged into the fake account I’d set up exclusively for this purpose and hit the button to start a video chat with my Irish associates in Florida and Jewish associates in South Carolina. After a few rings, they answered, and I saw them in their own homes miles away.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” I greeted the men. “Thanks for taking my call.”

“Of course. You said it was urgent. What is going on, my friend?” Moshe Holofcener asked.

Darragh O’Sheeran, the other man on the call, nodded and asked, “What can we do for you?”

“I’ve run into a problem, and I don’t know who I can trust,” I said before I explained what had happened with Freddy and Bex.

“And that has you doubting your own men,” Moshe said simply.

“Exactly.”

“What can we do to help?” Darragh asked.

“I need guards for my kids, preferably two for each so they’re always protected even if one of the men needs to step away or rest.”

“You have four children?” Moshe asked. “I can send four men right away.”

“I can also have four there within a few hours,” Darragh assured me. “Keep them with you as long as you need.”

Moshe expressed his agreement with a firm nod and added, “I’ll explain to them the importance of keeping the

children safe while keeping their ears open for information that might lead to other rats in your organization.”

“My next call is going to be to a PI that I know. I’m going to have him run a check on each of the men in my circle to find out if they have fallen into debt somehow or showing any erratic spending.”

“That’s a good plan,” Darragh agreed. “I’ll brief my men and have them on a plane within six hours.”

“We will ensure your children are safe so that you can focus on finding the problems and eradicating them.”

“Words can’t express how much I appreciate this. Your help will never be forgotten.”

“Tell us what type of men would work best for your children,” Moshe suggested.

I told them about each of my kids’ interests and their schedules and then left the men to make their choices with another word of thanks and the promise to speak to them soon. Once we hung up, I called the private investigator, Hammer, I’d met through my new brother-in-law and got his assurances that he’d run a thorough check on each man through his online resources but would be happy to travel to New York for a more thorough investigation if needed.

“Let’s just do the digital investigation for now. I’ve got the kids’ security covered by men outside of my organization,” I assured him.

“I can get some of the guys there in a blink if you need us,” Hammer assured me.

“I’ll keep you guys in my pocket for now, but I won’t hesitate to call Boss if anything changes.”

“Send me all the information you have on your men, and I’ll begin the process immediately.”

“One more thing,” I said before Hammer could continue.

“What’s that?”

I thought about the woman who had been spending time with my family and realized I had no choice but to give him her name too. Everything she'd said about rescuing my son that day seemed to be a brilliant stroke of luck, but I had been raised to believe luck was bullshit.

“See if you can find anything on Bex Holland while you're at it.”

“Are you going to send over her information?”

“I don't have any details yet, but I can give you the few stats I know.”

“I'll do what I can,” Hammer assured me. I gave him what little information I knew about Bex and listened to the clicking of his keyboard as he took notes.

Once Hammer, the biker who belonged to the same motorcycle club as my sister's husband, gave me his secure email address, I thanked him again and then argued about his refusal to bill me. After he promised to tally up the hours and resources used, we ended the call.

My head fell back, and I stared at the ceiling as I gathered my thoughts. I needed to go help my brothers with whatever clusterfuck Sam had uncovered, but I really just wanted to sit here in silence while I tried to assure myself that my kids were going to be safe until I could get my house in order, so to speak.

I'd feel a lot better once I had the new men in place. After that, I'd be able to focus on taking care of Frank Bovino, the man who had been a thorn in my side for more years than I wanted to count. Right now, my feelings of rage and helplessness needed to be channeled into something more tangible than the situation that was out of my control until tomorrow when the men arrived.

Luckily, there were two assholes downstairs I could take out my frustration on. I stood with a sigh and put my shoulders back, more than ready to act on something that could hopefully bring this situation to an end sooner than later.

If not, at least I'd get to beat on somebody until I was too tired to stand. Maybe that would finally get me a good night's rest.

10.

RICO

I pasted a smile on my face and stood to greet my mother-in-law. My ex-mother-in-law. Regardless of her official title, right now, she was simply a raging pain in my ass. During our marriage, she'd been nothing but understanding and patient with me, knowing that her daughter was my wife on paper only ... or at least, that's how it had been for the last twelve years of our marriage.

I wasn't sure why she was so insistent that I remarry or that she was the one to choose the woman. All of this started two years ago - almost a year to the day after Ann died. I'd brushed her off for a few months, but then she started coming by with a friend of a friend or sending a random widow by the office to drop off something for the kids. I'd finally told her that wasn't going to work, so she started taking a more direct approach, backing me into a corner so that I couldn't refuse without actively hurting her feelings.

Hopefully my daughter would swoop in to rescue me any minute now, and I could make my excuses to slip away. I wasn't sure how long I could manage to remain civil, considering this woman with my ex-mother-in-law was one of Ann's oldest friends who had started hitting on me long before our wedding. As a matter of fact, I vaguely remembered her propositioning me in the receiving line not even an hour after we'd said our vows.

The last time Ann had mentioned her, she'd said Elena had married a much older millionaire that was a real estate tycoon who let her live a jet-set lifestyle while he stayed home and counted his money or what was left of it after all of her surgical enhancements and shopping sprees. I'd never met the man, but it was easy for me to relate.

"Good morning, Rico," Carla said as she air-kissed each side of my face. As she took her seat in the chair I held out for

her, she said, “You remember Elena.”

“Of course.” I nodded at Ann’s old friend and gave a half-smile. “Elena.”

“Rico, darling, I was heartbroken when I heard about Ann.” Elena glanced at her chair, clearly waiting for me to walk over and pull it out for her. Instead, I sat and picked up my glass of water. “I wanted so badly to come to the funeral, but I was recovering from a medical procedure in Geneva.”

“It was a beautiful service,” Carla murmured. She noticed the extra chairs at the table and asked, “Is someone joining us?”

“Constance should be here any minute. She called the concierge and told them to set two more places, so I assume one of the boys will be joining us too.” Carla’s face lit up at the thought of visiting with her granddaughter. At the same time, Elena frowned. Even though I knew the answer, I asked, “Did you and your husband have any children, Elena?”

“My husband had three children, but I don’t have any of my own.”

I’d seen the disgust on her face, so just to be an ass, I asked, “Are you still close to them since your husband passed?”

“No,” Elena snapped. She seemed to remember that she had a facade to maintain, so she added, “They’ve sought support from their mother as they’ve always had a very close relationship.”

“That’s good,” Carla responded, completely oblivious to Elena’s disgust at the thought of a relationship with her step-children. “Rico’s kids are growing up so fast! You’ve met them all, I’m sure.”

“I’ve met Constance and the older boys, but I’ve never met Ann’s youngest son.”

I tensed when I saw Elena’s devious smile, but that was replaced with a look of confusion when we caught sight of my daughter walking toward us with a stunning woman I couldn’t place. As I stood to pull out Constance’s chair and let her

introduce her friend, I studied the beautiful woman with nothing short of awe.

Her dark hair was swept into an elegant updo, and she wore simple diamond studs in her ears that were at least two carats each. The suit she had on was obviously designer, if not couture, and fit her perfectly. It accentuated her ample chest and tapered down to her slim waistline before the skirt flared. The heels she wore were the same style I'd given to Constance as a Christmas gift a few months ago. They'd cost the price of a small sailboat, and although I couldn't remember the name of the designer, I knew they were in high demand and considered the very height of fashion.

The woman's posture was perfectly refined, and she walked with confidence and elegance as if she owned this room. I glanced at her face as she stood across from me next to my daughter and felt my jaw go slack when I recognized those vivid green eyes.

Bex Holland, the quirky woman who'd been roaming around my house barefoot and wearing my sons' sweats and ratty T-shirts had transformed herself into a stunning beauty that had every man in the dining room drooling as they watched her glide past.

As Constance leaned down to kiss her grandmother's cheek, Bex walked around Carla's chair and stopped next to me. She smiled sweetly as she held my eyes, resting her hand on my lapel as she purred, "Please excuse me for being late. Constance and I lost track of time."

"Of ..." I had to clear my throat before I continued, "Of course. It's, um, no problem."

"We had so much fun getting ready together that I think we should do it every week before our usual brunch. Don't you think so, Constance?"

"I'd love that," Constance agreed cheerily. She smiled at her grandmother and said, "Nonnie, you'll have to join us sometime."

“I ... That ...” Carla stammered before she looked up at Bex and said, “I’m sorry, but I haven’t had the pleasure ...”

“You must be the wonderful woman I’ve heard so much about,” Bex said as she turned to Carla and extended her hand with a smile. “I’ve been anxious to meet you, but we haven’t been socializing much.”

“I see,” Carla said, still confused. She looked at me and then back at Bex before she asked, “Have you been together long?”

“Not long enough,” Bex answered before she turned to drop a quick kiss at the corner of my mouth. “Sweetheart, would you be so kind as to move over a chair so I can sit next to Mrs. Brunetti. You know I’ve been eager to get to know her.”

I was stunned speechless. I cleared my throat and let out a small cough before I glanced at my daughter. She had a calculating look as she intently watched Bex interact with Carla. Her features quickly clouded over with anger when she noticed Elena furiously glaring at Bex.

I had been dreading this uncomfortable brunch for two days, but it had suddenly become much more tolerable and exciting. I couldn’t wait to watch Bex’s performance and planned on spending the meal trying to figure out how in the world she’d completely transformed herself since I left the apartment an hour ago.



BEX

If the daggers the mostly-plastic woman was aiming my way were real, I’d be standing in a pool of blood. On the other hand, I was positive that if I took a knife to her, silicone and botox would be the only thing to leak out.

Even better than the look on that woman’s face was the shock on Rico’s. When I rested my hand on his chest a second ago, I could feel his tension, but looking at him now, I saw that he was more amused than nervous. He had a strange

expression on his face as he studied me. Before he pulled out my chair, he gave me quite a shock by planting his lips on mine for a quick kiss. I tried to tell myself that it was only because he had caught on to the plan Constance and I had come up with and was rolling with it, but the gesture made my stomach flutter and my cheeks warm.

Once I sat down, he pushed my chair in and sat on my left. The way the table was arranged now, I was facing the woman that Rico's ex-mother-in-law was trying to set him up with and experiencing the full power of her intense glare. It was hard not to smile when I realized how close she was to stomping her foot and having a full-on meltdown like a toddler. My guess was that Constance had seen the same thing when she studied the woman's face and then gave me a blinding smile.

"I didn't realize you were in a relationship, Rico," Carla commented, sounding miffed before she took a sip of her mimosa.

Instead of letting him answer, I said, "We wanted to make sure we were a good fit before we brought the children into the equation."

"I'm so happy they've found each other," Constance lied. "The boys love her too."

"Where are my grandsons?"

Constance rolled her eyes dramatically before she answered, "Sleeping."

"I told them I was meeting you, and they said they'd come down to say hello."

Constance smiled at her dad as she grabbed her phone and said, "I'll send a text and make sure they're awake."

"You just recently met Rico's children?" Elena asked.

I nodded. "I did."

"I've known them since they were born."

"You've met Freddy?" Constance asked Elena without even looking up from her phone.

“I was talking about the older boys.”

I felt Rico shift uncomfortably beside me, and I tilted my head as I studied Elena. She was obviously holding back information, and her body language along with the micro expressions on her face told me that she felt smug about her secret, wanting to hold it over Rico’s head. I tried not to be a judgemental person, but I wasn’t always successful. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to remain neutral in this instance. There was something calculating about this woman that rubbed me the wrong way. I wondered what Carla Brunetti saw in her that made her believe she’d be a good fit for Rico or if she was simply snowed by the woman’s obviously fake care and concern for Rico’s kids.

“Didn’t you and Mom have an argument right before Freddy was born? It was something to do with your brother, wasn’t it?” Constance asked. I could tell she was scheming and seemed to be enjoying Elena’s discomfort.

“You know what it’s like as a young woman. There are miscommunications and misunderstandings that pull people apart, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t consider your mother one of my dearest friends.”

“You weren’t really young when you argued, though, were you? You *are* old enough to be my mother, after all.”

Rico had just taken a sip of his water and started coughing as he set the glass down with a thump. He yanked his napkin out of his lap and covered his mouth, and I could tell he was trying to cover his laughter by pretending to choke. I rolled with it and pretended to be the concerned girlfriend.

As I gently patted Rico’s shoulder, I asked, “Are you okay, honey?”

Rico’s coughing laughter became even more intense, and I could tell by the crinkles at the corners of his eyes that he was about to lose it. I couldn’t help but push the envelope a little more just to see his reaction when I said, “I’ve found that if you breathe through your nose when your mouth is full, it helps with the coughing and gagging.”

Rico snorted and a snicker escaped before he started coughing again. He bowed his head with the napkin still over his mouth, and I saw his shoulders start to shake just as Constance put her elbow on the edge of the table and rested her forehead in her hand. She had her lips pulled in between her teeth as she fought off her own bout of giggles, her face going an alarming shade of red as tears filled her eyes.

I glanced at Elena and saw that her face was now a mixture of shock and rage, but Carla was oblivious as she looked around the dining room at the other patrons.

I gave myself permission for one more dig and asked, "I'm sure you have plenty of experience, Elena. Doesn't it help to breathe through your nose?"

"Oh shit," Rico whispered right before he snorted and just as Constance lost it and exploded into laughter. They laughed loudly together, causing more than a few diners to turn and gawk at our table.

It was my turn to gasp when Carla leaned over and said, "I saw on the internet that there's a spot between your thumb and finger you can pinch that helps that. I've always wondered if it's true. Have you ever tried that, Elena?"

Elena's face turned beet red as Rico cackled with laughter. Constance was gasping for air as she dabbed at the corners of her eyes, and I couldn't help but laugh right along with them. Even Carla let out a giggle, but Elena didn't see the slightest bit of humor in our antics.

When the waiter came to take our order, everyone managed to regain their composure. For the next few minutes, we were all quiet until Carla started in with small talk about mutual acquaintances and family members, asking about Rico's nieces and nephews. When she found out that Rico's sister-in-law, Gabby, was pregnant, Carla told Constance a few funny stories about Ann's cravings when she was pregnant with her compared to her cravings when she was pregnant with Rico's other children.

I couldn't help but notice that Rico was silent during the conversation and seemed almost uncomfortable when Carla

mentioned Ann's pregnancy with Freddy. Oddly enough, Elena got a smug look when Carla mentioned Freddy's name. When Rico noticed, I could feel him tense again.

Without thinking, I laid my hand on top of his next to his plate, and Rico played right along when he turned his hand over and threaded our fingers together.

When we finished eating, the waiter took away our plates just as another served us coffee. I excused myself and walked toward the bathroom I'd seen near the front of the restaurant. I could see the guard that had accompanied me and Constance sitting on a couch in the main area of the hotel, so I stopped to ask the maitre'd to take the man some coffee and a pastry with a plate of fruit.

"I don't know if ..."

I wasn't sure if it was the expensive clothes or the atmosphere of the exclusive restaurant, but I found myself looking down my nose at the man before I snapped, "I asked you to do something, and I expect it to be done without argument."

"Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am."

I walked into the ladies room wondering where the hell *that* had come from and tried to rationalize my behavior by reminding myself that the guard was there to protect us. It only made sense that I'd want to see to his comfort. I wasn't quite ready to analyze what made me snap at someone in the service industry, considering that just yesterday, I never would have acted that way.

Maybe Botox Barbie and Carla, the matronly mafia queen, were rubbing off on me somehow. If that was the case, I'd have to watch myself. The elegant hotel and my new penthouse address were *very* temporary as was this role I was playing to help Rico out. I couldn't let any of this go to my head.

When I stepped out of the water closet in the opulent restroom, I was surprised to find Elena waiting for me near the sink. Her face was blank, but there was fire in her eyes. I

knew I would have to unleash my claws before this conversation was over.

I didn't mind, though, considering the woman had irritated me from the very beginning. She had an air about her that made me think of the mean girls I'd encountered on the rare occasions I'd been enrolled in public school. I found myself transported back to those days when my only defenses were my street smarts and sarcasm.

I decided to confront the problem head-on and asked, "Is this the part where you try to warn me off and make some vague threats about how I can't possibly understand this lifestyle?"

"I don't know where you came from, but I do know that you don't fit in. It won't take long for the new to wear off and Rico to see that."

"If that starts to happen, I'll give you a call so you can recommend a mediocre plastic surgeon. Your face and tits are clearly store-bought, so I'll give you that. We'd all presume you'll have the longer shelf life of the two of us." I let my gaze rove over the woman's face before I eyeballed her chest. I tilted my head and asked, "Did you get a discount since those ended up so uneven, or is that just the bra?"

"What?"

"Well, it is true that natural breasts aren't ever exactly the same, so maybe your surgeon was aiming for realism." I held her gaze for a second and then glanced at her forehead. "You might want to make another botox appointment. I'm almost sure there's a small crack near your right temple. If you don't get that spackled soon, you might be able to start moving your forehead. We can't have that, now can we?"

"You little bitch," Elena hissed.

"And you thought I couldn't fit in," I snarled just as a door opened and an obviously pregnant woman walked out with a grin on her face. I smiled at her before I looked back at Elena and said, "It's been fun, sweetheart, but I think I'll go back to

my boyfriend now. Do you want to walk to the table with me or stay in here and cry for a minute?"

"Burn," the pregnant woman whispered before she burst out laughing. She dried her hands on the fresh towel the attendant handed her and walked closer to me. "I'll come with you. It will give me a chance to convince you that we need to be best friends."

The smile on the woman's face was genuine, and there was something about her that made me instantly trust her motives.

I grinned at her and said, "I think that sounds grand." I turned toward the door without another word to Elena and put my elbow out as if I were going to escort the pregnant woman back to the dining room. "I'm Bex. Who might you be?"

The woman threaded her arm through mine as I pulled the door open. "I'm Gabby Romano. It's a pleasure to meet you."

RICO

“You should have seen the look on Elena’s face! That was the best showdown I’ve seen since Constance went toe to toe with that woman who was chasing after Ziggy.”

“I didn’t go toe to toe with her, Gabby,” Constance argued.

“Then what would you call it?” my brother asked through his laughter.

“I explained that she was making my uncle uncomfortable and should probably move out of the country,” Constance said primly.

“And tell everyone *why* she should move out of the country,” Gabby encouraged.

“Because ... well ...,” Constance hedged.

“Oh, I have to hear this,” Bex said as she propped her elbow up on the table and rested her chin on her hand. “Do tell.”

Constance rolled her eyes at me before she explained, “I simply *implied* that she *may* have a price on her head within twenty-four hours if I ever saw her face again.”

“So she disappeared?” Bex asked in awe. “How long has it been since you’ve seen her?”

“Probably ten years?” Constance guessed as she looked at Ziggy and Gabby.

“At least,” Ziggy agreed.

Bex looked confused when she asked, “You’re only 21, right? You were ...”

“It was right after her 11th birthday party. She cornered the woman on the porch of our old house and gave her a *vivid* description of what would happen if she didn’t disappear,” I

told everyone at the table, not caring that my daughter was blushing to the roots of her hair. “Ann came into the house and told me that if anyone ever doubted that Constance was a Romano, all they’d have to do is piss her off to know the truth.”

Bex reached out and fist bumped Constance as she said, “Don’t be embarrassed, sister. Sometimes, you’ve gotta put on the crown and remind everyone who’s the queen.”

“Damn right,” Gabby agreed.

I saw Relio raise his eyebrows, just as shocked as me that Gabby and Bex were getting along so well. Gabby and my brother had been together since their freshman year of high school, and over the years, she had become very protective of our family. She had tried so hard to get along with Ann but had been rebuffed at every turn. After a while, Gabby stopped overlooking Ann’s snarky barbs and the dismissive attitude she had toward me and our children. She just couldn’t hold her tongue anymore. It seemed like every time the women were forced to be in each other’s company, words were exchanged. On more than one occasion, they’d had screaming matches that came to blows. For the last few years of Ann’s life, my brothers and I had to make sure to keep the women as far apart as possible. That wasn’t difficult to do since Ann didn’t care to socialize with anyone in the family, including me and our children.

The way Bex and Gabby interacted was a refreshing change. When I saw my brother staring at them in anticipation, I realized that Relio, Ziggy, and I were waiting for them to start yelling any second. By now, Ann would have polished off at least half a bottle of wine, and Gabby would be glaring at her like she was trying to set her hair on fire. But not Bex. The women were laughing together like old friends, and when Constance joined in, I noticed that my older sons were in as much shock as the rest of us.

“She talks to *everyone*,” Rory said softly to Freddy.

“My mom didn’t like Aunt Gabby,” Freddy whispered. “They never talked like that. They usually just yelled at each

other.”

“Bex doesn’t always laugh like that when she talks to people, but she does ask them a lot of questions. She had a meeting with my teacher, and I had to sit there for *hours* while they talked.”

“Were you in trouble?”

