



BREEDING CONTEMPT 2

RUINING VANESSA

RAISSA DONOVAN
ADDISON WOLF

BLURBS AND WARNINGS

To survive, I need to give them what they want—but giving in will ruin me.

I made a mistake.

I thought I could delay the inevitable. I thought if I was smart, I could put off getting pregnant, and buy myself time to find a way to escape.

I should have known they'd find out. I should have known there'd be consequences.

Slayer is happy to dole out punishments. Damien's quiet disappointment pierces me with guilt.

But Giulio's wrath? Giulio's wrath will ruin me.

This is a dark novel with potentially triggering content, including forced pregnancy, breeding kink, knife “play,” primal “play,” torture, and more. For detailed content notes, please visit [Addison Wolf](#) or [Raissa Donovan](#)'s websites. Read at your own discretion.

RUINING VANESSA

BREEDING CONTEMPT

BOOK 2

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If we thought writing *Claiming Vanessa* was fun, *Ruining Vanessa* was even more of an adventure (and just wait for *Keeping Vanessa*, the third book coming out early next year — that one is going to be something else. :-D)

We really appreciate all of our personal cheerleaders, beta readers, and everyone who read and gave feedback on both *Claiming Vanessa* and this book, including (but not limited to) Shayna, Michi, Michelle L, Mary MM, Tracy Ann, Mia, and Gitte... You are all stars.

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About Addison Wolf

About Raissa Donovan

Also by Addison Wolf (as Adara Wolf)

Also by Raissa Donovan (as R. Phoenix)

NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

Thanks for continuing the *Breeding Contempt* series! Hopefully you know what to expect by now, but just in case...

The men of **Breeding Contempt** are villains. They are irredeemable assholes. They get off on terrorizing women, especially Vanessa. Once they've laid claim to her, they will never let her go. This is not a fluffy, romantic story, and don't expect to see the men "learn the error of their ways" and become better people. That isn't going to happen.

That means there are a lot of triggers in this trilogy—and **Ruining Vanessa** is darker than the previous book. Expect to see noncon, dubcon, bloodplay, and extreme torture. If you want to know the full list of content notes, some of which might be spoilery, please check out either of our websites: <https://rphoenixbooks.com/> or <https://www.adarawolf.com>.

Vanessa is not a sassy heroine. She isn't going to come out on top of this. She'll grow into the role these men want her to be, and she makes the best of her situation, but this is not a story of her triumphantly subduing these men and changing them to be better people. While she does grow as a person, she follows a more logical progression for someone trapped in her situation. The best outcome for Vanessa would be to escape, but we don't want to write the best outcome. We're writing the one that's fun for us.

This is fiction. It's a fantasy. It's okay to explore and enjoy darker themes in the safety of fiction, where none of it is real and no real people are harmed. If anybody like Giulio,

Damien, or Slayer approached us in real life, we would run the other way. But this series isn't a manual on safe, sane, and consensual relationships. We're exploring tropes and kinks that we enjoy in a strictly fictional context.

This book is for people who want to explore extremely dark tropes and themes. If that sounds like something you want to read about, enjoy! If that's not for you, now's a good time to close the book—no hard feelings. We don't want to upset anyone.

Thank you to everybody who reads our works and continues to support us! We really appreciate you.

- Addison and Raissa

VANESSA

“Hey, girl,” Slayer says in a faux gentle voice. “We’ve got a guest today. Are you excited? Want to wag that little tail of yours?”

No. No, I don’t want to *wag that tail*. I want out of the dog crate he has me in. I want to be out of sight, out of mind, even left alone in my pathetic little room in Ntimacy. I’m beyond humiliated, and it doesn’t help that Slayer keeps circling the dog cage to take pictures of me from every angle.

The dog ears, the butt plug the tail is protruding from, the mitts on my hands to mimic paws, the collar... All of it adds up to so much humiliation that I feel like I’m going to die from it. No one can withstand this level of embarrassment and still survive.