“Sort of. I missed a lot of school when my mom was sick, so Aunt Bex met with them to explain. I don’t have to go back to my old school because I’m sad, but when we move to Las Vegas, she has to enroll me in school there.”

“What about your dad? Can’t you stay here with him so we can hang out?”

“We don’t know where he is. Bex thinks he might be in prison again, but I think he isn’t coming home because he’s sad about my mom too.”

“Prison?”

“Yeah. Sometimes, his plans fall through and the cops catch him,” Rory said sadly.

I realized that Ziggy was listening to the boys when he asked, “What’s your dad’s name, son? I can look him up if you want.”

“I’m not supposed to tell anyone his name so they don’t hate me too. Mom said that some people who don’t like my dad could be dangerous.”

“Why would they hate you?” Freddy asked.

“Probably because my dad took all their money and left town before they could get it back.”

“Is he a bank robber?” Freddy whispered, his eyes wide with astonishment.

“Mom said he’s a gifter.”

Ziggy’s eyebrows rose, and he repeated, “A gifter?”

“Yeah ... someone who scams people.”

“You mean a grifter?” I asked Rory.

“No, I’m pretty sure she said he’s a gifter.” Rory looked pensive for a second before he added, “But that doesn’t make sense because he’s never bought me a present.”

Rory told Freddy, “Bex lived with him until she was almost grown and learned a lot from him. Her and my mom said he’s not allowed to teach me any more of his skills, or I’ll end up in prison too.”

“Really? What did he teach you?” Freddy asked, ready for some juicy details. I had to admit, I was too.

“He taught me how to steal,” Rory said with a shrug. “He said it wasn’t stealing if people left things out in the open, but Mom and Bex said that’s wrong.”

Freddy scoffed. “Well, it is.”

Rory rolled his eyes at my son and replied, “Maybe, but I still know how to do it.”

“My dad taught me how to throw a football and ride my bike,” Freddy boasted. My heart swelled with emotion, knowing those were some of the things he’d always remember, but it broke a little bit when Rory dropped his head with a forlorn expression.

He sighed and mumbled, “I don’t know how to ride a bike.”

“My dad will teach you. You can borrow mine.”

Rory looked hopeful for a brief moment before his face dropped and he said, “We won’t have time. Bex said we won’t be here much longer.”

“I’ll teach you this week, and then you and Freddy can practice on the track while I run with Nicky and Vigo.”

“Can we do it now after everyone finishes eating?”

“I’ve got to take care of some business with your uncles, but if we get done in time, we will get started.”

The boys bounced excitedly in their chairs and then leaned closer to each other to whisper conspiratorially. I looked around the table, and noticed that Bex wasn’t part of the

conversation with Gabby and Constance anymore. Instead, she had tears in her eyes as she watched her little brother giggling with my son. She looked up when she realized I was staring at her. The smile that lit her face was dazzling, and I couldn't help but smile back when she mouthed, 'thank you' before she took a deep breath and looked at my daughter as she said her name.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out to check the new message. I looked across the table at Ziggy and saw that he still had his phone in his hand. I nodded at him and then made our excuses to everyone before I stood along with my brothers.

Ziggy started for the door as Relio kissed Gabby goodbye and then walked over to the bar where his older daughters were sitting with their laptops. Aurelia and Divina were much older than their younger siblings, closer in age to my sons, Nicky and Vigo, and Zara and Ziva, Ziggy's twin daughters. The cousins were usually inseparable when we had a get-together, but Ziggy's daughters were with their mother this weekend and Relio's girls had major school assignments due. Relio's daughters removed their earbuds and smiled at their dad before he moved on to kiss his younger children who were napping in the portable cribs I kept in the guest room for their visits.

"When I get back, we need to have a family meeting," I said, interrupting the kids' conversations.

Constance looked concerned and asked, "Is everything okay?"

"It's gonna be, babe," I assured her before I mussed Freddy's hair and then Rory's, causing them to squirm and giggle. I grinned at the boys and said, "Don't eat all that birthday cake while I'm gone."

"I'll save you a piece," Bex assured me. I smiled at her and nodded in thanks and then walked toward the door, trying not to focus on how familiar and comforting the vibe was with Bex and her brother here with us

Of course, the second we got out into the hallway, Ziggy had to point it out. “That was very ... domestic.”

“What was?” Relio asked.

“The whole situation just now,” Ziggy answered. “The only thing missing was Rico kissing Bex goodbye as he told her he’d be home soon and not to worry.”

“That’s what I said to Gabby.”

“Exactly!”

“She’s a guest who’s leaving soon,” I reminded them. “If it weren’t for the problems we’re dealing with right now, she wouldn’t even be here.”

“But she is here,” Ziggy argued.

“And she gets along with Gabby. If things work out with the two of you, we’ll finally be able to have family functions that don’t include warfare between the women.”

“There’s no working out anything with someone who’s not there.”

Relio shook his head as he said, “I saw how you looked at her, man. You can’t tell me the thought hasn’t crossed your mind.”

“I’ve known her three fucking days. It’s a little soon, don’t you think?”

“Who’s her father? Did you pick up what the boy was saying? A grifter?” I nodded and waited for Ziggy to tell Relio what we’d overheard. When he was finished, he asked, “How can we be sure she’s not part of this?”

“He’d know!” Relio argued. “It’s only been a few days, but Rico’s spent enough time with her to be able to judge her intentions.”

“I was the one who chose Mark to be one of Freddy’s guards. Obviously, I’m not the best at judging someone’s character,” I reminded them.

“That’s not on you, man. We were all snowed. We’ll be able to focus now that we’re sure the guards protecting your

kids aren't infiltrators," Relio assured me.

"He's right," Ziggy agreed. "Hopefully, Mark was the only one that Frank got to, but we'll know for sure in the next few days."

"And you're both positive you can trust the guards you've got on your kids?" I asked.

Ziggy was the first to respond as we passed Tino, one of my personal guards on hall duty today. "Zander and Zane are fine. As a matter of fact, they volunteered to come home and take over the protection of Ziva and Zara, but I told them to stay in Vegas. The girls are good. Their guards are related to them on their mother's side. Charity's family is really close, so it's good they've got that connection."

"Same with my kids. The women that watch over them were all chosen by Gabby, and they don't have any connection to this life, so our kids are their sole priority."

We exited the elevator and were greeted by some of the men in our organization. I'd called a meeting in an hour, hoping that was enough time to get to know the temporary guards that our associates had sent. After we'd exchanged pleasantries, I followed my brothers into the conference room we used for our day-to-day business. There were eight men mingling, and they fell into silence the second I shut the door.

"Gentlemen," I addressed the group. "I'm Rico Romano, and these are my brothers, Ziggy and Relio." The men nodded as I continued, "If you don't mind, let's have a seat around the table. I'll have you introduce yourselves and then I'll tell you what I can about the current situation before we discuss how you'll be split up and which kids you'll be assigned to protect. Then I'll give you a little time alone while I tell our men what's going on."

"They don't know why we're here?" Zilv Holofcener, Moshe's brother, asked. I shook my head, and he raised his eyebrows before he said, "That's likely to cause some strife in your organization."

“I don’t care as long as my kids are safe.” Zilv nodded in understanding, and a few of the other men voiced their agreement. Once everyone had found a seat around the long table, I began speaking. “Until last week, I felt like the men chosen to protect my kids would do that as if they were their own family. I was wrong. A man who’d been my son’s constant companion for nearly three years turned against me and, in turn, put my son’s life in danger. I have no idea how long the plan to kidnap Freddy was in the works, but I know it wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment decision. We’ve ... *interviewed* a few people who were able to give us intel, and we now have the name of the bastard who put this plan in motion.”

“May I ask a question?” one of the men said as he put a finger up to interrupt.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Reign, one of O’Sheeran’s bodyguards,” the short-haired man explained, his gray eyes piercing as he studied me. When I nodded, he asked, “Isn’t there an unspoken rule among your organization that women and children are to be protected?”

“Yes, but as with every rule, there are people who will break it for their own personal gain,” Ziggy explained.

“Are we here to help you eradicate the problem?” another man asked.

I recognized this man from somewhere so I asked, “Where are you from?”

“I’m Evan Marks. I’ve met you at my sister’s ...”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re Emaline’s brother! We love her bakery,” Ziggy said cheerfully.

“To answer your question, I don’t expect you to do anything other than protect my children. If it comes down to it, I’d like to know that you’d do whatever it takes to keep them safe. O’Sheeran and Holofcener assured me that none of you would have an issue with that.”

“We’ll protect them like they’re our own family,” another man assured me.

“Let’s go through introductions,” Relio suggested. “I’ll need your phone numbers along with your names and which organization you’re with. We’ll have a group text that includes all of you along with me, Rico, and Ziggy. Communicate with us and each other as needed, always remembering that the kids are your first priority. We’re more than willing to get anything you need and field any questions you may have.”

The man who’d just spoken gave us his name before he rattled off his number. “I’m Cashel. I work for the O’Sheerans.”

The other men that Darragh O’Sheeran had sent from his organization in Florida - Vander, Reign, and Troi - introduced themselves and gave out their numbers one by one. As soon as they were finished, the men that Moshe Holofcener had sent from North Carolina introduced themselves. As soon as we’d put Zilv, Tevye, Evan, and Noah’s information in our phones, I initiated the group text. I relaxed and let Relio lead the conversation, letting the men get comfortable with each other while I decided which of them to pair together to protect my kids.

After a few minutes, I explained, “I’m going to split you into four teams. There will be an O’Sheeran and a Kosher Nostra with each of my children. That way, I’ll ...” I let my voice trail off, trying to figure out how to explain myself without offending the men who’d traveled to help me.

“If one of us happens to be compromised, then the one with us won’t have any loyalty and can take care of the problem accordingly,” Troi said with a nonchalant shrug. “Sounds like a good plan.”

“You do what you have to do, and we’ll do what you ask,” Zilv assured me. “In the meantime, we get to stay in a luxury hotel, eat some great food, and make some new acquaintances.”

“I’ll use my kids’ school and activity schedules to arrange for at least one of you to be with them every second they’re away from home. I’ll also need two of you stationed outside

of my home as an added layer of protection. We'll do it in shifts to make sure you stay well-rested."

"We hope to get this taken care of as soon as possible, and we'd like to thank you in advance for your help," Relio announced.

"I feel like this needs to be said, just to put it out on the table. The kids are the number one priority here. If you feel that *anyone* is a danger to them, we want you to take whatever actions are necessary to protect them," Ziggy said firmly. "Even if that threat comes from within our organization, take care of it. We'll back your decision."

The men around the table took all of this in stride and either nodded or voiced their agreement, which made me feel better about the situation right then and there.

"Moshe sends his regards," Zilv Holofcener said as he locked eyes with me, letting me know he was serious as he gave me the message from his brother. "Family is important, and children are precious. We will do whatever it takes to help."

"Same from O'Sheeran," Reign assured me.

"On that note, gentlemen, I ask that you get settled into your rooms and give us an hour or so to update our men. When we're finished, I'll have you escorted to our apartment so I can introduce you to your new charges."

The men stood and said their goodbyes, and I leaned my arms on the table, completely relaxed for the first time in days.

"Do you feel better now?" Relio asked.

"I'll feel better when Frank Bovino is six feet under."

"All of us will, but I like the plan we've got in place and the men Darragh and Moshe sent," Ziggy said.

"I hate that I don't know which of our men we can trust, but I appreciate the fact that we've got trusted men without any agenda other than fulfilling a favor on behalf of their organization."

Relio nodded. “Their only allegiance is to their own people, and that’s going to benefit us as far as the kids’ safety. They’ll do whatever they have to do to fulfill the promise Darragh and Moshe made while we investigate to find out if we’ve got another rat.”

“Let’s get on it then,” I said as I stood to open the door so my children’s original guards could file in. “I want to spend some more time with my family before the day is over and we start another week with this hanging over our heads.”

“You want to get back to that pretty woman in your house. Admit it.”

I tried to glare at Relio but couldn’t really muster up the emotion. Instead, I laughed and agreed, “That too.”

“She’s a pistol, but I like her,” Ziggy told me.

“Gabby likes her, and that’s saying something.” We laughed, knowing Gabby was a hard sell when it came to relationships with other women. Finally, Relio got to the heart of the matter when he asked, “Have you thought about what it’s going to be like when she takes her little brother and moves to Las Vegas?”

“I mean, I’ve only known her for a few days, but I really don’t want that to happen. Freddy really likes Rory and would hate to lose him.”

“Uh huh,” Ziggy said drolly. “It’s all about Freddy. That’s how you’re going to spin this?”

“What are you doing to make sure she doesn’t leave?” Relio asked.

“I’m going to use my charm to convince her that staying in New York for a little while is a good idea.”

Ziggy argued, “You’re gonna have to come up with a better plan, big brother. I’ve seen your charm, and let me just say that’s not your strong suit.”

“I can be charming.” Both of my brothers shook their heads as I scowled.

“I’d feel better about the entire situation if we knew more about the woman,” Ziggy admitted.

“I’m going to work on that tonight once the kids go to bed.”

Relio laughed as I opened the door. “I bet you are.”



“I don’t want new guards,” Constance said simply before she started to get up.

“Not negotiable, Stan,” I said, calling her by the nickname my sister had given her when she was a child.

“I should get a choice in who I spend my time with and who shares my house with me.”

“Generally, yes, that would be the case. But right now, this isn’t a democracy.”

“What if they’re weirdos?”

“Then they’ll fit right in with you,” Nicky mumbled just loud enough for his sister to hear and shoot him a murderous glare.

“Shut up!” Constance snapped.

“You shut up.”

Constance pushed her brother’s shoulder so hard that he almost fell off his chair. He growled at her before he lifted his hand to push her back.

“Oh, you hit girls now?” Constance taunted.

“You’re not a girl, you’re my sister,” Nicky said as he shoved her out of her chair.

“Enough!” I roared, and everyone at the table jumped. As Constance scrambled to get up, Nicky put his hand out to help her back into her seat. “I know you guys have gotten close to your guards, but this is more important than injured feelings.”

This is about trying to figure out who we can trust with your safety.”

“I know I can trust Park and Sully,” Constance argued.

“And I thought I could trust Mark, a man I’d known since he was a kid. I put your baby brother’s life in his hands and look what happened,” I reminded my daughter.

“But Sully and Park are different.”

“Yeah, they are. I haven’t known them nearly as long as I had known Mark and his family.”

“No! I don’t mean like that, I mean that I know they’d never betray me ... you. They’d never betray you.”

“And what makes you so sure of that?”

Constance looked away, not willing to argue the subject any further. I still wondered why she was so defensive when it came to her guards. Of course, I’d handpicked the men that would be shadowing my children, but I’d put even more thought into the ones I hired to be with my daughter day and night, even sleeping in her house since she’d moved out to attend college.

When I glanced over at Bex, I saw that her eyes had narrowed as she scrutinized Constance. I felt like something had her Spidey-Senses tingling. She felt my stare and looked over at me slowly with her gears still spinning. I would have given all the money in my bank account to know what she was thinking at that moment and made a mental note to ask her later when we were alone.

And we *would* be alone soon. I could guarantee it. Her quick kiss followed by two hours of flirting along with putting Ann’s old friend in her place had turned me on so much that I could barely think about anything other than exploring Bex’s mouth and her body. For hours. Possibly even days.

Within five minutes after we’d come back upstairs, Bex was barefoot again, back in my son’s sweatpants but wearing one of *my* T-shirts this time. When I saw her last night, she was curled up on the end of the couch with a tablet in her hand, immersed in a book that had made her laugh out loud

more than once throughout the evening. It was a far cry from the put-together socialite with perfect makeup and stilettos I saw at brunch this morning.

I wondered what other surprises the woman had up her sleeve. I was coming to realize that the more time I spent with her, the more I wanted to learn about each and every one.

“Dad?” Nicky said, waving his hand to catch my attention.

Bex’s face came into focus, and I saw she’d been watching me while my mind wandered with filthy thoughts of what I wanted to do to her. From the flush of her cheeks, I felt like she might have read my mind.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Sorry. I got sidetracked. What was that?”

“Constance asked a question.”

I looked at my daughter and knew she was about to lie to me and wondered what in the hell had happened to my little girl that told me everything.

“I asked if I can still see Sully and Park even though they aren’t going to be my security team for a while.”

“Why?”

“We’re study partners since they’re in classes with me.”

“Since when do you need help with your classes?”

“I’m not the one who needs a study partner, Dad,” Constance admitted.

“I’m telling them you called them stupid,” Vigo teased.

“Says the boy who has me tutor him in math.”

“Keep arguing and I will tie the three of you together and drop you into the pool,” I threatened without thinking.

Bex had just taken a sip of water and spewed it across the table, spraying me. I dabbed my face with my napkin as all the kids laughed as if it were the funniest thing they’d ever seen. Bex, on the other hand, was mortified. She jumped up

and ran around the table, apologizing the entire time. She wiped at my face and neck with her own napkin.

I wrapped my hand around Bex's wrist with her face just inches from mine, and we stared at each other for a few heartbeats. The noise of the kids' laughter and Rory's excited questions about when they could go swimming faded away as I stared into his sister's eyes.

"Sorry," Bex whispered. "You caught me off guard."

"You've been doing that to me all day."

"I have?"

"What happened to those heels you were wearing this morning?"

"They're in my closet."

"Put them back on, and let's go downstairs for a drink."

"Really?"

"Yeah. How soon can you be ready?"

"Give me ten minutes."

I let Bex go, and she hurried off to change. The silence of the room suddenly registered, and I turned to see the kids were all staring at me as if I'd grown a second head. Constance, Vigo, and Nicky looked completely taken aback, if their wide eyes and open mouths were any indication. Rory and Freddy, on the other hand, looked disgusted for some reason.

"What?" I asked, aiming my question at the younger boys.

"Were you about to kiss my sister?" Rory asked.

"Possibly."

"Are you taking her on a date?"

"Inevitably."

"Are you gonna kiss her then?"

"Probably."

"Ew," Rory and Freddy chimed in unison.

“Go, Dad,” Nicky whispered as he put his fist out to bump mine.

Vigo did the same as he said, “I like her.”

I saw Constance was smiling mysteriously. “What’s that about?”

My daughter shrugged and then her smile got even bigger before she said, “I love it when a plan comes together.”

12.

BEX

“What am I doing?” I whispered to my reflection as I dried my hands at the sink in the restroom of the most sophisticated restaurant I’d ever been to. Rico had brought me to a different restaurant on the property that was even nicer than the one where we’d had brunch earlier.

The dining room was so swanky that it was hard not to gawk at the chandeliers and other decor. But the bathroom, with its sitting room, wash room, and private stalls, had three times the square footage of my apartment in Kansas City. I had no doubt that just one of the fainting couches I’d walk past to get back to the exit cost more than my car.

I had found myself completely out of my element the last few days. Since my brother and I rescued Freddy, our entire life flipped upside down. We’d gone from a modest apartment to a penthouse. Three days ago, I had lunch with my brother at a greasy spoon, and now I was in a Michelin-starred restaurant with a mob boss.

The whirlwind of culture shock was giving me whiplash, and the decision I’d made earlier when I was getting dressed to come downstairs wasn’t helping.

I had been attracted to Rico Romano from the second we met. Of course, that was slightly compromised when he threatened to kill me, but it came back with a vengeance after his apology. The buttoned-up, suit-wearing, serious man the outside world saw was light-years away from the happy father who laughed with his kids while he cooked them dinner.

Every facet of the man, from his easygoing nature with his children to his fierce need to protect them, was sexy to me. In any other scenario, I would never consider a relationship, or even a friendship, with him. He was way out of my league. But we’d been thrust together and would need to stay that way until the danger passed. When it did, my brother and I would

resume our lives and follow through with the plans we had to move to Las Vegas.

Freddy and Rory would probably keep in touch for a while, but their friendship would fall to the wayside gradually with that much distance between them. Considering their age, I doubted it would last more than a few months.

Once we left New York, I wouldn't have any more contact with Rico Romano. Right now, though, we were forced to spend time with each other. I didn't know how much longer I could make it without climbing the man like a tree and begging him to fuck me on the nearest flat surface.

And since we wouldn't even be living in the same time zone soon, what would it hurt?

"You're really going to do this?" I asked my reflection.

My cheeks were flushed, my hands were shaking, and my clit was throbbing. I wanted to scream, 'Yes! Yes! Yes!' Whether that was to answer my own question or the excited words I would yell the second I got Rico alone and started ripping his clothes off didn't matter.

I knew my endgame. Now it was just a matter of making it back to the table and getting Rico onboard. Considering how he'd been looking at me for the last three days, I didn't think that would prove to be a difficult task.

I stepped back so I could view the full-length mirror and couldn't help but smile at my reflection. If Harry and Diana could see me now, they'd likely faint. Considering my daily outfit of choice was leggings, a worn T-shirt, and a pair of Chucks chosen from my extensive collection, tonight's attire was a bit of a shocker. It might not be my norm, but it made me feel like a supermodel. The champagne-colored slip dress I'd chosen gave my skin a healthy glow, and the strappy heels that were hell to walk in made my legs look a mile long.

I had been unsure of what I'd chosen while I was alone in my bedroom but knew from the look on Rico's face that I'd nailed it. The look of heat and longing that came over his face when he saw me boosted my ego. I suddenly felt like I

radiated sex appeal and added a little more sway to my hips as I walked toward him.

I knew I could get used to this if I let myself. That couldn't happen since we were leaving soon, but if I had my way, it would all work out.

Living in an exclusive hotel, wearing designer clothes, and eating in high-end restaurants was foreign to me and probably something I'd never experience again. The adventure that had brought us to this place was a moment I'd look back on for the rest of my life. If I could add a quick fling with a sexy mobster, I'd have even more reason to smile at the memories.

I leaned closer to the mirror and inspected my lipstick before I smiled wickedly. I was ready to go out and bag myself a mafioso. "You've just got a few weeks before real life returns, Bex. Make every minute count."



RICO

I ran my hand over my face as I took a calming breath. I had a million things going through my head and ways I could get rid of Frank Bovino was at the top of the list. It was primarily for the purpose of my son's safety but would definitely give me peace of mind by flushing out the traitors in my organization.

That was the most important task I had, but it was nowhere near the only one. I was working on a real estate acquisition with my brother, worrying about an upcoming inspection on a multi-million dollar construction project, second-guessing my decision to move my family to Manhattan, terrified that I wasn't doing enough to support my kids in their everyday lives, and stressing over my daughter's reaction when she found out about her new guards. Somehow, in the midst of all that, Bex Holland had pushed her way into my psyche and had

my body reacting like a boy in the throes of puberty every time she looked my way.

I needed a new woman in my life like I needed a hole in my head, but what could I do? I'd dragged her right into the middle of it by insisting she stay in our home until everything settled down and she could move on with her life safely.

Now, added to my crushing worries and stress, had come the realization that I didn't want her to leave. After just a few days, I couldn't imagine not hearing her laughter when she teased Freddy and Rory over breakfast or seeing her tucked into the couch with a book in hand while she drank her morning coffee or watching her fingers working bread dough. I was already addicted to seeing her wear my old t-shirts around the house.

I couldn't focus on what I had to do tomorrow because the idea of waking up next to Bex and starting my day making love to her had somehow jumped to the top of my to-do list. I couldn't get past this fantasy of doing that every morning for the next thirty or forty years.

My phone vibrated, yanking me out of my daydream, and I reached for it to make sure there wasn't an emergency. I smiled when I saw the text from my sister and hit the button to call her even though I usually wasn't a guy who found it acceptable to have a phone conversation in the middle of a crowded restaurant.

"Frank, my dear, what's going on?" I asked the second my sister answered.

Francesca's laughter brought a smile to my face before she said, "Well, Fred, I hear that you've got yourself a live one, and I thought I'd give you my support."

"Constance?" I asked, predicting my daughter had been the one keeping my sister informed of all the latest happenings even though she was hundreds of miles away in Texas with her new husband and the eclectic family they'd created there.

"And Gabby," Frankie added, and I could hear the smile in her voice. "She's made quite an impression on your protective

baby girl. I haven't even met the woman, and I'm already impressed."

"If she has her way, you won't meet her at all."

"What?" Frankie's serious disposition she had when she worried about my family took over. "Why?"

"They told you how we met Bex, right?"

"They did. I'm trying not to obsess about Freddy being in potential danger and to focus on you finally having a woman who makes you happy instead."

"What about the fact that I've only known her for a few days, and she's planning to move across the country in a few weeks?"

"And? You've got the resources to make sure she really is who she says, and you're jaded enough to watch out for not only your interests, but the family's too. That's healthy to a point, but I don't want you to let it get in the way of your happiness."

"I've got a lot on my plate, Frank."

"And you always will. Life has thrown you enough curveballs to give you the experience to deal with this famously. Do you know what you want from this woman?" Images of Bex writhing beneath me as I fucked her into oblivion flashed through my mind. I leaned forward and rested my head in my hand as I rubbed my forehead and tried to gather my thoughts. Frankie seemed to sense my stress and asked, "Are you trying to decide if she's meant for right now or forever?"

"Three days, Frank. I've known her three fucking days."

"And in those three days, she's made you look at life differently, become a friend to your daughter, made Nicky and Vigo fall half in love, reassured Freddy that he was safe, and fed Ziggy the best crême brulée he's ever eaten."

"Ziggy told you about her?"

"Ziggy called me a couple of hours after you guys found the woman working in your kitchen. Not long after that, I got

the first call from Stan.”

“I knew that you and Constance seem to have some fascination with my relationship status, but I had no idea Ziggy was in on it too.”

“Oh, he just thinks you need to get laid. Constance and I know that you need something more permanent than that.”

“We just met,” I reminded my sister.

“Are you reminding me of that or yourself?”

“Both, I think.”

“I feel like there’s a quick trip to New York in my future.”

“You know you’re welcome anytime, but I’m not sure I need you to weigh in on this just yet.”

“I might see if Paula’s got a day or two free and just swoop in to give this woman who has your mind all twisted up a dose of my charm.”

“I guess that’s one way to get rid of her,” I teased.

Suddenly serious, my sister said, “Constance told me she has never seen you smile as much as you have since this woman arrived. Knowing that, I’d never try to drive her away.”

“Three days, Frank.”

“If she makes you happy, turn that into the rest of your life, *Fred*.”

“Since you’re now happily married to your biker, you’ve put on some rose-colored glasses.”

“No, since I found out that your marriage to Ann wasn’t anything like I thought and that you’d been living a lie for twenty years, I’ve realized that true happiness is everything.”

I wondered how my sister had figured that out and guessed Constance had opened up to her about it at some point. “She’s not from our world, Frank.”

“You’ve met my husband. Take it from me, having someone beside you who doesn’t understand the world we

grew up in can be the greatest thing you'll ever know."

"But you're not living in it anymore. I am."

"It really makes no difference whether it's three days or decades, Federico. When you find someone that turns your heart inside out, where she's from doesn't matter as long as wherever she's going is with you."

"I've been telling myself that I'll work her out of my system and then let her go to Vegas, but I don't know if I'll be able to do that."

"Work her out or let her go?"

"Both."

"Then do whatever you have to do to keep her."

I looked up to see that Bex was on her way back to the table, so I cut the call with my sister short. "She's coming back. I've got to ..."

"Take the leap, Fred. As scary as it is in the beginning, the reward outweighs the risk."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Without another word, my sister hung up, and I was left holding my phone as I watched Bex make her way back. Something had happened while she was away from the table, not just in my mind but with her. The look on her face was laser-focused, and there was a fire in her eyes I hadn't noticed before.

Bex Holland looked like a woman on a mission, and I wondered if she'd come to the same conclusion I had. Three days wasn't much in the grand scheme of things, but right now, I felt like it was just enough time to determine that this woman needed to be part of my future.

"Will room service take our order upstairs?" Bex asked as soon as she approached the table.

"You don't want to eat here?"

Bex studied my face for a second before she leaned over and whispered, "I want to eat it in bed while we're still naked

and breathless from our latest orgasm.”

I pushed my chair out and stood, pulling her close to give her a searing kiss. I reached for her hand and took off at a brisk clip toward the exit. As we passed the maître d, I said, “Put a hold on our order.”

“Of course, Mr. Romano.”

“Oh wow,” I heard Bex whisper as she hurried to keep up.

I slowed down and looked back at her as I asked, “What?”

“I liked that.” I raised my eyebrows, and she smiled. “Mr. Romano.”

Hearing her say my name like that made my cock even harder. I wasn’t sure I could make it to a private area without ripping her clothes off. When we passed the bank of elevators, I could tell that Bex was hesitant because she wasn’t sure where we were going, but I had a plan. I stopped a little farther down the hall before I pulled my wallet out and passed it over a panel on the wall, causing a hidden door to slide open.

“What’s this?”

“Private elevator.”

“Are we going back to the penthouse?”

“No.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Heaven.”

13.

BEX

Rico was walking so fast that I could barely keep up in the damn heels he'd asked me to wear. I had a feeling that if I faltered, it wouldn't slow him down at all. He was so determined to get where he was going that he'd probably just throw me over his shoulder like a caveman and keep walking.

The thought of that didn't turn me off at all. I'd read more than one romance novel that included a big, strong male character picking up his woman to cart her off and have his way with her. I was still wondering if I could pull off a convincing stumble to see what his reaction would be when he passed the elevators and came to an abrupt halt in front of a blank wall panel. Once he scanned his wallet, the panel slid open, and we were facing a smaller elevator car that was just as shiny and opulent as the others.

"What's this?" I asked, wondering where it would take us.

"Private elevator."

"Are we going back to the penthouse?"

"No."

I had a second of panic and asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"Heaven." I swallowed hard and Rico saw my uncertainty. "Do you trust me?"

"Mostly," I admitted.

"I'll let you in on a little secret. I get off on being in charge, whether it's monetary satisfaction in the boardroom or sexual gratification in the bedroom."

"Okay."

"I'll fuck you when I decide it's time."

I was uncertain about his motives now, so I had to ask, “Is now the time?”

Rico slowly shook his head as he let go of my hand and touched my lower back to nudge me inside. The back wall was mirrored, and I watched his reflection as he walked in behind me. His expression was intense as his eyes held mine. Without looking, he reached over and pushed a button. Before I could turn around, the doors began to slide closed, and I had a split second of panic when I saw the predatory look on his face.

He got closer to me, and I turned to face him. Before I’d come to a stop, his mouth was on mine. Burning hot desire spread through me when one of his hands held my jaw and the other slid into my hair and tugged my head back.

“I’ve wanted to do this since you perched your tight little ass on my counter that first night we met,” Rico admitted in a low murmur as he trailed kisses across my jaw and down my neck. My hands slid up the back of his neck as I tried to find purchase in his hair to force his mouth back to mine. Rico growled when I pulled on his hair but wasn’t deterred from his mission as he trailed his tongue along the neckline of my dress.

“Kiss me,” I whispered before I let my head fall back against the mirror with a thump.

“You should be specific,” Rico said as he pulled back a fraction to stare into my eyes. I was confused for a second and then I gasped in shock when Rico dropped to his knees at the same time he lifted my dress over my hips. He bunched the skirt with one hand in front of my navel as his other trailed along the top of my panties. He let out a wicked little laugh right before he tucked his thumb into the waistband and yanked, ripping them at the side. I felt them fall down my leg before his tongue darted out and flicked over my clit. I sucked in a breath but couldn’t hold back my moan of pleasure when he pulled it between his lips and hummed.

“Oh! That ... Whew ... Oh my God.” Rico’s wicked chuckle vibrated my core as a hand roamed up my calf and

hooked onto the back of my knee, pushing it up until my foot left the floor. He hooked my leg over his shoulder, and I was left with one foot on the floor and my pussy open to his gaze. “The ... the door ... people ... see ...”

Rico hummed again, and all worries of being caught in a compromising position flew out of my head as he slowly pushed two fingers inside me. The hand on my stomach pushed in, almost uncomfortably, but I couldn't focus on that while Rico was doing such wonderful things to my clit with his tongue. He hooked his fingers deep inside my pussy, pulling me closer to his mouth as he slowly started to move in and out. I shamelessly tilted my hips as I pulled him closer with my leg.

“That feels so good,” I whispered as I watched him. He looked up at me just as his fingers hit a spot inside that made my entire body tense.

“Let it go, Bex,” Rico murmured against my clit, his hot breath giving me goosebumps. “Come for me.”

I gasped when he hit it again and shuddered as his tongue flicked against my clit. He pushed against my stomach as the pads of his fingertips brushed over that spot once more, and I screamed as my leg gave out and I started to fall. I couldn't hold myself up with my arms because my entire body was on fire as my pussy clenched around his fingers.

Somehow Rico held me up, all the while rubbing me just the right way as he sucked my clit in between his lips and hummed. My hands left the bar at my back and clutched his hair. I thought to pull his head back so I could catch my breath, but when he squeezed his lips over my clit, I came so hard that I couldn't do anything but pull him closer.

I felt a gush of moisture running down my legs and tried to clamp them together to stop it but couldn't because Rico's head and hand were in the way. He kept at it until I could barely take a breath and only pulled his head back when my body was limp above him. I was still coming, my pussy spasming uncontrollably as he fucked me with his fingers. After what felt like an eternity, he pulled his fingers out.

When I looked down at him, he had them in his mouth while his eyes watched my face.

“I want another one,” he growled as his hand fumbled with the belt at his waist. I could do nothing but watch as he slowly stood as my leg slid down his arm, but he held it up by bending his elbow and grabbing the bar behind me. His other arm slid around my waist as I felt his cock rub against my clit. Without even thinking, I tilted my hips to welcome him inside me. “Oh fuck yeah.”

He entered me slowly, stretching my body to fit his thick cock. When his pubic bone hit my clit, he stopped to let me adjust. After a few seconds, the burning sensation started to recede, but when he pulled back a fraction and snapped his hips to bump my clit again, I was on fire in a completely different way.

He grunted as he pulled back and slammed into me again, and I couldn't help but moan when he bit my neck with his next thrust.

“I'm gonna fuck you so hard that you'll feel empty without me until I fuck you again,” Rico murmured next to my ear. “We're going to sit for dinner and you'll feel me inside you, leaking out of you as your pussy weeps for me to come back home.”

I had never been one for dirty talk, but I realized in that second it was because I'd never heard it done quite so skillfully. The images he created along with the feel of him stretching me and bumping my clit with every thrust were enough to have me teetering on the edge again.

“Come for me, Bex,” Rico ordered as his movements got harder and more intense.

“I can't come again,” I whispered, my words half plea and half declaration.

“You will,” he growled as he ground his hips against me, rubbing against my sensitive clit. He kept the same motion and steady pressure until I felt myself start to spasm again, and

I heard his roar mingle with my screams of pleasure as he pumped into me one final time and filled me with his release.

“Shit,” I whispered as I tugged at his hair, directing his mouth to mine for a kiss. I could taste myself on his lips but didn’t care. I needed him, more of him, all at once. When I finally pulled my mouth away, I asked, “What are you doing to me, Rico?”

“That was just an appetizer, sweetheart. The main course will come when I finally get you in my bed.”

I laughed softly before I admitted, “I don’t think I can handle anymore.”

“You’ll take everything I have to give, and you’ll like it,” Rico ordered as he bumped my clit again. He did it a few more times, and I whimpered before he asked, “You’ll even beg for it.”

“Never gonna happen,” I assured him.

He pulled back and tilted his hips so that he touched that sweet spot inside me as he ground against my clit. “You will, sweetheart. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Promises, promises,” I taunted.

Rico grinned as he slowly pulled his softening cock out and stepped back. I gasped in horror when I felt the warm wetness seeping out between my legs and glared at Rico when he started to chuckle. He yanked his tie off and folded it in half while he held my dress up. I didn’t have time to realize what he was doing before he was on his knees again, cleaning the mess he’d made of me with his expensive necktie.

“You’re never gonna be able to wear that again,” I lamented as I felt my face flush with embarrassment.

“I’ll have it laundered and then keep it handy for something else.”

“Like what?”

“Have you ever been tied up, Bex Holland?” When I shook my head, he grinned at me wickedly and winked before he said, “Prepare yourself.”



I didn't have any choice but to compose myself and pretend I hadn't just been fucked to the brink of unconsciousness because the second the doors slid open, a man called Rico's name. He stopped and looked toward the voice before he returned a greeting as he slipped my torn underwear into the same pocket that held his tie.

"I dropped by your apartment and was told you were coming down for dinner," the younger man said as we walked closer to him.

"We are on our way now," Rico said as he slid his hand into mine and squeezed. "Would you like to join us?"

"I think the Russo brothers are already seated at your table, and I'd hate to interrupt your plans."

"Bex, this is my associate, Zach Campana. He's been out of town for a few days, and I'd like to catch up. Would you mind if we have guests at dinner tonight?"

"I don't mind," I answered demurely. The younger man smiled at me before he fell into step on the other side of Rico. I tried to tug my hand from his grip when I spotted the restroom.

"Is everything okay?" Rico asked.

"I should ... Excuse me for a minute, please," I said politely as I nodded toward the bathroom.

Rico's eyes narrowed, and he stopped walking so he could pull me closer. He looked over at his friend and said, "We'll see you at the table in a moment." Once Mr. Campana walked away, Rico brushed his lips over mine before he hugged me and whispered in my ear, "Don't you dare wash me away so soon, Bex."

"I've got to clean up, Rico, or I'll make a mess of my dress when I sit," I hissed.

“Clean up your pussy this time, but next time, I’ll take care of it in the shower.”

“We’re showering together?”

“I’ll have to clean you up before I get you dirty again.” I was stunned when Rico pulled back and ran his tongue over his lips. “And you will get dirty, sweetheart.”

“You confuse the hell out of me, Mr. Romano.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out.”



RICO

We had finally finished the dessert course and were having coffee and after-dinner drinks when Zach excused himself to take a call. Luca and Matteo Russo then said their goodbyes and left to go to their respective homes upstairs.

Bex had joined the conversation every so often, and I was happy that my associates had tried to include her. I had spoken enough with Bex over the last few days to know she was a highly intelligent woman, but she proved to be reserved in this situation and chose to observe our interactions unobtrusively.

“Your associates are very nice,” Bex said as she waved at Luca and Matteo before they disappeared through the door that led to the reception area of the hotel. “I like them. They all seem so genuine.”

“They are,” I agreed. “Did you expect something different?”

“You should always expect an ulterior motive until you’re absolutely sure there’s not one. Even then, you should keep your radar on in case something changes.”

“Like what?”

“A person’s priorities can shift for any multitude of reasons, and when that happens, their loyalty and behavior are likely to also change.”

“Did you think that one of the other families might be involved in what happened with Freddy?”

Bex shrugged. “I wouldn’t have ruled it out.”

“And now?”

“I believe they genuinely care about you and your children. They all tensed at the mention of this Frank person and seemed to take it personally that Freddy was targeted. I have a feeling they’d have had that same reaction if it had been any of your family members, nieces and nephews included.”

“My brother was initially worried that you might be involved somehow,” I admitted.

Bex smiled as she nodded as if she already knew. “Ziggy. He still doesn’t trust me.”

“What makes you say that?”

Bex’s entire demeanor changed as she leaned forward and rested her arm on the table. She lifted a finger for each reason she knew Ziggy was leery of her. “First, he doesn’t just maintain eye contact when he asks me a question, he insists on it. He’ll lean to the side so that he’s in my line of vision if I look away. That’s a sign of mistrust. Second, he will occasionally ask the same question after it’s already been answered but will word it in such a way that it’s not overtly obvious that it’s being repeated. By doing that, he’s trying to trip me up to see if I’ll give a different response than the first time so he can catch me in a lie. Third, when he speaks to me, his body language becomes more aggressive and larger than usual so he will seem more imposing.”

“Really?” I asked, wondering how in the world she’d figured out my brother’s mannerisms so accurately. He used the same techniques with his kids when they were teenagers trying to tell a lie, but he took it even further when he was

speaking to someone that had information he needed. “Most people wouldn’t notice things like that.”

“Your brother would be an excellent interrogator for law enforcement. If he worked for the FBI, they’d hone his skills and use him in all sorts of situations where I’m sure he’d be very successful at getting results.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of my brother working for the feds. I’d have to tell him she thought he’d make a good agent. He wouldn’t know whether to consider that a compliment or an insult.

“Have you ever been interrogated by the cops or the FBI?” Bex nodded, so I waited for her to explain. When she didn’t elaborate, I asked, “Well, which one?”

“Both.”

“Why? I mean, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“It’s a matter of public record since I was going to be tried as an adult,” Bex explained with a shrug as she looked out over the patrons in the dining room. “I was arrested during a sting operation the FBI had going for years in the hopes of trapping my father and finally getting him sentenced to a long prison term.”

“You were arrested?” Bex nodded, so I asked, “But you weren’t charged?”

“I had charges brought against me, but they were dropped. I was questioned extensively while they had me in custody but ...”

“How long were you in custody?”

“Seven weeks.”

“Holy shit. You said they were going to try you as an adult, so you were underage?”

“I was about to turn 17 when they raided the hotel where we were staying and took me into federal custody.”

“And they snagged your father?”

Bex sighed as she slowly shook her head. “They didn’t catch him since he took off as soon as he got word of what they were planning.”

“Your father left you there?”

“I was the distraction so he could get away.”

“Ratto,” I mumbled in Italian as I studied Bex’s face. “Did you have to serve any time?”

“No. After hours of interrogation, the agent in charge was satisfied that I was just a kid who was a victim of circumstance. He pushed to have me released to his custody so I wasn’t alone on the streets when they realized my father wasn’t going to come back for me.”

“How did your father explain what happened?”