I shake my head slightly, closing my eyes and trying to curl up in a ball in the crate.

“I’m gonna give you so many treats. And you’ll show off all the tricks I taught you,” Slayer says, grinning widely.

I don’t want to show off any *tricks*. But I don’t fail to notice how he didn’t ask me—he stated it as fact. He knows I’m going to cooperate because I don’t have a choice.

The doorbell suddenly rings. Slayer stands up, clapping the top of the dog crate. “There’s my guest now.”

He grabs the leash from the hook on the wall, the sight of which has tears threatening to spill all over again. It’s stupid, but I guess the plug in my ass is worse. Everything they’ve

done to me is worse. Yet I don't want to crawl at his side like a dog, to be that complicit in my own humiliation.

Slayer opens the crate door and slaps his thigh. "Come on out, girl."

I look at him through tear-filled eyes. Now that I have a chance to leave the crate, I don't want to.

Well, that's not quite accurate. I'd just rather stay in here than go meet his *guest*. Giulio or Damien, most likely—probably the former, because Slayer and Damien don't get along. And Slayer had said *guest*, so it probably isn't both.

I guess I have to be grateful for small mercies.

I slowly crawl out of the cage, my limbs shaking a little as I finally get to stretch them out. I don't know how long I've been in the dog crate this time, but it was long enough to make my muscles cramp.

Slayer hooks the leash onto the collar, then ruffles my hair, careful not to jostle the dog ears. "Good girl. Now heel." He doesn't even look to see if I'm going to obey, immediately walking toward the door—and tugging on the leash.

If I don't follow, I'll choke.

I wish I wasn't so familiar with this routine, but Slayer's kept me here for the past few days, "training" me. He'd said something about giving Giulio more time to calm down, but I don't believe him. He just wants to break me.

We walk through his apartment, which is smaller than Giulio's, and stop in front of the front door.

Blushing furiously, I try to pull back, but Slayer puts more pressure on the leash, which puts more pressure on my neck. I gag, then reluctantly edge forward. He opens the door with a wide grin, opening it in full—and we're in a goddamn apartment complex, where anyone could look through the door and see me. With my luck, it's a pizza delivery person, and Slayer's just screwing with my head.

I'm confused and borderline panicked when the first thing I see is, in fact, a pizza box... but a glance up shows that

Giulio's carrying it.

"Took you long enough," Giulio says, stepping inside. "I almost thought you'd gone out."

"Yeah, yeah. I was in the other room." Slayer closes the door and locks it. "Please tell me that's a normal pizza."

"It's a perfectly normal pizza, with white sauce, pesto, grilled chicken, sun-dried tomatoes, and spinach." Giulio goes to put the pizza on the kitchen counter, completely ignoring me.

I'm not sure if I should be grateful or hurt.

"That's not *perfectly normal*, man," Slayer protests. "That's some bullshit artisan pizza. *Normal* would be pepperoni, maybe some sausage. We both know you like some sausage." He leers at Giulio, and I feel strange, like I'm witnessing something I shouldn't be.

Giulio grabs a slice and starts eating it, meeting Slayer's eyes. "I told you, if you want me to... partake of your sausage, you gotta return the favor. Until then, I'm sticking with the artisanal stuff. Like Damien's cock."

"Damien does not return the favor," Slayer huffs, but he grabs a piece of pizza. "Damn, I'm hungry." Despite his protests about the fancy pizza, he eats it anyway, for all that he makes a face.

I feel weirdly alone. The two of them are ignoring me, and only the tight pull of the leash against my collar reminds me that Slayer is even aware of my presence. Giulio still gives me zero consideration, chatting with Slayer like I'm not even there.

"Damien absolutely reciprocates when you aren't there." Giulio reaches for his second slice. "Fuck, this pizza is good though. I'm glad I stopped when I saw the sign. And it's on your way to my place, so you could..."