“He didn’t. I haven’t spoken to him since.”

“How long ago was that?”

“About ten years ago.”

“You’re only 27?” Bex nodded, and I didn’t even think before I blurted, “Do you want children of your own?”

One eyebrow rose as Bex tilted her head. She asked, “Isn’t it a little late to wonder about that considering what happened in the elevator?”

“Do you?” I pushed.

“No. I don’t. I’ve never felt particularly maternal. The thought of having an infant rely on me for everything they need to live is just terrifying. I’ve never even had a pet.”

“I’ve watched you with Rory and Freddy, and you’re very maternal.”

“I’m a big sister who knows how to set ground rules. I’m in no way a mother. Not happening.”

“That might change someday.”

“No, it won’t. Believe me. I have no ambition to experience pregnancy or childbirth, and I damn sure don’t want to mess with nighttime feedings and diapers.” Bex

shuddered. “Just no. Never.” I guess my shock registered on my face because she asked, “Are you one of those people that’s going to judge me because I don’t want children of my own or think a relationship is incomplete without a herd of kids?”

“Definitely not. I have plenty of my own children to worry about and don’t have time to take care of anyone else’s. Are you on birth control then?”

Bex slowly shook her head. “I’m not. I let my prescription lapse when I came to New York to be with Rory because I had other things on my mind. I’m praying that this isn’t my fertile time or whatever you call it. We’ll have to be much more careful going forward.”

“You don’t have a problem with what I have planned for you? Once wasn’t enough?” I asked, just to inflate my own ego.

“There is no way in hell I’m going to be content with that memory alone. If you can do that in an elevator with me standing up, I can’t imagine what you can do if you’ve got all the time in the world and plenty of room to work.” Bex put her hand up to stop me when I opened my mouth to say something. “But I’m serious about being more careful. I’m clean, and I pray to God you are, too, but I am not going to risk pregnancy again.”

“I had a vasectomy fifteen years ago, so there’s no need for birth control.” Bex tilted her head and studied my face before she smiled. “Does that make you happy?”

“Spontaneity is the spice of life, don’t you think?”

“Is it?”

“I believe so.”

“And what does that have to do with pregnancy?” I asked as I lifted my glass to take a sip of Scotch.

“If, in a few minutes, I decide I want to unzip your slacks and then lift my dress and sit on your lap so I can bury your thick cock inside me, I won’t have to worry about waiting for you to pull a condom out first.” The drink went down wrong

when I sucked in a shocked breath, and I had to put my napkin over my mouth so I wouldn't spray single malt all over the table. I had nearly recovered when Bex added, "I think that would be frowned upon in polite society, and I'd be risking a jail term for lewd behavior. I'd be willing to risk it for another orgasm like before."

"What happened to the shy woman who blushed to the very roots of her hair when I implied that I'd like to eat her pussy?"

"She experienced just how well you do that, and now she wants more."

"Is that so?"

"I'm only going to be here for a few weeks, so I'll need to stock up on orgasms that I can use in my rub reel after I'm gone."

I was amazed at yet another facet of Bex's personality that had just come to light. I knew there was not a chance in hell I'd be able to let her go in a few weeks - or even a few months for that matter. Somehow, I knew that I'd barely scratched the surface when it came to discovering all that was Bex Holland, and there was no way I'd be able to watch her leave.

It was now my mission to make sure she didn't ever want to.

14.

RICO

For the first time since Constance was born more than twenty years ago, I prayed to whatever deity might hear me, hoping that my kids had gone down for the night without me. On one hand, I felt horrible because I'd already missed too many bedtimes in their lives, but on the other, I knew that if they were up and around, I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything they might want to talk about because my mind was already on what I had planned for Bex.

When we walked inside, the only signs of life were the dogs who were eager to go outside one last time, the running dishwasher, and the television that had been left on in the game room.

"I'll make sure the boys are settled if you'll take care of the dogs," Bex said as she moved toward the stairs that would lead her to Rory and Freddy's rooms. It felt like such a perfect scene of domestication that would actually happen if I'd ever had a real relationship. I couldn't help but pull Bex into my arms for a kiss before I nudged her back toward the stairs. She stumbled when I let her go but caught herself with a soft laugh before she said, "I swear, you're a dangerous man in more ways than one, Rico Romano."

"How's that?"

"You make me so weak in the knees when you do things like that. Add in these damn heels and I'm a disaster waiting to happen'."

"Keep them on," I ordered as my eyes traveled down her body to the strappy heels. "Meet me in my room when you're finished."

Bex raised her eyebrows in question, but I just smiled. She rolled her eyes but didn't argue, turning to go upstairs without another word. I watched her walk away with a little extra

sway in her hips and then she stopped at the bottom of the stairs and glanced over her shoulder with a seductive smile. I smiled back at her as I shook my head, and she laughed out loud before she darted up the stairs.

I turned and walked outside, following the path to the play area I'd had built for the dogs. I leaned against the rail and looked at the windows above to see if the lights were still on in the kids' rooms. It seemed like the older boys were still awake, but the windows on the other end of the hall where Constance, Rory, and Freddy slept were dark.

I felt movement near my leg and looked down to find Cujo pawing at the hem of my slacks. I laughed and leaned over to pick up the small dog. About a year before Ann died, she'd insisted she needed a designer dog like some of her friends. At the time, we lived in a large house with an expansive yard, and I'd already brought home Tank and Millie, the Bernese mountain dogs I'd found for the kids.

Tank and Millie were natural protectors but playful and attentive too. Cujo, on the other hand, was a spoiled terror. Of course, he wasn't originally named Cujo. Ann named him some fancy French name, but he'd hated her from the minute the breeder delivered him to our house. For about three days, she tried everything she could think of to get the damn dog to love her, but it was pointless. Every time Ann opened her mouth, both of us wanted to growl. Of course, Cujo could get away with it a lot easier than I could, but our mutual dislike for my wife had made us instant allies.

Just like everything else, rather than work toward a goal, Ann gave up on her puppy, and his care fell to me and the kids. He hadn't even been a part of our family for a week when he started sleeping with me. He had become more my companion than anyone else's.

I watched Tank and Millie wrestle around until I saw the light in my bedroom come on out of the corner of my eye. I let out a low whistle, and the large dogs snapped to attention. When I started inside, they were on my heels. Once I had them settled, I locked the doggie door I'd had installed on the door that led from the dining room into my office.

Cujo sat down in front of his private entrance to my bedroom and stared at me in question. All I could do was shrug before I whispered, "If you had balls, you'd understand, my friend." Apparently, his lack of testicles didn't affect his hearing or grasp of the English language because he sighed before he walked toward the stairs as if he'd been betrayed. I was still chuckling when I walked into my suite but stopped short when I realized the lamp was on in my office. When I looked into the room, I was greeted by a sight I'd remember for the rest of my life.

Bex was sitting on the edge of my desk, wearing only those sexy fucking heels. She had one leg crossed over the other with her hands resting on her knee. Her little foot was swinging back and forth just like it had that first night when she perched herself on the bar in my kitchen.

This was my first opportunity to see her unclothed, and it was everything I'd imagined and more.

"Mr. Romano," Bex purred as she slowly uncrossed her legs and spread them apart for a split second before crossing them the opposite way.

"Ms. Holland," I replied as I stopped in the middle of the room. "This is more than a pleasant surprise."

"I wasn't sure where you'd want me."

I studied her breasts and then let my gaze roam up to her face. "Beneath me. On top of me. In front of me on your knees."

"All of those sound interesting, but which would you like first?"

I walked past the desk through the door behind it that led into my dressing room. I turned the chair just a bit to find the perfect angle and then sat before I called out, "Come here, Bex."

I watched the doorway in the reflection of the full-length mirror on the wall. She immediately knew why I'd chosen this chair.

“And here I was thinking we’d play boss and secretary, but you’re going to fuck me in the closet instead?” Bex sauntered into the room and looked around. “This is big enough to be a bedroom.”

“Then you’ll really be impressed when you see where I sleep.”

Bex looked uncomfortable when she caught my eye in the mirror, and I almost regretted my choice not to take her on the desk. To soothe her mind and distract her from the fact that she was naked while I was fully-clothed, I spoke my next words in Italian, “Vieni a sederti sulle mie ginocchia, bella.” Bex’s eyebrows rose as she licked her lips, and I saw goosebumps raise on her skin as her nipples pebbled at the sound of my voice. “Voglio che guardi mentre mi fotti.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying, but if you’re going to keep talking like that, I’d prefer you do it with your mouth right here,” Bex said as she ran her finger down her neck beneath her ear.

“You like it when I speak Italian?”

“Apparently,” Bex answered with a laugh. “What did you say?”

“Come sit on my lap so you can watch yourself as you fuck me.”

“It sounds good in English too.”

“Come here, Bex,” I ordered as I lifted my hand toward her. She took it, and I drew her in front of me as I unbuttoned my pants. I kept her hand in mine as I pulled out my cock and stroked it a few times, my eyes never leaving her face as she watched my movements. “Can you still feel me inside you?” Bex shook her head and then nodded, so focused on my cock that she wasn’t sure how to answer. I slipped my hand between her legs, nudging them apart so I could cup her pussy. “Do you want to feel me here again?”

Bex nodded and stepped closer, her legs straddling my knee, giving me better access. I curled my finger so that it barely entered her pussy while at the same time, I pushed the

heel of my hand against her clit. Bex's eyes closed as she shivered, and I leaned up and pulled her hard nipple into my mouth. When she gasped, I sucked harder and then heard her moan when I pushed two fingers into her pussy.

"Rico," Bex panted as she leaned forward and rested her hands on my shoulders for support. When I tugged on her nipple, she got even closer, and when I bit down gently with my teeth, she gasped and her eyes flew open. I did it again and she shuddered, causing her entire body to shake and move my fingers deeper inside her. Her eyes held mine as she moved her hips, fucking herself on my fingers as I feasted on her breast.

Bex's hands came up my neck to either side of my head and pulled me back so she could lean down to kiss me. The second my lips touched hers, I used my thumb to press her clit while pushing my fingers inside her.

"Sit," I ordered. When she started to lift her leg to straddle me, I shook my head. "Turn around first."

Bex did what I asked and turned before she slowly lowered herself down with her legs on the outside of mine. I held my aching cock at just the right angle so that just the tip penetrated her as she seated herself on my lap. I watched her face in the reflection of the mirror and then let my eyes travel down to where we were connected. Bex leaned forward so her hands were resting on my knees and started moving up and down on my cock, using the strength in her legs.

I wrapped my arms around her and cupped her breasts as I pulled her back to my chest. I nipped at the base of her neck with my teeth before I licked my way up to her ear. I curved my arms up to her collarbone and tugged her all the way down onto my cock. She gasped as it stretched her pussy. Bex shifted her hips and adjusted her body so that she'd taken all of me. I held her still as I whispered in her ear, "Look at us."

Her eyes opened, and I met them in the mirror's reflection as she studied where we were joined. I trailed a hand over her breast and stomach until I covered her mound, rubbing her clit with one finger as I pushed my hips up.

Bex lifted herself up just a few inches so I could move, and I lifted my hips again and again, fucking her slowly as she enjoyed the show. I could tell by the heat of her pussy that the sight made her even more turned on. When I spread my knees wider, they stretched hers out, giving us an even better view.

“You’re so fucking beautiful taking my cock like that,” I murmured as I swirled my finger around her clit. “Touch yourself. Touch my cock while I’m inside you.”

I groaned as she lifted up and wrapped her hand around the base of my cock before she came down again. She did that a few more times before she cupped my balls and rolled them in her hand while swiveling her hips to change the angle of penetration.

I groaned when she kept fondling me and let my head fall back as she started moving in earnest, her gaze studying our reflection as she sought her release.

“Fuck me, Bex. Make yourself come.”

“Yes!” Bex hissed as her hand covered mine. She directed my finger with her own and touched herself along with me as she bounced on my cock. After just a minute or two, I felt her body start to tense as her pussy squeezed even tighter, so I lifted my head and watched as she came. I held out as long as I could but joined her in the end, thrusting my hips one final time before I came too.

I took her with me as I leaned back in the chair, our bodies still connected as we tried to catch our breath.

“I thought the elevator was the hottest thing I’d ever seen and then this happened,” Bex said as she used her fingertips to softly trace designs on the back of my hand that was laying across her stomach. One of my hands was moving of its own accord, palming her breast as I slowly rubbed my thumb across her nipple over and over. “You’re filling up my rub reel with all sorts of goodies, aren’t you?”

“What exactly is your rub reel?” I asked before I lifted my head a fraction so I could nibble on her neck.

“It’s like a movie that plays in my head while I masturbate.”

I felt my cock start to harden again, deep inside her, at the thought of her pleasuring herself alone. As hot as that was, I couldn’t help but ask, “Why do you need a rub reel when I’m right here and more than willing to fuck you senseless?”

“Believe me, I appreciate that.” My first thought was to give her another memory immediately, so I started flexing my hips slowly, moving in and out as much as I could at this angle. Bex moaned and her hand stilled before she said, “You’re already ready to make more?”

“Of course.”

“You’re going to spoil me, Rico.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“When I move to Vegas and your magnificent cock isn’t available 24/7, I’m going to have to rely on my rub reel. It won’t be nearly the same.”

I stilled beneath her but kept my hand on her breast. The thought of never seeing this woman again - hearing her laugh, watching her smile, feeling her body clench around my cock as she gasped my name - filled me with dread. I barely knew her. Hell, I wasn’t even positive I knew her real first name, assuming Bex was a nickname or abbreviation.

It was way too soon to have these kinds of feelings, so I pushed them aside and asked, “How long do I have again?”

“Obviously, I don’t have a ruler, but I’d have to say at least nine inches. Probably ten.”

I laughed softly before I nipped at her earlobe. “You know what I mean.”

“Less than a month. I’ll probably be packing up in about two weeks. Well, if it’s safe.” Bex sighed and lifted my hand from her stomach. “I should go clean up.”

“I thought we were going to make another memory.” I flexed my hips and asked, “Do you want to get off my lap, or do you want to get off again?”

I studied Bex's face in our reflection. It seemed like she was almost as sad about her leaving as I was, but she rallied and said, "Earlier, you said you'd clean me up in the shower."

"I did."

"I'm feeling dirty right now, Rico," Bex said as she sat upright, pushing my cock deeper into her body again. She rested her hands on my knees and ground her pussy over my cock before she added, "Very *very* dirty."

I trailed my hand down over her and touched her clit as Bex moved her hips. "Why don't I make you dirtier before we get in the shower?"

"Please do."

15.

BEX

“I’m bored,” Rory complained as he walked into the room.

“I thought you were going to play video games.”

“That was hours ago.”

I glanced at the clock on the wall and then back at my brother. “That was 45 minutes ago, dude.”

“Can we go downstairs to get something to eat?”

“You just had a snack!”

“I’m hungry again.”

“You’re just bored.”

“I know! I already said that!”

I sighed and put the e-reader on the cushion beside my leg. I’d been daydreaming for so long that the screen had gone dark anyway. He flopped down on the other end of the couch and sighed, just to reiterate how horrible his life was at this moment.

The poor kid. He was in a New York City penthouse overlooking Central Park clad in designer clothes and expensive shoes with dozens of video games at his disposal and access to every entertainment subscription known to man. But he was bored.

“Try reading a book.”

Rory turned and glared at me. “Why can’t we go downstairs? Are we hostages?”

“No, we are *not* hostages, Rory.”

“Then why can’t we leave? Let’s go somewhere cool like we talked about last week. You said you wanted to see the city before you take me to the middle of nowhere.”

“Nowhere? Really?”

“It’s not the city.”

“You act like we’re leaving on a covered wagon to explore the West. We’re moving to Vegas, not Timbuktu.”

“I want to stay here and live with Freddy.”

“I guess that’s an improvement over the other day when you told me you’d rather be in foster care than go to Vegas with me.”

“Rico can be my foster parent, then you don’t have to take me.”

“That’s not how it works, and you know it.”

“That’s how I *want* it to work,” Rory argued petulantly. He sighed again before he pleaded, “Bex! *Please* take me downstairs. I’m dying here. I’m starving and there’s nothing to do since Freddy’s at school and ...”

“Where are the dogs? Take them ...”

“Mona took them to get groomed this morning.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You were sitting right there when she left!”

I thought back to earlier when I’d been trying to act normal over breakfast with Rico and his kids. I vaguely remembered Mona saying she’d bring the dogs back this afternoon. Rico had talked to her as if he hadn’t escorted me to my room two hours earlier and then had to sneak out half an hour later after he’d fucked me against the back of the door when our ‘goodbye’ kiss had gotten out of hand.

“Well, I’m going downstairs,” Rory said firmly as he stood and started for the door.

The same door that Rico had pressed me against and ... Good grief. I had to get my mind out of the gutter and into the present. I had shit to do, but I couldn’t even concentrate long enough to have a conversation, let alone call the realtor to verify my new address so I could put in a change of address and then call to arrange for utilities.

I had to get that done today. *Today*. I couldn't put it off any longer. I also needed to figure out how to get the apartment emptied. I'd have to ship the mementos and pictures that Rory might like to have to Harry and Diana's house for storage and then sell off the rest of the contents. I also needed to figure out which school Rory would be attending and make arrangements for his records to be transferred so he could start as soon as possible.

I had so much to do that my mind should be spinning, but instead, it was filled with thoughts of Rico and what it would be like to have a future together. I couldn't think like that. This whole situation of living in the penthouse like I was one of the rich and famous while soaking up the attention of the sexiest man I'd ever known was just a fleeting distraction. I needed to find something else I could focus on. Anything else.

"I'll come downstairs with you, but we're not leaving the hotel!"

"Yes!" Rory cheered triumphantly. "Finally!"

He waited at the door of my suite while I pulled on a pair of shoes Rico had delivered the other day. I wondered again how I'd ever repay him for the expensive wardrobes he'd supplied for us. I had a general idea of how much everything cost, only because I'd looked up a few of the pieces online. When I finished hyperventilating, I tried to tell myself that it was the least he could do since our lives had been turned upside-down thanks to one of his employees. It still didn't sit right with me. Considering the cost, I'd likely be making monthly payments until I died of old age.

"Hurry up, Bex!" Rory urged from the doorway.

"I didn't realize we were in a race," I muttered as I walked toward my brother. "I'm gonna remind you of this conversation the first time I'm trying to herd you out the door in time to catch the school bus."

"If you let me live here, I won't have to take the bus. I can ride in the fancy car with Freddy every day."

“Not gonna happen,” I said firmly as I waited for Rory to open the front door. We stepped into the hall but stopped in our tracks when I saw a man I didn’t recognize sitting in a chair across the hall. He stood and smiled at Rory before his gaze came back to me. I didn’t know what to do, so I smiled and said, “Hi.”

Rory darted toward the elevator. “Come on, Bex! Let’s get some food and maybe go across the street ...”

“We are *not* going to the Park.”

“Will you take me to the Park?” Rory asked the man. He slowly shook his head, and Rory pouted. “I’m so freakin’ bored, man. What is there to do here?”

I ignored him and turned toward the guard when we stopped in front of the elevator. “Do you have to come with us?” He nodded. “Are you allowed to talk?” He nodded again and then I was the one letting out a dramatic sigh. “What’s your name?”

“Bugsy.”

“You’re shitting me.” I tilted my head and studied his face for a second before I asked, “Really? That’s your real name?”

The man snickered as the elevator doors opened. After he motioned for us to walk inside, he said, “One of the guys said you complained that none of us had ‘mobster names,’ so I picked one out just for you.”

“What’s your real name?” I asked, irritated that he’d lied to me and that ‘the guys’ had been making fun of me.

“Lorenzo.”

“Dude. Seriously.”

“I promise. That’s my real name.”

“But is that what people call you?” Rory asked. “Rory isn’t my real name, but it’s the only one I go by.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Roarke Lennon Holland, just like my dad, but he goes by Lenny.”

“You’re Bex, right?” Lorenzo asked. When I nodded he asked, “What’s that short for?”

“I think my name is just the right length, don’t you?”

“That wasn’t really an answer,” the man chided.

“I guess it wasn’t.”



RICO

“I found her,” Sam said the second my office door closed behind him.

Cento Moretti, who was sitting across the desk from me, turned to Sam and asked, “Were we looking for someone?”

“The woman who saved Freddy.”

“Bex? What happened? Did she leave the hotel?” I asked, straightening in the chair. “I told Lorenzo to ...”

Sam put his hand up as he shook his head. “No. She’s roaming around downstairs with her brother, and Lorenzo’s with them. I found out who she is.”

I relaxed into the chair and blew out a breath, trying to slow my heart rate before I had a fucking coronary. My mind was racing not just because I was worried for the safety of Bex but because I thought she’d left.

“Thanks, Sam. Leave the file. We’ll get back to you,” I heard Cento say. The door closed, and he lowered his voice as he asked, “Are you already so far gone that you’re not gonna pay attention to whatever it is that Sam found?”

“Gone where?” I blustered. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t bullshit me, man. How long have I known you?”

“Since I mopped the floor with your face for stealing my shit and then erasing it.”

“This again?” Cento asked in exasperation. “How many fucking times do I gotta tell you I didn’t steal it? Ladonna Luchessi stole it and asked me to hold it for her.”

“And then you killed it.”

“I gave you mine to make up for it!”

“You’re still fucking arguing about this? Let it go, gentlemen. *Please!*” Ziggy walked into the room with Cento’s little brother right behind him, both holding coffee from the shop in the lobby. “Every time you get into this fight, you just look like bigger nerds than before.”

“That’s saying something,” Tonio said as he handed his brother a coffee cup. “They were fucking primo geeks back in the day.”

“Oh fuck you,” Cento said before he took a sip of his coffee. “Thanks for the brew. You got here just in time.”

“To watch you throw down over some ancient beef you should have squashed when your balls finally dropped?” Ziggy asked.

Cento took another sip, this time lifting his middle finger as he put the cup to his lips.

“What started it this time? Did you look at Bex funny, or did you steal his reading glasses?” I tilted my head and stared at my brother, but rather than cowering away at the anger burning in my eyes, he laughed. “What?”

“You’re less than two years younger than me, and you want to start tossing around old age jokes? How’s that arthritis in your knee today, asshole?”

“Fuck you.”

“It’s funny that you asked about Bex because she is partially to blame for us getting off track,” Cento remarked.

“This I’ve gotta hear,” Tonio said as he leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs out in front of him.

“Sam finally got information on her identity, and I asked Rico if he’d be willing to listen or if he was so far up her

pretty pussy ...”

I pointed my finger at Cento and interrupted, “Don’t go there.”

“Her pretty smile. Is that better?” I scowled, and he grinned.

“We’re calling it a smile now?” Ziggy teased with a grin. “And?”

“That’s as far as we got.”

“So are you?” Ziggy asked. “It’s obvious that your grumpy ass didn’t get any sleep last night. Since things were quiet around here, there isn’t any good reason for you to have stayed up all night other than a beautiful woman.”

“And he freaked out when Cento mentioned her pink parts,” Tonio joked. I glared at him, and he shrugged. “I didn’t say it, I alluded to it.”

“He does have that ... glow, don’t you think?” Cento asked.

I picked my phone up from the desk and hit the button to begin a call. When the older woman answered, I said, “Hey, Carla. I’m sitting here with the guys and mentioned that Elena was single and you thought she might be interested in dating again. Since I’m taken, I figured it might be a good idea to re-introduce her to my brother. I’m sure they’d get along just fine.”

“You motherfucker,” Ziggy growled as Carla’s voice lifted with excitement.

I grinned and said, “Well, you know, Cento and Tonio Moretti are single, too, and ...”

“Fuck you, Rico,” Cento hissed as he sat forward in his chair and glared at me.

“Nope,” Tonio said vehemently as he slowly shook his head. “I’m gonna have to fuckin’ kill him now.”

“He’s gotta die,” Ziggy agreed.

I continued as if I hadn't heard a word they said, "I know they'd probably benefit from having a good woman in their lives. Do you think you might be able to help them find one?" Carla happily agreed to play matchmaker, and I smirked before I said, "Hey, Carla, my appointment just got here, so I've got to cut this short. Get in touch with them as soon as you can, okay?"

Once Carla said goodbye, I hung up and gently set the phone down. I smiled broadly at the men in front of me and said, "Keep fucking with me, and I'll ruin your lives in a way that could take *years*. I've known that woman for ages, and I know exactly what kind of women she thinks are perfect for this lifestyle. If you're not careful, this story will end with each of you married to some ballbusting princess who will make your life a living hell and spend every dime you have. I know this because I was married to one."

"That was low, even for you, brother," Ziggy grumbled.

"I can't fucking believe you did that. Now every mother with a single daughter of marrying age in New York is gonna be gunning for us," Cento complained as he rubbed his forehead.

"And if word gets back to Italy where they're *really* serious about this shit ..." Tonio's voice sounded forlorn as he let it trail off, horrified at the shit storm I'd just stirred up. "You're a fucking asshole, Rico."

"It's odd that you hadn't already picked up on that."



Lorenzo, one of the men normally assigned to my protection detail when I left the building, was sitting outside the penthouse when I exited the elevator.

"Good afternoon, boss."

"How did things go today?"

“Just fine. They explored the hotel until the boy found the toy store downstairs, and then we spent a few hours there.”

“Freddy would move in there if I’d let him.”

“He won’t want to now. The woman brought so many toys back to the apartment that he’ll never want to leave.”

“Oh really?” I asked, a bit stunned that Bex had taken me at my word when I said she had free reign to pick up anything she or her brother might need. From her reaction at the time, I had seriously doubted she’d take me up on my offer, but I was happy she had, even if it was only for some toys. “Did anything happen I should know about?”

“She met with a man in the restaurant while her brother was having ice cream, but she didn’t interact with anyone other than staff the rest of the time.”

“Who was the man?”

“I’m not sure, boss. I was in the atrium but saw him stop at their table before she asked to be taken to a private dining area so they could talk.”

My mind raced as I wondered who in the hell it could be. I felt an unexplainable surge of anger when I realized that she was hiding something, and it got worse knowing that she had the audacity to meet with them privately and right under my nose.

“How long did they stay there?”

“Almost an hour.”

“And her brother was with them?” Lorenzo nodded. I pulled my phone out and dialed Sam’s number. He answered on the second ring, and I didn’t even greet him before I said, “Ms. Holland met with a man this afternoon for almost an hour. Get with Lorenzo for details and see if you can find him on surveillance. I want to know who that was and what they talked about.”

I ended the call and nodded at Lorenzo before I scanned my thumb to get into the penthouse. Before I opened the door,

I turned to ask Lorenzo, “If they left earlier today, how did they get back in?”

“They waited until Freddy got back from school and went in with him. They’ve been inside ever since.”

Without another word, I walked into the penthouse, my mind whirling with questions about who Bex had met with and what she might be planning. I didn’t want to address the ache in my chest or the heavy feeling in my stomach at the notion that I’d been played. No, I wanted to make sure my kids were safe first, then I’d figure out whatever else was going on.

The woman was hiding something. The second Lorenzo mentioned her taking a private meeting with a stranger, my gut twisted and I felt a hollow ache in my chest. That hollow was now filled with self-doubt. I’d started to enjoy Bex in my house so much that I began to wonder if there was any way to make her a part of our family permanently. Now, knowing that she was arranging secret meetings so flagrantly made my stomach churn.

I stopped in the foyer and listened for voices so I could find Freddy and make sure he was safe. I didn’t hear anything at all. The house was quiet. Too quiet. I dashed up the stairs, my heart in my throat, clenched with terror at what I might find.

“Dad!” Vigo’s whisper caught my attention, and I spun around, looking for my son. “Over here!”

I finally spotted him, laying on his stomach behind the beanbag that Freddy liked to use for gaming. I was halfway across the room, ready to pull my boy into my arms and rush him to safety when I realized that he had a Nerf gun propped up in front of him, aimed at the mouth of the stairs.

“Shhh!” Nicky hissed from somewhere to my left. I scanned the room and saw him behind the chair where Mona sat to watch her shows and do the daily crossword puzzle from the paper as she passed the time before the kids got home from school. Nicky was holding a brightly-colored gun, too, and had it aimed down the hallway toward the other stair landing. “Get outta here before you blow our cover!”

“What the hell are you two doing?” I whispered.

“Hiding from the boys,” Vigo answered as he motioned for me to go back downstairs. “You’re gonna give us away!”

“Bex left a gun for you on the counter downstairs,” Nicky whispered. “There should be extra ammo with it.”

“What the fuck?”

“Last man standing gets to pick dessert tonight. We teamed up,” Nicky explained. “If *we* win, we’re gonna have carrot cake.”

“Black Forest cake!” Nicky argued before he carefully peered over the railing, listening for any movement downstairs. “Shit! I think they’re coming up the back. I’m going down.”

“Fuck yeah, you are. Carrot cake!”

“Where’s your sister?”

Nicky was halfway down the stairs and waved my question off before Vigo answered, “She’s in her bedroom.”

“And Bex?”

“Somewhere downstairs. She’s got a gun too.”

“Shit!” Nicky yelled from downstairs. I heard thundering footsteps on the stairs at the end of the hall before Constance peeked out of her bedroom, rolled her eyes, and slammed the door.

“Man down! Man down!” Freddy cheered. “Cheesecake, baby!”

“Go! You’re gonna give away my hiding spot!” Vigo hissed as he motioned toward the stairs again. “Hurry!”

“What in the fuck?” I mumbled to myself as I crept down the stairs. I heard a commotion upstairs behind me, so I took a chance and rushed through the foyer before I peeked around the corner into the living room. When I saw that it was clear, I darted over to the counter and picked up the Nerf gun there, then pocketed the extra ammunition as I racked my brain trying to think of a good hiding place.

Knowing the boys had probably already cleared the room, I crept into the laundry room and pushed the door almost closed behind me. I was wondering if I could fit into the broom closet when I heard Vigo's shout and then Freddy and Rory cheering.

My phone buzzed, and I jerked it out of my pocket and put it up to my ear. "What's up?" I whispered, not even knowing who was on the other end of the line.

"Got some news on one of your guys," Hammer, the biker PI from Texas, said. "You good?"

"Hiding from my kids," I explained.

"Ah. I remember those days."

"What have you found?"

"I have some questions about three of your men. I've also got some information for the other guys too. When will you have some free time to talk?"

"Who are they and what did you find?"

"Rocco, Dario, and Park."

"Fuck," I hissed. "What did you find on Dario?"

"He's got some expenses that are questionable. Cash income I can't trace. It's not a lot in the grand scheme of things. A couple grand here and there."

"He's an artist and occasionally sells his work on commission."

"Ah! That explains it. Okay. I'll confirm, but that sounds right."

"Park?"

"All his money goes into a trust account that I can't trace ... not sure how he's living."

"His grandmother's in a nursing home. She had a stroke last year, and he found a solid facility in Brooklyn."

"That explains this spending. I thought he might have a mistress in Brooklyn since that's where he spends a lot of

time.”

“No mistress. He doesn’t play on our team.”

“Gotcha. Well, at least we know he doesn’t have a mister there, right?”

“Right. What about Rocco?”

“He’s had some purchases delivered to his house that don’t make sense. He’s paying for delivery out of his account, but I’m not seeing payment for the goods.”

“Like what?”

“Eight grand in the last three months paid for shipping and delivery. He dropped 5K on a security system for his place, and he’s got constant monitoring. Google Maps says he lives in the hood, so I’m not sure what he’s trying to protect. And I don’t know what he’s buying, but whatever it is, he’s willing to pay through the nose to get it there.”

“Fuck. And the other name I sent you a few minutes ago?”

“He’s about as dirty as a truckstop urinal. Just dropped some money on a suite in your hotel, as a matter of fact, and used an alias to do it. Somehow the fucker’s got a black card in another name.”

“Lenny Holland is in my building?”

“Yep,” Hammer said firmly.

“Sam didn’t find anything on Bex when he searched, but he sent that information to you, right?”

“I got it.”

It hurt to ask, but I had to know. “Did you find any connection that shows they are working together?”

“Can’t find any connection there. No phone calls, texts, or emails. Unless they’re using snail mail or smoke signals, they’re not talking.”

I felt such a sense of relief when I realized that she didn’t have any connection to whatever her father was planning that I

had to look down at the floor and take a few deep breaths before I replied, “Noted. I’ll keep my eye out.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. Your guy Sam is clean as a whistle. Does the man ever leave the building? It doesn’t seem like it.”

“Rarely. He’s got a thing,” I hedged. “Get the information about Holland to Sam so he can put eyes on him. I think he and Bex might have met downstairs this afternoon, but I’m not sure. If they’re planning something, surely they won’t do it sitting in my goddamn hotel.”

“Never know. I’ll have Sam check the cameras. And the other guy? Rocco?”

“I’ll take care of it myself. Keep that one under wraps.”

“I’m out then,” Hammer said. “I’ve got all of your guys flagged, and I’ll let you know if anything pops up on my radar. I’m gonna start working on Twatknot’s guys next, then move on to Stamp’s kids.”

For once, I didn’t laugh at the nickname Zach Campana’s new in-laws had given him. Instead, I said, “Send me an invoice, and keep in touch.”

“Will do.”

Hammer hung up, and I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, trying to calm my racing thoughts and get my head straight before I saw Bex. If it was her father she met with this afternoon, then everything she’d said about him so far was a lie. If she’d lie about that, then it was likely she’d lied about everything else and might very well have been involved in Freddy’s abduction just to get inside.

I couldn’t figure out what the endgame might be in that respect, but I’d get it out of her. If I had to, I’d fuck it out of her just so I could touch her one more time before I ... I couldn’t bring myself to think of what would have to happen if she’d been involved in the kidnap attempt or if she had *any* connection to Frank Bovino.

“Put your hands up, fool!” Freddy ordered from the doorway as Rory giggled beside him.

I slowly turned to face the door as I pasted a smile on my face. “You got me! Now what?”

“You’re gonna be our hostage until we find Bex,” Rory boasted.

“Why a hostage?”

“We’ll trade you for her since she’s the one that’s gonna have to make our cheesecake,” Freddy explained.

“And you’re gonna have to make Ragu alla Bolognese for dinner.”

“That takes some time, son.”

“Then you should get cookin’,” Freddy said with a grin. “We’ll find Bex and ... Ouch!”

My eyes widened in shock when a Nerf dart hit my son in the middle of his chest and then another hit Rory in the arm. I spun around and saw that Bex was *inside* the dryer. Before I could even lift my weapon, she shot me in the forehead.

“What the fuck?” I shouted as I rubbed the spot where she’d hit me.

Bex had to work at it, but she finally extricated herself and stood with her gun at her side. The boys were moaning and groaning behind me, and rather than laugh at their loss, Bex had an absolutely murderous look on her face. She stopped in front of me and narrowed her eyes before she slapped her gun against my chest and pushed. I reached up to grab it before it fell, and when my hand brushed hers, she jerked it back.

“You should probably start dinner, but don’t bother setting a place for me and Rory. We’ll be leaving shortly.”

“What?” Rory wailed.

Freddy’s distress joined Rory’s, and he shouted, “You guys can’t go home!”

“Rory, go change into what you were wearing when we got here. I’ll come up and get you ...”

“But I don’t want to leave!”

“It’s not up to you, Rory. Go change your clothes.” When it looked like Rory was about to argue, Bex roared, “*Now!*”

Freddy and Rory spun around and ran into the hall. Just a few seconds later, their footsteps rang out as they sprinted up the stairs.

“Bex ...”

“I guess I should have known that you wouldn’t trust me. It will make it easier to leave and not look back, knowing I was just a convenient fuck until your lackey was able to dig up some dirt.”

“Who did you meet with this afternoon?”

Bex narrowed her eyes before she replied, “Obviously you think I met with my father.”

“Did you?”

“I already told you how I felt about him.”

“Then why is he here?”

“To fuck up my life like he’s done a million times before,” Bex said sadly.

“If you weren’t meeting with your father then who?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Why is it a secret?”

“Because my little brother probably doesn’t want me to announce to the world that he sees a therapist,” Bex sneered.

“Shit.” I reached out to touch her arm, and Bex jerked away. “Let me explain.”

“No explanation necessary. Obviously you don’t trust me and I’m sure you never will. We’ll be out of your hair in just a minute. Make the call for our ride.”

BEX

I thought I'd have to physically drag my brother out, but he grudgingly walked through the door and past me to the elevator. Right before I turned to follow him, I saw Constance and Nicky walk into the hall with Vigo close behind. The boys looked confused, but Constance was angry. I was sure her anger was directed at me until she met my eyes with a look of pity and mouthed, 'I'm sorry.'

"Keep in touch," I said softly. When Constance nodded, I smiled at her and the boys and said, "It's been fun, guys." I looked at Freddy, sitting on the top step with a forlorn expression and all the dogs crowding his space because they sensed his distress. I promised him, "I'll make sure he calls when we get settled, okay?"

Freddy sniffed and swiped the tears off his face as he nodded. I took a deep breath and walked out. What was left of my heart shattered when I saw my little brother wiping away his own tears as he waited in front of the elevator. I wanted to curl up in a ball and cry tears of my own.

The ride down to the garage was done in silence, and what probably took less than a minute felt like hours as I reflected on how my life had changed in the last four days. I stared at the floor, listening to my brother sniff back more tears as I wondered what I'd been thinking.

A girl like me doesn't get the dream ... there would be no penthouse with the dashing handsome millionaire. That was the stuff of chick flicks and romance novels.

A girl like me, raised by a con man who'd probably steal bread from a starving orphan, doesn't get a chance at this kind of happiness. A girl like me had to work for everything she got in life and had to scratch and claw to make sure she stayed off the bottom. I used up my luck when Harry and Diana took

me in and made me part of their family. I should have known that I wasn't lucky enough for lightning to strike twice.

Up until four days ago, I'd been content to think I could make a new life for the two of us in Las Vegas. I never had any illusion of belonging to another loving family who talked about their day around the dinner table every evening.

A woman like me didn't belong in the penthouse of a five-star hotel with staff at her beck and call and unlimited credit at posh boutiques. A woman like me didn't dine at fancy restaurants wearing shoes that cost more than most people's monthly mortgage payment.

A woman like me didn't get the fairy tale. I knew better. I needed to get a grip on myself and my life before I became accustomed to all this extravagance and started to believe it could be real.

The elevator chimed, and I stood in front of the doors as they started to slide open. Since I was still looking down, the first thing I saw were men's shoes. As my gaze traveled up to see who was in front of me, I saw he was holding a gun. Before I had time to react at the sight of who was standing behind him, I was violently pushed aside. Right before everything went black, I heard a gunshot and my brother's terrified scream.



“What the hell is taking so long?” I barked as I punched the button again. “She'll be gone before I can get down there.”

“She's with Sully, and Park's going to ride to the apartment with them. I'll have my driver take you to her so you can talk. The guys can entertain Rory. They can take him to grab dinner or see a movie or something.”

“Fuck this. Let's take the stairs.”

“I guess I won't have to work out in the morning,” Ziggy grumbled.

“We’ll come down with you,” Luca Russo said as he and his twin followed me. Zach Campana was somewhere behind us with my brothers, and I heard them talking but couldn’t focus on what they were saying right now since my mind was completely focused on Bex, wondering how I’d ever get her to talk to me again. “This is like the movies where the merry band of misfits rush off to help the guy get the girl.”

“What the fuck have you been watching, man?”

Luca and Matteo started bickering good-naturedly, and by the time we got down to the garage, we were all out of breath, and they were laughing over something one of them had said.

“How’s that knee now, old man?” Zach asked Ziggy.

“Thank God it was only four floors,” Ziggy grumbled. “And for your information, it hurts like a bitch.”

“I know they didn’t have ‘em in the Dark Ages when you came up, but there are these really smart people called doctors and it’s their job to ...”

“Zip it, boy,” Ziggy snapped at Matteo.

“Did you ...”

“Was that ...”

“What the fuck?”

A second gunshot sounded from inside the garage and then a third and fourth. The silence that followed was broken only by a child’s terrified scream. I pulled my gun from the leg holster I always wore and became aware that the men around me were arming themselves much the same way. Zach was on his phone barking orders at someone as Ziggy reached around me for the door.

“No!” Matteo hissed, knocking Ziggy out of the way. “We go first.”

“What the ...”

“You’ve got kids, man,” Luca said as he walked around me.

“Sam’s got the place locked down and men coming in from three directions,” Zach said as he put his phone in his pocket and motioned for me to move aside. “From what he can see, we’ve got six men standing with one down in the elevator and another next to the car. The driver’s dead, but he took one out before he got shot. The perpetrators are wearing black hoods, and there are at least ten of them.”

“Shoot anyone you don’t recognize,” Luca ordered before he nodded at Ziggy who was against the wall beside the door.

Ziggy threw the door open, and the Russo brothers darted out with Zach Campana close behind. I crouched down next to Ziggy and peeked out in time to see a man wearing a black ski mask go down from a shot Zach fired and then Luca dropped another with two shots to the chest.

Sully’s prone body was blocking the elevator door from closing, and not far away, Park was laying on the ground in a pool of blood with at least one shot to the abdomen. A gunman who was crouched beside a parked car on the other side of the elevator was caught off-guard when a shot rang out from inside the elevator. When he spun around to return fire, he was hit twice in the chest and flew backward onto the hood of Zach’s favorite sports car.

“Go!” I barked. Ziggy darted out of the small room in a crouch before he found shelter behind a concrete post. I waited to give him a second to cover me and then I sprinted out and dove behind the dumpster that was in sight of the elevator.