"Nope, I'm not going to buy your fancy-ass pizzas ever." Slayer finishes his slice and goes to the fridge to grab a beer. "Where is he, anyway? He actually let you come over alone?"

Giulio meets my eyes for a split second, then makes an annoyed noise. “Not you too. Damien’s been on my case about being more careful or whatever. Anyway, Larry’s waiting for me in the car. Yes, I had to bring security along for a booty call.”

Slayer snorts, opening the beer bottle and taking a large gulp. “Boohoo, somebody’s watching out for you. Anyway, we gonna watch the game or what?”

“Sure. Which game? Is it one of the ones where the guys are in short shorts?” Still ignoring me, Giulio goes to sit on the living room couch. “Oh, water polo! That’s a good game to watch. Guys in tiny speedos.”

Slayer rolls his eyes, grabbing a second slice before following me. He tugs at the leash, and I follow without a word, my eyes staying focused on the floor beneath me. At least it’s carpeted, so it isn’t complete hell on my knees. “I was planning on watching some football, but sure, we can watch the water polo so you can leer at their asses.”

“And their sausages. But there might be a lady version of water polo? I don’t keep up with this shit.” Giulio waits until Slayer is seated next to him before leaning in close. “Tell you what, we can watch beach volleyball if you get my cock hard.”

Slayer makes a face at him. “I’m still not sucking you off, Jules,” he says. “But I’ve got a perfectly capable little pet right here who can get the job done.”

He means me, obviously, and I blink back tears.

“You can just use its face,” Slayer continues cruelly. “It’s been so good lately, it deserves a treat like your *boner*. Whatcha think?” He jerks at my collar, pulling me up until I’m on my knees.

Giulio finally looks at me properly, and there’s a hint of a smile, enough to relax part of me. His indifference was more of his roleplay. He isn’t actually still upset with me.

I wish that wasn’t such a relief.

“I dunno, man. A dog? Can’t even unhinge its jaw for a proper blowjob like a snake could.”

Slayer makes a disgusted face. “You fucking Antonia now? I knew you were a kinky fucker, but I didn’t think you’d go that far.” He lets go of me, letting me sit back down again—as much as I can with the tail butt plug in place, at least. “Man, you don’t deserve a proper pet.”

“I would never! I love Antonia!” Giulio says, mock-scandalized. “But just imagine, that lack of gag reflex, the muscles convulsing around your cock...”

Slayer gags, and I don’t think his disgust is feigned. “Oh my god, man. I wouldn’t even be able to get hard if one of you did blow me now. Jesus. Are you always this romantic?”

Giulio laughs and pats Slayer’s thigh. “Yep. But okay, why don’t you show me what tricks your new bitch can do? If there’s one small, miniscule advantage dogs have over snakes, it’s their ability to follow commands.”

“This one’s good,” Slayer says, patting me on the head. “It knows some pretty good tricks. We’ve been working on a few you’ll probably like. But we’ll start with the basics. Sit.”

I try to sit down on my ass, but the butt plug is too uncomfortable for me to fully obey.

Slayer mock-scowls at me, but he knows perfectly well how difficult it is for me to sit. “Well, that’s one less treat it gets.”

I wish he would at least call me *she* instead of *it*, but I keep my mouth closed. They’re both in good moods, and I’d rather they stay that way.

“Okay... roll over,” Slayer directs me.

Despite the way my cheeks heat up, I obey, getting on my back and rolling over onto my stomach.

“Now... present,” Slayer says.

Oh god, this is the worst of it. I whimper, but I slowly raise my ass in the air.

“Nice tail,” Giulio says as he leans down to tug on the butt plug. “And wow, what an eager bitch. You’ll have lots of

purebred little whelps in no time.” He lets go of the plug to run his fingers between my folds.

I’m not wet yet, but I know it won’t take them long to get me there. No matter how hard I try, I can’t stop my body’s reactions.