Two more shots were fired, and I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. A man fell back against a car. I lifted my gun and shot him twice before he slid to the ground. The sound of gunfire surrounded me for what seemed like forever until it suddenly stopped.

The silence that fell over the garage was only broken by the occasional moan of an injured man and the constant dinging of the blocked elevator door in the background.

I heard Bex yell, “There are two behind the silver Porsche.”

I was flooded with relief when I heard her voice and realized she wasn't injured, but just then, I heard two gunshots. One that came from inside the elevator took down the man who'd popped up from behind the car just a few feet from me.

"Got 'em!" Zach yelled before gunfire erupted on the other side of the garage.

"Behind the red car," Bex called out seconds before a barrage of gunfire hit the elevator door. I heard glass breaking and then Bex yelled, "Fuck, that hurt!" There was more gunfire and a man screamed before Bex yelled, "We're alright! I'm good! We're fine!"

There was a long silence and then a voice came over the speaker that was attached to the wall above the elevator. "It looks like they're all down. I've got men sweeping in from three sides. Hold your fire."

I held my position as I heard voices call out, "Clear!" over and over again. Finally, the same voice came over the loudspeaker and said, "The threat is contained. Two ambulances are on the way, and Doc is coming to set up triage."

"Somebody help me!" Bex yelled from the elevator. As I stood and ran her way, I watched as she rolled Sully to his back. Her hand went to his neck and after a second she yelled, "He's breathing, and his pulse is steady."

Knowing she was uninjured - or at least able to move around and talk, I dropped down on one knee next to Park and checked his pulse, glad to find that he was alive for now. There was widespread movement as our men began checking our injured and others came for the enemies who'd invaded our home. Seeing that they had that in hand, I sprinted toward the elevator to help Bex.

I dropped to my knees by Sully's legs as Bex held his wrist to monitor his pulse. "Where's Rory?"

"You can come out, Rory," Bex said softly as she looked to her left. I leaned around the door of the elevator car and saw

Rory curled into a ball in the corner. He lifted his head and looked from Bex to Sully and then to me. “Are you okay?”

“Is he dead?”

“No.”

“What about the other guys?”

“I don’t know,” Bex admitted. She took in the carnage of the garage and sighed before she asked, “When we move Sully out, can Rory just ride the elevator up instead of walking into the garage?”

I looked out at the men who were helping others and the men who were obviously dead. There was blood everywhere and most of the cars were riddled with bullet holes. I nodded and she said, “I need to talk to you, so do you think Constance will ...”

I pulled my phone out and called my daughter. She had probably been alerted by her guards, who I was sure Sam had sent running to our suite, so she answered the phone before it had finished the first ring.

“Is everyone okay?”

“I’m going to send Rory up in the elevator. I need you to take him into our place and get him comfortable, okay?”

“I will. Is everyone alright?”

“A few of our guys are injured but ...”

“Who?”

“Your uncles are fine, and so are Zach and the Russos.”

“Are Sully and Park there? Are they okay?” I looked down at the man next to me who was still unconscious and got the shock of my life when my daughter sobbed, “Dad! Are the guys okay? Please tell me they’re okay!”

Bex put her hand over her mouth and her eyes grew wide. If I didn’t know better, I would say it looked as if she were trying to hide something. I narrowed my eyes as she looked back down at Sully.

“Dad!”

“They’ve both been shot, but they’re ...”

“No!” Constance wailed.

I let my head fall forward and sighed. “Where’s Mona?”

“She’s right here,” Constance said, her voice choked with emotion. Her crying had broken my heart every time it had happened since she was a tiny girl. Now, even with everything going on around us, my heart broke a little more because now I *knew* there was something more than just friendship between my daughter and her guards. “Can I talk to them? Please, Dad, let me talk to them.”

“Tell Mona I’m sending Rory up. When he gets there, come down to our garage. Make sure there’s a guard with you.”

I hung up without another word and took a deep breath. “Well, that was a surprise.”

“Um ...”

“Did you know?”

“I just had a feeling. When she talks about them, her intonation changes and she gives physical cues that seem to indicate a closer ...” Bex blew out a short breath and admitted, “Yeah, I figured it out.”

“Help me move him so we can send Rory up.”

“Will you be okay?” Bex asked her brother.

Rory sniffed and said, “I’m not the one that got shot. Will *he* be okay?”

“The doctor’s on his way.”

Rory pressed, obviously needing more than that answer. “And?”

“I don’t think the bullet is what hurt him,” Bex hedged as she looked around the inside of the elevator. “I think he hit his head when he fell, and that knocked him out.”

“Okay.”

“Are you gonna be alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re gonna need years of therapy, huh?”

“This isn’t nearly as bad as what happened the last time I was with Dad.”

“Years,” Bex said sadly as she pulled her brother into a hug. “I’ll be up as soon as I can, okay? I need to talk to Rico alone.”

“So we can stay?”

“Yes,” I answered him.

“No,” Bex said at the same time. “This doesn’t mean we’re staying forever, Rory. It just means we’re not leaving right this minute.”

I decided not to argue that point now and stood to call someone over to help me carry Sully. Zach jogged our way and helped me move him over to the concrete of the garage floor, both of us trying our best not to hurt him any more than he already was.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Bex hug her brother once more before she stepped out and watched the elevator doors close.

“Rory was behind me so he didn’t see him, but our dad was here,” Bex said as her voice broke and her eyes filled with tears. “The man in front of him had a gun ... and Sully pushed me ... and then ... and then ...”

“Come here, baby,” I murmured as I pulled Bex into my arms. I knew exactly what she was feeling. She’d been running on sheer adrenaline while in the middle of a shootout where she handled herself better than most people would have. Now she was crashing, a common thing to happen to people after a traumatic event. “It’s okay. I’m so glad you and Rory are alright.”

“I promised his mom I’d protect him, and I tried. I really did! I picked up the gun and did just what Harry taught me all

those times at the range. I didn't even think about it. I just shot those men like they were targets!"

"They were, Bex. The difference is, if you hadn't protected yourself and your brother, those targets would have hurt you. You did the right thing."

"I'm probably gonna need a therapist," Bex said as she sobbed into my chest.

"Okay. We'll find you the very best. I promise." I kissed her on the head, not sure what else to say or do.

When I looked up, I saw Ziggy with his hand over his mouth as he tried to stop himself from laughing out loud. Relio and Zach were having much the same problem. Zach turned and went toward the twins. After a few seconds, Relio joined him, happy to see that we were all okay but not willing to wade into whatever was going on with Bex.

"Honey, my daughter's going to step out of that elevator any second now and lose her shit. I'm not sure what to do when that happens," I admitted, hoping to get her mind on something else.

Bex leaned back, her tear-stained face just as beautiful as always, and said, "She loves them. Let her have that.

"She's gonna be crying and ..." Bex paused and her breath caught. Her body was shaking like a leaf, just like my daughter's did when she was upset, and when her lower lip quivered, I was lost.

She finally sucked in a deep breath, and I said, "I can't lose you, Bex. Please don't leave me."

"What?"

"Let me explain what you heard. Just don't leave until I have a chance to talk to you. I've got some ... work things to sort out this evening and probably over the next few days and then ..."

"You're going to interrogate the men who are still alive, aren't you?" I swallowed, unsure how to answer that. I'd never trusted anyone other than my brothers with secrets about

our family business and what went on when we dealt with an enemy. I'd recently learned that Zach, Matteo, and Luca could keep my secrets along with Cento and Tonio. But could Bex be trusted with our most confidential affairs? "I want to sit with you while you interrogate him."

"Nope. That's not happening," I argued as I shook my head.

"They shot into the elevator that was holding my brother. They shot at *me*. My father is involved in this, and nothing you do will make him tell you the truth about his involvement. I'm not even sure he knows *how* to tell the truth. I can judge what he's saying and tell you if he's being honest or blowing smoke. I know him better than anyone and can help you figure out the truth buried underneath all of his lies."

"How?"

"Security."

"What?"

"That's what I do. Well, that's what I'm going to do in Vegas."

"Interrogate people?"

"No. Study and analyze behavior. I have a bachelor's in behavioral science, and I'm working on my master's with a specialty in paralanguage and kinesics, focusing on non-verbal communication."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"All you need to know is that I can tell whether a person is lying by the look on their face, unconscious movements, and tone of their voice." I raised my eyebrows in question and she said, "Except for you. I can't tell when you're lying, and it makes me crazy."

"I've never lied to you."

"The man in the trunk?"

"What man?"

“See? I *know* you’re lying, but I can’t see a tell.” I shrugged, and she said, “Let me sit in with you when you talk to my dad. When I’m done and have the answers I need, you can do whatever you want to him.” Bex let go of my waist and wiped the tears off her cheeks before she added, “No. Not whatever you want. I want you to go old school and put him in concrete shoes before you toss him into the Hudson like the piece of trash he is.”

I shook my head to clear it. Surely I hadn’t heard her ...

“You’re going to have to kill him. He knows that Rory and I are important to you somehow. He’ll use that to his advantage and then toss us away when he can’t use us any more.”

“Like he did when you were a kid?”

Bex nodded. “I can’t let that happen to Rory.” She looked around the garage, and her eyes landed on one of the men she’d killed. “If you won’t do it, I will. What’s one more, right?”

The elevator dinged, and my daughter rushed out of the doors before they were even halfway open. She saw Sully first and dropped down beside him as she brought his hand to her chest. Her other hand covered her mouth as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“What the fuck?” I mumbled, terrified at the love and brokenhearted sorrow I saw in my daughter’s eyes.

“My father can sleep with the fishes, but you can’t do that to Sully or Park, okay?”

“There’s a code, Bex.”

“Just get the whole story first. I’ll help you figure out the truth from fiction.”

“You’ll have to stay here to do that, you know.”

Bex sighed, wiping the last of the tears from her face. “We’ll stay for a little while, at least. I’m not making any promises for the future.”

RICO

“It’s not what you think, Dad,” Constance said quietly as she pulled out of my arms and looked me in the eye. “I’ve never lied to ... Okay, I’ve rarely ever lied to you. I promise, it’s not as bad as whatever is going through your head.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“I can see it in your eyes. Park and Sully respect you and would never betray you.”

“That’s debatable, but I’m not going to get into it right now,” I said firmly.

I wasn’t sure it would matter either way. Sully was still unconscious, and his prognosis wasn’t good. The bullet hadn’t actually done much damage, but he’d fallen at such an angle that the force of the impact had cracked his skull and caused a severe head injury. Park had taken not just one, but three shots to the abdomen. He had damage to his liver, his intestines, had lost his spleen, and might lose one of his kidneys.

If they lived, they would have months of recovery ahead. Dating my daughter was the least of their worries. Right now, their health was much more important than my anger and disappointment in them.

“I love you, Dad, but I love them too. Don’t make me choose.”

With that shocking threat, because I couldn’t perceive it as anything else, my daughter walked toward Zilv and Troi, her newly assigned guards that would be her shadows for the foreseeable future. I watched the men immediately cover her, Zilv slightly ahead and Troi keeping his head on a swivel as he stayed a step or so behind to watch her back.

“That was harsh,” Ziggy said from his seat a few feet away. “What are you going to do? You can kill them now and

...

“I promised Bex I wouldn’t. For now. But I’m smart enough to realize that if I do decide to hurt either of them, I’ll lose my daughter forever.”

Vino, our cousin who held the same position in our family business as Relio, consigliere for the family, approached me. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed before he said, “I know you’ve got a lot on your plate right now, but I just got a call that you’re going to want to hear about.”

I could tell by the tension in his body and his concerned expression that whatever news he had wasn’t any kind of good. “What’s going on?”

“Frank sent a package to the hotel. Sam accepted the delivery and called me immediately.”

“What was the message?”

“Sam didn’t open it, but it seems to be a large envelope of pictures. I told him to put it in the safe until one of us picks it up.”

“Thanks, Vino. I know I can always count on you. I have to go home and check on the kids. Will you ...”

“I’ll stay here and wait for news on the guys,” Vino assured me. “I’ve set a schedule and they’ll have eyes on them at all times. I’ll relay anything I hear.”

I sighed and let my head fall forward, making a decision that I prayed I wouldn’t regret. “And Constance. Keep her in the loop about their progress. I’m sure she’ll be back after she gets some sleep. Let her ... let her see them. It’s important to her.”

“I think that’s a good call,” Vino assured me. “I’ll have Angelia check on her throughout the day, and Gabby is waiting for her at the hotel.”

“Did *they* know?”

“I think Angelia had her suspicions, but she never said anything to me about it.”

Vino and his wife had been together for more than ten years, and she was an important part of our family. Constance considered her a close friend as did I. I knew that I could rely on Angelia and even Gabby, for that matter, to support Constance through the worry and fear she had for Park and Sully's safety. Even more, I knew that the women would be loyal to her in a time when she was worried about my reactions. They would be reassuring when she might feel afraid the family would turn against her because of the secrets she and her guards had kept.

"I'm going home to check on my kids, and then I'll join Relio downstairs," I told Ziggy and Vino.

"I'll come with you," Ziggy said as he stood.

"Are you up for it?" Vino asked, his eyes on the bandage wrapped around Ziggy's bicep. There was another on his neck, but from my understanding, that wound was superficial - a burn from a bullet that came within an inch of taking his life. "Doc said you should rest that arm."

"I'll use my other hand if I need to, but thanks, Ma." Ziggy said sarcastically.

"If I were your mom, I would have flushed you before you were too big to clog the toilet."

"Your mom left the best part of you on the shower floor," Ziggy retorted.

"Does it not bother either of you to talk about our mother and Aunt Vida that way?" I asked, resigned to the fact that when these two were together, 'your mama' jokes were constantly tossed around. They'd been acting that way since puberty, and I had no illusions that it would ever stop. "I'm just saying it bothers me. It always has."

"At this point, if we weren't insulting each other, we wouldn't have anything else to talk about," Vino explained.

"Why don't we talk about work and leave it at that?"

"All work and no play makes Ziggy a dull boy," my brother said with a grin.

“God, we can’t have him any duller, for fuck’s sake.” Ziggy laughed at the insult but sobered when Vino touched his good shoulder. “I’m glad you’re okay. I’d hate to lose you. If I did, I’d have to start insulting Rico, and he’s got no sense of humor.”

“You two ... Fuck it. Let’s just go.”

“See what I mean?” Vino called out from behind us as Ziggy and I walked away. “No sense of humor at all.”



Years ago, the Moretti family had opened a clinic on Staten Island that catered to the men in their organization. For a long time, Paola Moretti, Cento and Tonio’s aunt and Zach Campana’s mother, had been the resident physician at the clinic. After she was ostracized by her family, she moved to Texas with my sister, Francesca, who was also a doctor. Another doctor was hired to work for the Moretti clinic. Due to his gambling habit and affinity for leggy blonde call girls, he didn’t have a problem treating anyone the family sent over who needed his expertise. It wasn’t exactly convenient to have to drive to Staten Island when we made our home in Manhattan, but it kept the law out of it while our people got the best care possible.

Most minor injuries, from stitches to superficial stab wounds, could be treated in a special suite we had outfitted as a medical clinic at the hotel. But bullet wounds and anything else that required surgery had to be transferred to Staten Island. Luckily, we had two ambulances in our fleet of vehicles that were available any time we needed them.

The ride from the clinic back to the hotel usually took quite a while, but since I was alone with my thoughts, time seemed to fly. I had time to take care of some pressing business with a few phone calls and then stared out the window at the traffic we passed while I pondered what might happen this evening and in the near future.

For some reason, Frank Bovino had decided to become a pain in my ass, and therefore, a problem for all of the families. I wasn't sure he understood the magnitude of the shitstorm he'd just stirred up, but he would figure it out when the hammer fell and everyone on the street started gunning for him.

My children and my brothers' children were mostly curtained off from the details of our lifestyle, but they weren't sheltered from our men. A week ago, I would have said any one of my men would lay their life down for my children, my most important and beloved asset. However, the events of last Friday had changed my perspective, and now I wasn't sure who I could trust or be sure of who I needed to kill.

I hoped that the scales would balance out soon so I could feel a little more secure in my trust for my crew, but until Frank was out of commission, that might not be possible.

What had started out as a grudge against me, and in turn, the rest of my family, had been taken to a new level last week. If I had my way, Frank would experience the fallout from that sooner rather than later.

Until then, I'd have to make sure to screen everyone who came across my path and keep an eye on the people I should be able to trust the most. Hopefully, the men who were in holding cells waiting for me to interrogate and likely kill them would give us enough information to find the hole where Frank Bovino was hiding. I couldn't wait to slowly and ever so painfully kill him.

But first, I needed to get rid of Bex's father like she'd asked. I still wasn't sure it was a good idea to let her talk to him, but if the man upset her, I'd start cutting off fingers and toes until he learned to use his manners. I was taking a risk letting her get involved, but if I looked at it from a business standpoint, it was a case of mutual destruction. She might know my secrets, but I'd know hers too. If she told anyone, that foster father of hers included, she'd be implicating herself just as much as me.

I didn't want to think that way, but I had to be honest with myself since my family's future and the future of my friends hinged on her silence. I wanted to believe I could trust Bex because I wanted to explore a future with her. I had a feeling she wasn't as sure of that plan.

As soon as I finished with my business this evening, I'd crawl into bed and work on convincing her of the idea.



"I brought you a coffee," Ziggy said as he walked into the room. I smiled at him, more than ready for a shot of caffeine. I'd been working with Cento and Tonio for the last hour while Luca and Matteo had gone to pick up Bex's father using the information we'd garnered from the man in the chair. We were waiting for Zach to come down with the men in his organization we had just found out were working with Frank.

"He's too far gone," Cento said with a sigh as he studied the man a few feet away. "I think it was a heart attack."

"Or maybe the ice pick," Tonio said in confusion as he stared at his brother. "You don't think that had something to do with it?"

"Maybe," Cento hedged.

"Have you ever studied the anatomy of the human body?" Ziggy asked as he looked at Rocco, my guard who had been turned by Frank six months ago.

"I've taken plenty of anatomy lessons. Given a few too."

"Textbooks, asshole," Tonio growled.

"No. Why would I?" Cento asked.

Ziggy shook his head sadly and explained, "So you would understand that if you stick a six-inch metal rod in at a downward angle between the scapula and the clavicle, you're likely to do something that *might* ... and I say might in the broadest of terms ... kill someone."

“You live, you learn.” Cento grimaced as he glanced at Rocco. “Well, not in his case.”

“Did he give up anything first?” Ziggy asked.

“He did. Luca and Matteo went to retrieve Lenny Holland, who somehow managed to get away during the gunfight and is currently relaxing in his girlfriend’s apartment while he waits for further instruction from Bovino.”

“So Bex’s father *is* involved with Frank.”

I nodded. “Before Cento so kindly turned Rocco into a shish kabob, he explained that Holland owes Frank a mint but promised he’d deliver something that was worth its weight in gold. He insisted that Bex could help him with that and if Frank could get a hold of her, he’d have everything he needed to pay his debt.”

“What?”

“Exactly. What does Bex have that Frank wants?”

“He did mention that Frank wants Bex on another level too,” Tonio explained. “Not just because of what she has but who she is. Apparently, Holland has been telling Frank all about his little girl and how beneficial she would be to his organization. As soon as Frank found out that you and Bex were involved, he got *very* interested in her.”

“He sent Holland to retrieve her so he could have this priceless treasure *and* your girlfriend?” Ziggy asked incredulously. “And how does that make you feel, Rico?”

“He handed me the ice pick,” Cento told my brother with an exaggerated shrug.

“I’m saving my energy for when we find Frank.”

Ziggy chuckled before he asked, “What are you going to do about Bex and her father?”

“I’m going to talk to the man like a rational adult and let Bex sit in on the interview.”

“And then?”

“She asked me to drown him in the Hudson, but I’m probably gonna set him on fire first.”

Ziggy nodded slowly before he deadpanned, “Glad you’re not upset.”

18.

BEX

“Hey,” I murmured when I felt Rico drape his arm over my waist. “Is everything okay?”

“Better than okay,” Rico answered as his hand slowly moved up to cup my bare breast. “As a matter of fact, everything is fantastic.”

I laughed softly and pushed my ass against his erection before I asked, “Are you finished with your ... business?”

“Not quite, but alas, I’m a mere mortal everywhere but the bedroom, so I had to have a nap.”

Rico pinched my nipple and started kissing my shoulder as he ground his erection against me. I angled my hips just as the head of Rico’s cock breached my pussy.

“What’s better than fantastic?” Rico murmured before he nipped at my earlobe with his teeth.

“This?”

“No, baby. Close, though.”

“What then?”

“This,” Rico said as he slowly filled me with his cock. I was still sore from our antics yesterday, or was that two days ago now? I couldn’t gauge the time because my mind was on other things, but the burning and pain started to recede as he held still and let my body adjust. “I thought for sure I’d have to break into your bedroom to get to you, but I luckily found you exactly where I wanted you.”