I whimper as Giulio keeps touching me, sliding a finger inside of me. It’s uncomfortable, but he’s insistent.

“Does the pretty little bitch like this?” Giulio croons. “Are you gonna get nice and wet and ready to breed for us?”

“I got us a breeding bench to use,” Slayer says wickedly.

I freeze. That must’ve been the last thing he’d brought in. I hadn’t thought much of the simple piece of furniture, but now? Now, even the thought of it freaks me out. I berate myself for not being scared of it sooner, with its straps and...

I shake my head, trying to shrink away and get Giulio’s finger out of me.

“Oh, this I gotta see.” Giulio pats my ass. “Are you excited for that, girl? Want something thick and hard inside your gaping hole? I can tell she’s in heat right now, desperate for some puppies.”

I’m not. I don’t even want to think about what my body might already be forming inside me. I still haven’t had my period, and every passing day only makes my terror worse.

“You want to give it a small treat first?” Slayer suggests. “It loves slurping on cock.”

“If it’s a small treat, shouldn’t you give her *your* cock?” Giulio answers with a chuckle.

If Slayer wasn’t such a dick, I’d feel sorry for all the ribbing about his cock size.

Maybe.

Slayer glares at Giulio. “Har har. Very funny, Jules. I can’t help that some of us are *average*. It’s the only thing about me that is.” But he’s obviously not too pissed if he’s still using Giulio’s nickname. It’s always surprising to me, how they

tease Slayer about the size of his cock, yet he doesn't jump to aggression or get defensive. Of course, they might call it small, but it's still big enough to be uncomfortable.

Giulio snorts and reaches over to unbuckle Slayer's belt. "Okay, girl, give Slayer's *perfectly average* cock a nice, good lick. I want to see how much you enjoy treats."

I hate this. I hate that I'm rolling back onto my knees, I hate that I'm putting my mittened hands onto Slayer's thighs. I hate that I lean forward as soon as Giulio has Slayer's cock out of his pants, and I hate that I know exactly where to lick to get Slayer hard.

But they've made it clear what will happen if I don't cooperate. It's not just my own well-being on the line, and I can't—I won't—let anybody else suffer because of me. Not again.

They don't even have to remind me of what's at stake.

I lean in, and Slayer's cock bumps against my cheek as I try to get it into my mouth. He laughs, but he doesn't help me. With my hands in the mitts, I can't really guide him easily past my lips, and I end up smearing pre-cum all over my face. By the time I get his cock in my mouth, my cheeks are burning.

I start to slowly suck on the head of his cock, leaning in a little more. The good thing about his size is that he isn't difficult to take. I gag a little on him, but it isn't like Damien's massive dick.

I shudder at the thought of it, grateful that at least he isn't here to remind me that *tick tock*, time is running out while my period takes longer and longer to start.

Slayer groans, running his hands through my hair behind the dog ear headband he'd put on me. "That's a good pet," he says, finally pushing me down a little on him. He doesn't take long to get erect, even though he's mostly just using my mouth and not getting me to suck on him.

I make embarrassing slurping sounds as I bob up and down on him, adding another layer to my humiliation.

Then I feel a tug on my hair.

“Okay, good enough. We wouldn’t want Slayer to spend already,” Giulio says, tugging hard enough that I’m forced to pull off Slayer. “Nice to see how eager you are, though. Really can’t get enough of cock.” He smiles darkly at me. “Woof a bit for us, girl, to show your appreciation.”

I look up at Giulio, feeling the tears starting to form in my eyes all over again. Slayer has made me bark like a dog, but it seems worse coming from Giulio. I don’t know why, but it’s harder to humiliate myself in front of him.

But I make a soft woofing sound, just enough to let them know I’m listening.

Slayer swats my shoulder. “Oh, you can do better than that,” he chides me. “A real bark. Show us what a little bitch you are, what a good little bitch you’ve become. Then maybe we’ll take you to the breeding bench and make sure you get exactly what that cunt of yours needs.”

I bark, and it almost sounds real—after how many times Slayer has made me practice, it’s unsurprising. It hurts something inside of me to debase myself like this, but I know I don’t have a choice.

Well. I do. But it’s an impossible choice, one I’ll never actually make. I’ll never sacrifice Stef’s well-being for my own comfort.

Giulio laughs and ruffles my hair. “Good girl. Sounds like you deserve a reward. Get your aching cunt filled up.” He grabs the leash as he gets up, tugging insistently. “Where’d you put the breeding bench? With all your trains?”

At first, I’m too miserable for Giulio’s words to register. Then I frown, just a little, as my attention goes to his words. Trains? What kind of trains?

I don’t have long to think about it, though.

Slayer laughs. “Like I’d really take her in there. She’d probably break something. You know how rambunctious bitches can be. Nah, it’s in my office.”

“I just figured you’d get even hornier, staring at the trains while you fuck her.”

“I’m not a perv like you. I know you probably have to stare at your *pets* while you fuck to get it up,” Slayer says with a smirk.

“I don’t *have* to. But sometimes I want to.” Giulio winks at me, then leads me to the guest room, and I don’t have time to worry about trains—or reptiles.

I recoil when I see the dog crate again. Slayer had left me alone in there for hours at a time, only letting me out to use the bathroom and for training sessions. It was worse than even the small cell at Ntimacy, because at least at Ntimacy, I could hear the noise of the club even when I was locked up.

There’s nothing at all here, just my own thoughts and the dread about what they’ll do to me next.

Giulio ignores the crate and pulls me toward a padded bench. Slayer had brought that in last night, but I hadn’t paid much attention to it. Now that I’m right in front of it, I can see the leather straps on the sides, and the way it’s angled so one side is higher than the other.

A breeding bench.

I tremble as I crawl after Giulio, but the collar tugs at my neck as I slow down. I don’t want to go anywhere near it, but they don’t give me a choice.

“C’mon, girl,” Giulio says, and I should not appreciate being called ‘girl’ instead of *it* as much as I do. “Right up here.” He unclips my leash and nudges me toward the bench, even offering a hand to help me get up on it.

Slayer watches with keen interest. His cock is still out, and he strokes it slowly. “Fuck, it looks hot up there,” he says. He strolls over, grabbing one of my wrists once I’m on top of it and pulling the strap taut before securing it into place. I don’t know why he’s bothering. It’s not like there’s anywhere for me to go. They’d only grab me and force me back onto it anyway.

But as he tightens the straps, I realize it’s partially to keep me from sliding down. It braces me so my hips are lifted and my ass is in the air—probably the perfect height for them to take me.

I choke back a sob, but I can't help but wonder why I'm bothering to try to hide it. They already know how humiliating this is for me. They have to know they're going to evoke tears for their efforts.

They probably want it.

"How's that?" Slayer asks when he's done binding my wrists, ankles, and waist to the bench. I want to believe he's asking me, but I know better. He strokes one of my ass cheeks then slaps it almost *playfully*. "Doesn't it look good like this?"

Still with the *it*. Still with the dehumanization.

God, I hate them both.

Giulio snorts in amusement. "Pretty hot, yeah. A purebred bitch like this, you'll want her having lots of puppies for you. You have a sire in mind?" He strokes his cock through his jeans as he speaks, making it pretty clear what he actually wants to do.

"Yeah, I might rent a stud, get somebody real pretty. You want to keep the lineage pure... or some shit like that. I don't know what goes into dog breeding, Jules."

Giulio laughs. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see him unbuttoning his pants. "You think I know? I know snakes, not dogs."

I shudder at the mention of his pets.