I sighed, waiting for him to start moving, but couldn’t stop myself from admitting, “I went to bed in my room with the door locked to keep you out, but I couldn’t sleep.”

“Why?”

“Because my pillow didn’t smell like you.”

“So you came to my room?”

“I came to steal your pillow, but then I thought about how good this would feel and stripped off my clothes to wait for you.”

Rico started to slowly pump his hips, filling me and then retreating, until my body clutched at his cock to keep him inside. “You knew it was inevitable.”

“I guess so,” I answered, breathless now that he’d started moving.

“We’re inevitable, Bex. You know that, right?” I tensed and then started to move away, not ready or willing to have a conversation about our future right now, but Rico held me tight. “Don’t lock me out, Bex. Not out of your room, not out of your life, and not out of the possibility of what we could become.”

“There has to be more than this, Rico,” I argued.

“There will be. There already is.” Rico filled me again and held himself there as he slowly ran his hand over my stomach and cupped my sex. One finger swirled around my clit and I gasped, waiting for him to do it again, but he held still. “I’ve never known a woman who could enthrall me with just a few words or thrill me with a smile. I’d never met a woman who I felt like I could be myself around until I met you.”

“We barely know each other.” I reached down and covered his hand with my own, trying to get him to move his finger and rub my clit just right, the way he had when we were together before.

Rico kept his fingers still and blocked me from touching myself. “I don’t know everything about you, but what I do know is enough to tell me that the rest is a discovery I’m more than willing to work on for years to come. Decades even.”

“It’s too soon to know that.”

“Take a chance, Bex. The reward outweighs the risk.”

“It’s not just me I’m thinking of. I can’t talk about this right now. It’s not fair for you to expect me to concentrate when ...” Rico started rubbing my clit, the pressure just perfect as he thrust his cock in the same rhythm.

“You’ll talk to me, though, won’t you?” Rico’s question sounded more like a command, but I couldn’t argue at the moment. What he was doing felt too good. He stilled and I moaned, biting my lip so I didn’t lower myself so far as to beg. He seemed to know he was making it impossible, so he answered for me. “You’ll talk to me when you’re blissed out from the orgasms I give you. We’ll talk with your head on my chest while your hair tickles my nose.”

It wasn’t in my nature to give in quite so easily so I had to argue. “If you think so.”

“I know so,” Rico growled before he started moving again, this time in earnest, rocketing me toward my first orgasm of the night. I knew that even exhausted, mentally and physically, he’d take me to that peak over and over again until I caved to his demand for a conversation about our future.

I’d already made the decision to stay, and that was cemented when I crawled into his bed naked. Somehow I knew that once I went back, I’d never want to leave - and that he’d never let me.



“Comfortable?” Rico asked as his hand trailed up and down my arm, giving me goosebumps that were countered by the warmth coming from his body beneath me.

“Yes. Are you?”

“Surprisingly, I’m always comfortable with you. I’ve never had that before. It’s a foreign feeling, but I like it.”

“So do I,” I admitted.

“Will you answer my question now?”

“What question?” I hedged. Rico slapped me on the ass, and I let out a yelp. “Fine. We can talk. Just don’t spank me again. My ass is already tender from earlier.”

“You liked it.”

“I’m not saying I didn’t, but it might be a day or two before I’m willing to let you do it again.”

“They were just love taps to show you how much I appreciated the sight of your ass in the air while you took my cock.”

I lifted my head off his chest and stared at him. “You have a way with words that is unmatched by any poet, Mr. Romano.”

Rico grinned. “I do, don’t I?”

“If it was just you and me in the equation, I’d be more than willing to give up my job in Vegas and stay here, but that’s not reality. I’ve got to consider Rory’s future just like you’ve got to consider your kids’ future.”

“Why can’t they all go hand in hand?”

“What if they don’t? This is so new that we haven’t had a chance to even get to know the things about each other that piss us off. What if we come up against something so bad that we can’t go forward and have to split up? What happens then?”

“We don’t let that happen,” Rico said simply.

“If it does, then I’ll be left without a job, a place to live, or money of my own. All I’ll have is a broken heart and a boy to raise who’s already lost too much in his life. He would lose you and Freddy, who’s already closer to him than any friend of his I’ve met so far. Rory will be just as heartbroken as I will if it doesn’t work out. I’m new to this parenthood gig, but I’m pretty sure risking an 11-year-old’s heart at the whim of my sex drive is frowned upon.”

“It’s more than just sex, baby.”

“You barely know anything about me!”

“I know more about you than I should, and I’m willing to tell you all the same details about me.”

“The private investigator,” I whispered as I started to get off Rico’s chest so I could find my clothes. “How could I forget that you had me investigated?”

Rico held me still and lifted his head so he could stare into my eyes. “Think about that, Bex. Do you blame me? You can find out damn near anything you want to know about me at the touch of a button. I’ve had people taking pictures and documenting my life since I was a child. Where’s your open book? I was simply putting us on even ground.”

“When you put it that way ...” I let my voice trail off as I made a decision. Finally, I admitted, “I did look you up. I saw the pictures you were talking about and the arrest record. There were pages and pages of information, and some of it wasn’t great.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“What have you found out about me?”

“That you have an excellent credit score, you donate to not one, but *three* charities for police officers and their families, and you volunteer at a shelter for homeless veterans.”

“That is all correct.”

“You’re allergic to sulfa drugs, there’s an active trespassing order against you at a bowling alley in Kansas City, you won a blue ribbon at the Kansas State Fair for your apple crumble when you were 19, and you’ve had your appendix removed.”

“You looked into my medical history?” I asked, outraged.

“No, you have a scar,” Rico said with a grin as he ran his hand down my side. I squirmed when he hit a ticklish spot, and he laughed.

Without thinking, I blurted, “Did you find our father?”

“Yes.”

“Did you ... is he ...”

“I promised to take you with me when I spoke to him, so I haven’t even seen him yet. He’s downstairs waiting on us.”

“Do you know how he’s involved in all this?”

“He has connections to Frank.”

“What kind of connections?” When Rico hesitated, I asked, horrified, “Did he steal from a mobster? Seriously?”

“I don’t know that he stole from him, but he owes him a substantial sum of money.”

“What does that have to do with you?”

“He promised Frank that you have something he would want and ...” Rico sighed and slowly shook his head. “He promised to give you to Frank.”

“What do I have that’s worth a bunch of money? Nothing! Rory has Shawna’s life insurance money, but that’s in a trust that can’t be used for anything other than his expenses. My car is ...” I realized exactly what Rico had implied, and I yelled, “What do you mean he was going to *give me* to Frank?”

“It’s my understanding that he was going to do just that.”

“Like a Christmas gift? Or a valentine? What the fuck?”

“Obviously, that’s not going to happen.”

“I’ll fucking say! I’m not going anywhere near that man.”

Rico grinned at my indignation. “Frank’s not going to touch you. Whatever it is he thinks you have for him, he’s gonna go to his grave without it. You’re mine, Bex. I’m not going to let anyone near you.”

“He used to be your friend, didn’t he?”

“He was my best friend for years until he betrayed me in a way that I could never forgive.”

“Didn’t your wife have some say in that?”

“How did you know?” Rico asked softly.

“More than once, you or your brothers have mentioned that Frank would never get to Freddy. You don’t seem nearly

as worried about Nicky, Vigo, or Constance. You are, but not as much as you worry about him getting his hands on Freddy.”

“That was just a slip ...”

“You’re lying, Rico.”

“I thought you couldn’t tell when I lied to you.”

“You had a vasectomy after Vigo was born. That was a few years before your wife had Freddy. *That* is a betrayal a man can never forget.”

“It is.”

“Is Vigo yours? Is Nicky?”

“They’re my sons just as much as Constance is my daughter.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

“They have my name and my heart, even if by some chance they don’t have my DNA.” I laid my head on Rico’s chest, unable to find words of comfort. Instead, I pressed myself against the man I was quickly falling in love with and gave him what support I could in the moment. I fell even further when he said, “Someday, I’ll say the same thing about Rory, Bex. You know that, right?”



“What’s that?” I asked Rico as I came out of the bathroom, my arms still above my head as I twisted my hair up to keep it out of my face.

“Are you ready to go downstairs?”

I dropped my arms and motioned toward my body. “I couldn’t figure out what to wear.”

“Wear whatever you want.”

“What exactly does a woman wear to an interrogation and possible homicide, even if it is warranted?”

Rico threw his head back and laughed heartily, a sound I'd only heard from him a few times so far.

"I mean, do we go all the way down to the bank to drop his body or do we just toss him over the side of the George Washington Bridge? It makes a big difference if I need to contend with mud. Do I need a ski mask and gloves? What's the protocol here?" Rico was still laughing when he pulled me into his arms. "I've got so many options with all the clothes you bought that I'm not sure how to choose an outfit."

"There's not going to be any bloodshed while you're around, and you're not going to help anyone put him in the Hudson."

"Why not?"

"You're handling this much better than I thought you would. Why is that? It's almost as if you have experience dumping a body."

"How am I supposed to handle it? Lenny Holland has information that could help keep you safe, and if this goes where you want it to go, it will also keep my little brother safe. Besides, that man's been dead to me since he left me to rot in prison for a crime he committed."

"I read about that."

"Then you know that it was pure luck that I'm not still in a federal penitentiary instead of standing in the middle of a penthouse wearing a pair of joggers that cost more than a sane person would ever spend on a piece of athletic wear." Rico leaned to the side and looked down at my legs with a curious expression. "That's a girly way of saying sweatpants."

"You went with the toss-him-over-the-railing scenario and put on something stretchy?"

"I thought it might be nice to hear him scream on the way down." Rico laughed again and then kissed me on the end of my nose. I glanced over at the envelope he'd tossed onto the coffee table and asked, "Do you need to take care of something for work or ..."

Rico sighed and shook his head. “It’s more riddles from Frank.”

“I’m good at figuring out riddles. What do you have?”

“What we shared is gone, but you still have two things that belong to me. Three, if you count my future wife.”

“Oh, he did *not* say that.”

“That’s a direct quote. It’s even in his handwriting.”

“What else did the letter say, and why did he put it in such a big envelope?”

“He wanted to hammer home exactly what he knows and throw me off, probably thinking it would be new information to me.”

“What else was in there?”

“Pictures of Freddy I’ve never seen, which leads me to believe Ann took him around Frank without my knowledge. I don’t recognize the woman in the pictures with him, though, and that’s what’s confusing.”

“Do you think Freddy might remember who it is?”

“He’s just a baby in some of them and a toddler in a few of the others. The most recent one looks like he was about 5. There’s a school picture in there that I’ve never seen either.”

“He probably wouldn’t remember that far back. Even if you don’t recognize the people, do you see anything in the background that might give you a clue? Does it even matter?”

“I think that’s part of the riddle. Who is she, and what does she have to do with my son? Is it some sort of implied threat?”

“Let’s look at them together. Bring them over by the window where the light’s better,” I said as I stepped out of his arms and walked toward the window. Rico walked up and wrapped his arms around me from behind, the stack of enlarged pictures in one hand. He tilted them so that I could see, and I tensed. “Why did he send you a picture of Shawna and Rory?”

“What?”

I snatched the pictures out of his hand so I could bring them closer to my face. “That’s the living room of the apartment we lived in with Shawna when she was pregnant.” I put that picture at the back of the stack and studied the next one. “This is the kitchen. It was right before my dad took me to Kansas. Rory started walking the day before this was taken. He’s sitting on my lap, but my face is cut out of the frame. The full picture is hanging up at the apartment.”

“That’s not Rory, Bex. That’s Freddy.”

“No, it’s not. I lived there when this was taken. That’s my brother.”

19.

RICO

Bex took my hand, and I looked down at her and asked, “Are you okay? You don’t have to do this.”

“I have to see him now more than ever! I’ve got a million questions, and even though I’m positive I already know the answer to most of them, I’ve still got to ask.”

“You say that your father is a con man to the core, and there’s no way we can break him. How do you suggest we get the answers to all those questions if our usual methods won’t work?”

“A baseball bat and a hammer?”

“You underestimate my imagination.”

Sam, who was in front of us waiting on the elevator to take us down to the maintenance level where we were keeping Lenny Holland, coughed into his hand to cover a laugh, but I saw his shoulders shaking and reached up to poke him in the back. “Sorry, boss.”

“He’ll be tense if he doesn’t feel like he’s in control. If he’s not the smartest man in the room, he’ll keep pushing until he either makes you lose your cool or go after him physically so he can play the victim.”

“So how do I make him feel like he’s in control?”

“Treat him as if you can’t live without the information he’s holding, and don’t show any outward reaction when he tells you something you don’t already know. If you don’t give him any signs that he’s telling you something fresh and new, he’ll dig deep to find more to tell you so he can make you believe he’s indispensable.”

“They taught you all that in school?”

“No. He taught me that by dragging me from con to con throughout my childhood.” Bex reached into the pocket of her sweatpants and pulled out a white case that held the earbuds she’d borrowed from Vigo before we left the penthouse. She handed me one before she used her phone to call mine. I pulled my phone out and the earpiece automatically connected so that when I accepted the call, I could hear Bex in stereo. “You said that there’s a window I can watch through, and he won’t be able to see me. I’ll give you clues as you go and advise you on what to say next to make him keep talking.”

“Okay. Any more advice?”

“Don’t tell him where I am. Use that as a bargaining chip. If he thinks I’m here, he might believe he can get to me and hand me over. If he thinks I’m gone, he’ll believe he can find me and bring me back. It’s best to keep him guessing which scenario will play out. He’ll keep talking until he gets you to tell him where I am.”

“Got it.”

I turned the volume up, and Bex touched my arm. “Change my name in your phone to something he won’t recognize. If he happens to see the screen, he’ll know that I’m involved. That will show him that you have the upperhand which is exactly what we don’t want.”

“This idiot knows he’s not leaving this building, right?” Sam asked as he threw me a look over his shoulder. “The guy’s clearly not a fucking genius. I wasn’t even with him for three minutes after Luca and Matteo brought him in before I could tell he’s a few nuggets short of a Happy Meal.”

Bex laughed. “He’s just dumb enough to believe that he’s always the smartest guy in the room.”

I showed Bex my screen, and she tilted her head in confusion as she asked, “Mae Coughlin? Where’d you come up with that name?”

The elevator opened, and Sam walked out into the hall. As he turned to hold the doors open for us, he answered, “She was

a good Irish Catholic girl who married a very naughty Italian boy.”

“Who did she marry?”

I grinned at Bex before I answered, “Al Capone.”

I escorted Bex into the room next to the one where her father was being held. Out of respect for her, Sam had arranged for someone to clean up Lenny’s face, but there was nothing they could do about the bruises. I wondered which of my associates were responsible for those.

I didn’t have to wonder for long. Zach Campana walked into the room and sat down in the chair across from Lenny. He tipped it back and propped his legs up on the corner of the table and then pulled his phone out and looked at the screen.

Lenny didn’t like the fact that he wasn’t paying attention to him, so he asked, “What, you’re not gonna beat on me again?”

“Do you want me to? I can.”

“I knew your father.”

“Wow. You *really* want me to hit you some more, don’t you?”

“See the look on his face? Zach’s playing it all wrong. Lenny knows he’s gotten under his skin, so he’s going to keep picking and picking until Zach loses his cool,” Bex explained softly, probably afraid Lenny would be able to hear her.

“Both of these rooms are soundproof. That speaker lets you hear what’s going on in there, but they can’t hear anything unless you push the red button for the intercom.”

“Okay,” Bex said, not much louder than she was speaking before. Lenny was talking again, and Bex started a running commentary on what she saw as he spoke. “When you ask him questions, do more than just listen to him talk. Make sure you lean in, occasionally tilt your head as if you need more explanation, show a visible reaction but not too much.”

“What do you mean?”

Bex furrowed her brow and tilted her head before she asked, “What do you mean?”

“I mean ... oh.” Bex smiled before she looked back into the other room and watched her father’s interaction with Zach who was actively ignoring him now.

“This actually could be working to your benefit. He’s really irritated that Zach’s ignoring him. The guy is good, but I can see that Lenny’s getting to him. He’ll keep talking and piss him off enough so that he either goes away or erupts, then you can sweep in and be the good cop to his bad cop.”

Just then, Zach shot out of his chair and reached across the table. He picked Lenny up by the front of his shirt and shook him like a rag doll before he tossed him backwards.

Lenny didn’t even have time to collect himself before Zach flew over the table and tackled the man, knocking him backwards. Zach landed on Lenny’s chest and started hitting him in the face with each word he clearly enunciated, “Don’t. Ever. Talk. About. My. Mom.”

“Now would be a good time for you to go in,” Bex suggested as she nudged my shoulder. I resisted long enough to kiss her firmly on the mouth, then I left the room without another word. Her voice rang out behind me with the reminder, “Be nice or you won’t get anything out of him.”

I’d do it. For Freddy. For Bex. And for Rory. I could do it, but I wouldn’t like it.



“Are you sure you don’t want something for that?” I asked Lenny Holland as I studied the bruises on his face. “It looks like it hurts.”

“I’ll be fine if you’ll let me out of this room so I can get some stitches,” Lenny snarled as he put the ice pack I’d brought in for him back up to the cut on his brow, courtesy of Zach.

“You don’t know why he’s here anyway.”

I took Bex’s direction and said, “Honestly, I’m not sure why he’s beating on you. What do you even have to do with all of this?”

“Nothing. I’m confused too.”

“He believes you. Roll with it. Make him convince you he’s important.”

“I’ve got real shit to deal with besides keeping Zach from killing some asshole who’s got no involvement in my problems. I’m not sure why I’m here,” I said as I put my hands on the table and started to push myself up from the chair.

“Your friend knows that I’m an associate of your enemy, so he thinks there’s something I’m not telling you.”

“That’s doubtful.”

“What is?”

“That you would have any knowledge of Frank’s dealings. He keeps his shit close to the vest. Always has.”

“But he told you his secrets until he stole your wife, didn’t he?”

“He’s goading you. Keep your cool.”

Bex’s calm voice in my ear was the only thing that held me back from jumping over the table and beating on Lenny just as Zach had done. Either the man was too stupid to realize he was going to die today or was trying to get us to put an end to him quicker than we planned. I had a feeling it was the latter.

“He didn’t steal my wife. She died a few years ago from natural causes,” I lied. The coroner had listed Ann’s death as a heart attack caused by a genetic abnormality. I’d paid him handsomely for that because I didn’t want my children or their grandmother to ever know that she’d died of a drug overdose in a seedy hotel where she’d spent the night with her dealer. The housekeeper had found her the next morning, naked and blue. We lied and said that she passed while she was in the sauna room at a spa on Park Avenue. “It was a heart attack.”

“You must have loved her very much.”

“Of course.” I hoped I sounded convincing.

“I think Frank loved her too.”

“I know he did. He was at our place all the time. He stood with me at our wedding, and we chose him to be our oldest son’s godfather.”

“You’re losing him. He knows that a man in your position can’t be that dumb.”

“Fuck. What am I saying? I think they had an affair, but I was never able to prove it.”

“I can prove it.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. She’s gone now.”

“And you have a new woman in your life.”

“Eh,” I responded with a shrug. “Sort of. I guess I do.”

I heard Bex’s soft laughter and knew she was getting a kick out of hearing the man who’d professed his intention to keep her around dismiss her so easily.

“She’s been living with you for almost a week.”

“Well, yeah. She’s staying in the penthouse because her little brother is friends with my son.”

“Which son? Vigo or Nicky?”

“Stay calm.”

“No. My youngest. Freddy.”

“Oh right. Freddy is your youngest just like Rory is my youngest, right?”

“They’re just about the same age, I think.”

“Has Rory ever mentioned me? Has Bex?”

“Say no!”

I took Bex’s direction and shook my head. “I haven’t heard either of them say anything about you.”

Lenny scoffed and anger transformed his face. “I taught that little bitch everything she knows. The boy, well, I didn’t waste as much time on him because there wasn’t a chance he’d end up anything like me, but Bex did. She’s my clone whether she wants to admit it or not.”

I shrugged, remembering that Bex had advised me to just let the man talk. And talk he did. He was a bottomless pit of narcissism and self-promotion. I could only thank Bex’s fortitude and self-awareness for the person she’d become because she damn sure didn’t inherit any personality traits from this asshole. That was for sure.

Lenny kept talking, listing all the things he’d taught Bex over the years and how she was an ungrateful child for abandoning him in favor of the new family she’d found in Kansas City.

“Everytime I tried to get in touch with her to see how she was faring, I was turned away. She blocked my number and returned the letters I sent her without even opening the damn things. Thankless wretch. I raised her. I spent my time and energy making sure she knew what the world owed her and how to take it when the time was right. And what do I get for my troubles? She abandons me like yesterday’s fucking trash.”

“If you don’t let me throw him in the Hudson, I’ll never talk to you again, Rico Romano!”

It took everything I had not to laugh at the fury in her voice, and I could just imagine the look on her face right now. I heard mens’ laughter in the background and realized she wasn’t alone. I recognized my brothers’ voices along with the Morettis, Zach, and the Russo twins. I was glad Bex had some support in the room and knew I could trust any one of them to take care of her while I was busy trying to restrain myself from choking the life from her father.

“She probably thinks I gave her a shit life, but she’s going to have quite a surprise in store when I get out of here. As much as she hates the heat and the sunshine, I was surprised to learn she was moving west. She’s going to hate the heat in the

Middle East much worse than she would have hated the weather in Las Vegas.”

“Isn’t she a felon? How’s she gonna get a passport?”

“Frank took care of all that. I’ll get her over there to him, and my debt will be paid in full.”

“What about Rory? Does he have a passport?”

“That won’t be a problem. Frank plans to sell Bex to the highest bidder and then just stay for a few months while he recovers from his most recent procedure,” Lenny said dismissively. “I was going to use his jet to deliver them since he’s already gone. He’ll bring them back to be raised at his house in Newark once he’s healed. They will learn the lifestyle and ...” Lenny suddenly realized all the information he’d just given away and sat up straighter in his chair, the wound on his face forgotten as the hand holding the ice pack dropped.

“He got a new face didn’t he?” I asked, knowing the game was up now. He’d given too much away and wouldn’t slip up like that again.

Just as the door behind me slammed against the wall, Bex yelled, “You were gonna sell me to that bastard and let him put me on the auction block like fucking livestock? What the fuck is wrong with you? I’m your daughter for God’s sake!”

Lenny was shocked to see Bex in the doorway, but he recovered quickly and asked, “But are you really? Maybe I just needed a cute little accessory to take the heat off of me while I got my work done.”

“You motherfucker!” Bex roared as she ran around the table to get to Lenny. I was out of my chair before she could get past me. I grabbed her around the waist and spun her back toward the door, but she fought me as she yelled, “Let me go, Rico! I’m gonna kill him with my bare hands!”

“We can’t let you do that, sweetheart,” my brother said as he walked into the room.

“You promised, Rico!”

“I didn’t promise anything of the sort, I just didn’t tell you no,” I pointed out as I turned her in my arms so I could look at her face. There were tears in her eyes, and I knew that what Lenny said had affected her more than she wanted to let on.

“He was going to *sell* me, Rico.”

“I know, baby,” I murmured as I pulled her into my chest. I turned and the look on my face scared Lenny so much that his face paled. “I won’t ever let that happen. That fucker will pay for even considering it.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Lenny started to argue, but then there was the slightest ping sound. Lenny’s eyes grew wide as he reached for the small dart lodged in his neck. Before he could grab it, his eyes rolled backward, and he fell forward, his face hitting the table with a loud thud.

“Whoa!” Zach cheered from where he stood between the Russo twins. “How cool was that shit?”

“What the fuck?” Ziggy asked as he stared at the silver handgun Zach was holding. “Did you just tranq him?”

Zach giggled like a little kid as he nodded excitedly. “I sure the fuck did!”

“Where the hell did you get a tranquilizer gun?” Cento asked.

“That is sick. Fucking awesome!” Matteo choked out through his laughter.

“My new stepdad gave it to me for Christmas. He said that violence wasn’t always the answer, and then he and his friends laughed and laughed.”

“If you ever shoot one of us with that thing, I’ll kill you myself,” I threatened.

“Of course not,” Zach assured me as he waved the gun around.

Bex winced and moved around to my other side so I was between her and the crazed gunman. “Is he serious right now?”

“That boy’s never serious,” Ziggy complained.

“I’m all man, Zig.” Zach gave Bex an exaggerated wink and then lifted his chin and wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Ew.”

Her reaction caused all of us to laugh, but then Lenny moaned loudly.

Zach shot him twice more and then looked at the gun in his hand. “At this rate, I’m gonna need more darts soon.”

Bex was looking at her father who was drooling on the table now. After a few seconds, she asked, “Are we gonna drop him off the bridge like that or ...”

“You’re not dropping him off of anything, and neither is Rico,” Matteo said firmly.

“But ...”

Zach’s face lost all traces of humor, and he glanced over at Lenny before he looked at Bex and explained, “Even if he’s been a bastard all your life, he’s still your father. Getting rid of him yourself won’t be as easy to get over as you might think. One of us will do it. That way you won’t have any regrets, and you won’t ever hold a grudge against Rico for doing it, even if it’s something you wanted him to do at the time.”

“We won’t tell you or Rico which one of us took care of it. That way, there are no hard feelings. If you’re gonna hate whoever did it, then you’ll have to hate us all equally,” Matteo explained.

Luca chimed in, “When he wakes up, we’ll see if we can get some more information out of him. The two of you are probably exhausted. If you leave now, you’ll be able to get a little sleep before the kids wake up and start wanting their usual Saturday morning feast.”

I sighed. “I haven’t seen them for more than a few minutes at a time in a couple of days.”

“They know you’ve been working. I hung out with them while you were gone. They were okay,” Bex assured me.

“Are you content with what the guys have planned?”

Bex took a deep breath and then nodded almost imperceptibly before she said, “I understand, and I guess I sort of agree.”

“It will be a lot easier to forget the bad parts and only remember the good if you don’t have any part in the ending,” Zach said earnestly. He gave her a bitter smile and added, “Trust me.”

Bex gave him a genuine smile. “You’re an okay guy, Zach, no matter what the rest of the guys say.”

“Remember that later because the longer you know him, the more he starts to grate on your nerves,” Ziggy told Bex with a grin aimed at Zach. “He’s a punk sometimes, but he has his moments.”

“They’re few and far between,” Cento deadpanned.

“I’m still holding a tranq gun, you know.”

“Use it on them, and you’ll be sleeping with the fishes,” Bex said cheerfully.

“No one really says that,” I told her with a shake of my head. “Seriously. Nobody.”

“No horse heads in the bed? No cement shoes? No heads in a duffel bag? No bodies in concrete pillars along the highway or underneath the football stadium?”

“Eh,” Ziggy said noncommittally.

“Really, who’d do that to a horse?” Luca asked the room in general. “I wouldn’t even know where to find a horse.”

“Carriages in the Park,” Matteo pointed out.

“But why? That’s just unnecessary,” Luca argued.

“Come on, Bex. Once they get on a roll, they’ll be at it for hours. I’m already exhausted.”

“Let’s go home.”

I smiled at her as she tucked herself underneath my arm. “Let’s go home.”

We were walking down the hall toward Sam and Dario when I pointed out, “You called it home.”

“Well, as of about twelve hours ago, I’ve been living there for a week. What else do you want me to call it?”

“Our home.”

“Give me a little time, Mr. Romano. You’re starting to grow on me.”

“No more Vegas?”

“I guess I’ll have to give them my resignation before I even start.”

“No need. I’ll call my nephew and tell him you had a change of plans.”

“Your nephew?”

“I told you who really runs Vegas, babe. You didn’t believe me?”

“But why would your nephew need to know I’ve decided not to move to Vegas?”

We had just walked into the elevator followed by Sam, and he looked from me to Bex and then back again before he asked, “Aren’t you going to tell her?”

“Tell me what?”

“My family owns the casino where you were going to work, and Ziggy’s sons manage it.”

“What?”

“We can go anytime you want. I have a penthouse there too.”

“Maybe someday. In the winter. My dad was right about one thing at least.”

“What’s that?”

“I really, *really* hate the heat.”

20.

BEX

“How are Park and Sully doing?”

I looked at Constance and waited for her to answer Gabby’s question. She took a deep breath and gave her a sad smile before she explained, “Neither of them are awake yet. The swelling in Sully’s brain is going down, so they won’t have to do a craniectomy to relieve the pressure after all. His condition has been up and down so much that it could change at any minute.”

“And Park?” I asked.

“Well, Sully is in a coma all on his own but Park’s is medically-induced so he can heal.”

“How long will they keep him under?”

“At least another day or two. When his liver function goes back to almost normal and his kidney output is better, they’ll start to consider it.”

“Shit,” I whispered as Gabby leaned over to hug her niece.

Constance forced a laugh, but it was marred by the tears that filled her eyes when she said, “You know, some people say there’s a silver lining on every cloud. In this case, that may prove to be their being unconscious. Dad can’t kill them like he wants as long as they’re comatose.”

“And you’ll have a little more time to work on him,” I told her, pointing out another benefit to the situation.

“Will you help?”

“Me? What can I do? I’ve only known your dad for eight ... no, nine days.”

“He moved your things into his bedroom himself,” Constance reminded me.

“It’s not like I had that much to move,” I argued. Gabby and Constance just stared at me until I rolled my eyes and caved. “Okay, maybe I can help, but I’m not sure how to go about it.”

“Work on Rico from the sidelines. She’ll come at him head-on, and you’ll be whispering in his ear when he’s not paying attention,” Gabby explained. “Sort of a sweet subliminal messaging system.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Most definitely. I use that method all the time with Relio. The girls will want to do something that he’s adamantly against but I think is fine. Instead of going toe to toe, I stand back and let my girls learn to steer their own course, but I plant ideas in his head until he comes around.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” Constance asked.

“Then I tell him how it’s going to be, and he has to deal with it. I try the easy way first to keep the waters calm, but I’m not afraid to rock the boat when it needs to be done.”

“There you go. We both learned something new today.”

Constance smiled as she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “I’ll put that in my arsenal for the future.”

“Use your powers wisely, my child,” Gabby said seriously. She couldn’t hold the serene expression for long and finally broke into giggles. “If you want any more tips and tricks on how to keep the peace and get your way at the same time, I can record some tutorials for you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Speaking of counseling, how are you doing, Bex?”

“I’m fine.” Constance and Gabby stared at me blankly again, and I sighed. “I really am doing okay. The other night was the first time I’d seen my father in a decade. I’ve thought about it, and I’m really not sure why it surprised me to find out about his plans. He has always put himself first before anyone else, including his kids.”

They nodded in understanding, but I could tell by the looks on their faces that they knew the whole story about Rory's parentage. I'd asked Rico if the guys had gotten anything else out of him about why he was listed as Rory's father, and he'd assured me he was going to ask them today. In a way, I was anxious to find out, but on the other hand, I didn't know if that would make a difference in how I felt about my dad.

Either way, we had decided that we weren't going to tell Rory what we'd learned. Rico assured me that no one would let the information slip, and if he somehow found out on his own, he would be there to help deal with the repercussions and Rory's feelings about his parentage or lack thereof.

Shawna had been a loving mother, and I knew that Rory would miss her for the rest of his life. I wanted to make sure that he only had good memories of her to look back on. I didn't want her legacy to be tainted by a lie she told. I'd rather believe that she didn't know Frank was Rory's father. It was doubtful, but it sounded like a better scenario than knowing she kept such a big secret from everyone, including her son.

Hopefully, Rico would have more information for me later. If not, then that was something I'd always wonder about. Luckily, Rory would never know, so he wouldn't have the same nagging questions without answers. That was my hope anyway.

"I'm glad my dad found you, Bex," Constance said earnestly. "I've never seen him smile as much as I have since you came along."

"Technically, I found him. Then he forced me to move into this sweet penthouse, and I decided to give the high life a try for a while instead of moving to the desert and working like a regular girl. It's very *Real Housewives*, don't you think?"

"That's not a thing," Gabby said in disgust.

"Come on. You don't know a single woman like that?"

"Not one," Constance said firmly. "I mean, there are a few with some of those qualities, but any woman that acted like

that would end up single and homeless within a week.”

“Or in the river sleeping with the fishes!”

“No one really says that. You know that, right?”



RICO

“Guess who called me this morning?” Ziggy asked as he sat down in the recliner beside mine. We had moved our conversation downstairs to Zach’s suite so the boys could play pool while Bex and the girls kept Gabby company as she got the kids down for a nap. I’d been eager to get at least one of the guys alone so I could get an update on what they’d learned from Lenny after Bex and I left in the wee hours of the morning yesterday.

“I guess that depends on what they called you,” Relio retorted.

“Carla called me.”

“Ann’s mom? Why would she call you?”

Centio and Tonio started laughing but all I could do was smile at the look of disgust on Ziggy’s face. “One of her friend’s daughters is freshly divorced and has just moved back to town *with her four kids*, and Carla wondered if I’d take her somewhere nice so she could get back into the dating scene.”

“Oh shit,” Relio whispered, a look of horror on his face.

“Before I knew it, I’d already agreed. Now I’m trying to figure out how to back out before I end up ...”

“You can’t even back out of a parking space,” Relio teased.

“Says the man with five kids and one on the way.”

“Same baby mama doesn’t count, you manwhore,” I teased.

“I was deeply in love with both of my wives.”

“And you’ll be in love with the next one,” Cento said with a bark of laughter.

Tonio joined in the teasing with, “And the *next* one.”

“And the one after that,” I added.

“No no no. Not happening, gentlemen.”

“We should put some money on it,” Cento suggested.

Ever the numbers guy, Tonio added, “We should establish a timeline first.”

“If we give him an end date, all he has to do is hold out until then,” I pointed out.

“True,” Tonio agreed.

I listened to the guys rib Ziggy for a few minutes before I got up to get another few fingers of whiskey from the bottle I’d given Zach. It was the same bottle I’d given all the men who led the four families. Zach saw me walking toward the bar across the room and handed Rory his pool cue before he made his way in my direction.

I lifted an empty glass and tilted it toward Zach. “Want one?”

“I’m good. I’ve got plans later and need to be level-headed.”

“I’m going to relax and go to bed early. A little bit of the good stuff will help me do just that.”

“At your advanced age, you shouldn’t be staying up for days at a time.”

“Kiss my ass, youngster.”

“That wrinkly old man ass? Not a chance.”

I turned around so I could see my boys and leaned back against the bar. I took a sip of my drink and asked, “Who took care of the problem?”

“I did.”

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

“Nah. We’re set,” Zach argued. After a few seconds, he shrugged and explained, “I didn’t want Bex to have to deal with that, and I didn’t want you to experience the fallout if she got twisted up about it.”

“Were any of you able to convince him to give any more details about the Frank situation?”

“He’s hooked up with some guy who’s been hiding in the Middle East for a while. Years from what I understand.”

“Who is it?”

“Ironically, it’s my godfather.”

My eyes got wide and I slowly turned to my friend. “He’s dead.”

“That’s what I thought. I distinctly remember attending his funeral.”

“What the hell?”

“That’s what I said. Looks like Frank isn’t the only Bovino we’ve got to watch out for.”

“My brothers know?”

“Yeah. I think they were going to tell you at the office tomorrow, but you asked. No sense in keeping it a secret.”

“Holy shit,” I muttered, still reeling from that revelation. “How many more of my father’s spawn are going to crawl out of the woodwork and try to ruin our lives?”

“I could ask the same thing. My new sibling is due any day now.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. I always asked my mom for a brother or sister, but I thought that ship had sailed long ago.”

“Wait. Your dad died, didn’t he?” I looked at Zach in confusion. “No. I know he did. I helped you plan that shit, and we were just talking about how it haunts you.”

“Right. You’re doing the math, aren’t you?”

“He died two years ago. How is she just now having a baby? Is she an elephant?”

Zach burst out laughing as he shook his head. “Well, no. If anything, she’s more like a 2 x 4. She’s so skinny that if her zipper sticks out, it looks like she’s got an erection.”

It was my turn to laugh, and then I elaborated, “Elephants carry their babies for almost 650 days. I learned that when Freddy had to do a report for school last year.”

“Good to know, but that’s not the case. She’s not an elephant, but she is a money-grubbing bitch who thinks that if she has my father’s baby from the sperm she convinced him to freeze before his untimely death, she’ll get half of my inheritance.”

“Will that work?”

“It sure will, and my attorney says that there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yep.”

“Well, that sucks, but ... congratulations?” I asked tentatively.

“Thanks. I think. But let’s be honest. I’m probably never gonna meet the kid. That’s not what this is about. I have no illusion that she wanted to have this baby because her biological clock was ticking. She hired a surrogate to give birth to the baby, and I know she did it for the money.”

“Probably. Okay, I’d agree that she most definitely did it for the money. If I ever see her again and she’s wearing something with a zipper, I don’t think I’ll be able to control myself.” We both got a laugh out of that image. Once we’d wound down, I reminded my friend, “If you need help from me, money or anything else, just let me know.”

“I will. I’m sure it will be fine. I could hold her up in the court system for the next fifty years, but I’m not going to bother. That would just hurt the kid but not quite as much as having that woman as a mother will.”

“This is sort of off the subject, but did Lenny happen to mention if Bex was his kid or not?”

“He didn’t say anything about that, but he did explain why he was listed as Rory’s father.”

“Why’s that?”

“I almost don’t want to tell you, man.”

“Was it because of Ann?”

“Yeah. Frank was afraid that if Ann found out, she would quit seeing him. He paid Lenny a hefty sum to marry Rory’s mom and list himself as the father. He assured him that when Lenny called in his marker, he’d pay up and at some point, he’d take Rory under his wing and tell him the truth.”

“That’s never going to happen. I’ll make sure of it.”

“There’s more.”

“Fuck. Really?”

“Lenny said that Frank had something to do with Ann’s death. She’d broken it off with him and insisted that she was going to stay married to you until death do you part and all that bullshit. He took her at her word.”

“And he killed her?”

“It seems like he had a part in it.”

“She died in a hotel of a drug overdose. Her dealer is in prison for giving the shit to her.”

“Her dealer got a reduced sentence and has half a million dollars and a new identity waiting for him when he gets out.”

“Oh! The hits just keep coming.”

“Does it make it worse knowing that Frank had something to do with Ann’s death?”

“I won’t hold that against him. I was married to the woman for years, and I can’t count the number of times I wanted to take her out myself.”

“Fuck that. I am never getting married. Hell, I’m never having kids either.”

“We’ve got a pool started about Ziggy’s future in that area. Maybe we should throw your name into the pot too.”

“If you want to lose some money then more power to you, my friend.”

Movement at the door caught my eye, and I smiled when I saw that it was Bex walking in arm in arm with my sister-in-law. The women split apart and Gabby went toward my brother while Bex walked over to me.

“Hello, beautiful.”

“Hi. Fancy meeting you here.”

“I hang out here on occasion to make the riffraff feel important,” I joked as I pulled her into my arms for a kiss. I kept it calmer than I wanted to, considering we were surrounded by my friends and family, and then asked, “Why didn’t Constance come down with you?”

Bex’s eyes shifted for a second and then she explained, “She went to the hospital to see the guys before visiting hours are over.”

Zach pushed away from the bar and gave me a mock salute as he said, “And on that note, I’m out.”

Bex and I laughed as he walked away, then asked, “Did one of the O’Sheerans go with her?”

“The other guy. Zilv? Is that his name?”

“Yeah. I think since we’ve got everything settled, I’ll be sending them home this week.”

“You’re okay with her going to see Park and Sully?”

“And what would happen if I tried to stop her?”

“I’d help her argue with you.”

“That’s how it’s gonna be from now on, huh?”

“From now on?”

“You’re stuck with me, Bex.”

“You think so?” Bex asked.

“You’ve gotta stay.”

“And why is that?”

“You can’t take Rory away from his long-lost brother. That would be horrible.”

“That was just dirty, Mr. Romano.”

“I can show you dirty if that’s what you’re after.”

Bex looked over at her brother who was playing pool with the rest of the kids. As we watched, Zara said something that made him and Freddy laugh. It was uncanny how much the boys looked alike, but I’d thought that since the first time I’d seen them in the Park together. Now that we knew they were brothers, it made perfect sense. Well, perfect sense of a very fucked up situation, but there was nothing we could or would do to change it.

“They are entertained right now, but will it last?”

“They’re getting pool lessons from the older kids and basking in the attention. From what I understand, they’re in the middle of a tournament, and the losing team does the winning team’s laundry for two weeks.”

“They could be here a while then.”

“Long enough for us to sneak away and let me show you something I’ve got in my pocket?”

Bex rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen it and it’s nothing to write home about.”

“Oh! You want to go there? It was you screaming my name last night, I’m sure, and it wasn’t because what’s in my pants wasn’t enough to write home about.”

“You were laying on my hair, and it hurt.”

“I’m gonna take you upstairs and spank you until your ass is red and then pull your hair and make you like it.”

“Promise?”

“Damn right.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

THE END

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About the Author

Cee Bowerman is a proud, lifelong resident of Texas. She is married to her own long-haired, tattooed biker and is Mom to three mostly adult kids - a daughter and two sons. She believes in love, second chances, rescue dogs, and happily ever after.

Cee received her first romance novel along with a bag of other books from her granny when she was recovering from surgery at 15. She has been hooked on reading romances ever since. For years, she had a dream of writing her own series of stories, but motherhood and all the other grown-up responsibilities kept getting in the way. Luckily, with the support of her family and the encouragement of her son, she purchased a computer and let her dreams become a reality.

With over fifty published books, Cee is still happily writing and creating new worlds for her readers to enjoy.

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