"Okay, since *Damien* isn't here to fuck the bitch, I guess one of us will have to do it," Slayer says with a sneer. "Gotta make sure we come in its cunt and leave it there for a little while to let it take. Why isn't Daddy Dearest here, anyway? I'm surprised he didn't spooge just thinking about the bitch on the bench."

I'm grateful Damien isn't there. One less person to use me, to degrade me... It's a small mercy, but I'll take it.

"You into daddy kink now?" Giulio pulls his cock out and thumbs the tip. "And Damien's in Benton right now, trying to sort a few messes, kick a few people into line. Don't worry, I have his full blessing to knock up our bitch and sire some

purebred pups.” He bursts out laughing. “Could you imagine Damien telling me no, I have to hold back and *not* come inside Vanessa?”

Slayer laughs too, dropping his pants and stepping out of them. “That’ll be a cold day in hell. I’m surprised he didn’t forbid me from fucking her while she’s here. I take it that was your work?”

Her. Finally. It shouldn’t be this much of a relief, but them being so distant is so much worse than the usual.

“He agreed she was safest here while we updated the security at Ntimacy. We can’t control your cock in the meantime.” Giulio ruffles my hair again. “You miss him, Mama? I know Slayer’s cock—”

“Don’t fucking say it,” Slayer growls.

“I know neither Slayer’s nor my cock compares to Damien’s monster, but we still give you a good time, right?” Giulio sounds far too amused.

It’s still better than when he’d stared at me with icy eyes.

I shudder, focusing on the fact that they’re being... as kind as they’re capable of being. Fuck, I should not be giving them credit for this! They’re not even decent human beings when they’re being *nice*. But here I am, giving them all sorts of leeway because it feels better than being treated like trash. Like nothing. Even being treated like a broodmare—or a prized bitch—is better than that.

“C’mon, he asked you a question,” Slayer prompts when I don’t immediately answer. “You still like it when we make you come, don’t you? And we always make you come.” He pauses, then amends, “Well, there was the one time after the cop died, but I was running late for work.” He snickers. “At the police station.”

He’s been rubbing in my failed attempt to run in my face the entire time I’ve been here. As if I could forget it, especially not with the tracker embedded in my back. Every time I move, I can still feel the small twinge of pain from where they’d injected it.

“Y-yes,” I mumble dejectedly. “You... You give me a good time.”

Giulio slaps my ass lightly. “There’s a good girl.” He pulls on the butt plug and twists it around, before driving it deeper into me again.

I gasp involuntarily, trying to stave off the inevitable pleasure.

The plug has been in me more often than not since I arrived at Slayer’s, and the only good thing about it is that it’s not too large—which I’m grateful for, considering he likes to fuck me with it still inside my ass.

“She loves being DP’d,” Slayer says gleefully. “She loves having the tail in while she’s being fucked. Too bad we have to get her knocked up before we can really focus on her ass.”

“I’m sure Damien would cry many tears if he found out you’ve been using her ass instead of her cunt.” Giulio bats at the dog tail, making the plug shift around inside me. “Tell you what, if you give me a nice kiss, I’ll let you take her cunt first.”

“You’re ridiculous, Jules. I don’t mind sloppy seconds,” Slayer says smugly, stroking his own cock. “But hell, why not? You’ve been so generous with your little bitch here.” He pauses, then adds, “I’m still not sucking your damn cock.” He goes to Giulio, and to my surprise, he grabs the back of Giulio’s neck and pulls him in for a demanding kiss.

Giulio kisses back with just as much enthusiasm. He’s shorter than Slayer, so he has to crane his neck a bit. One of his hands snakes down to their cocks, gripping them both. I can hear the two of them groan.

Then Giulio grabs Slayer’s ass.

Slayer stiffens, but he only pulls back enough to growl, “Don’t push your luck, Jules.”

I can’t believe I’m even seeing this. It’s enough to displace some of my horror at the situation, to see someone as straight-presenting as Slayer even kiss Giulio again, let alone let Giulio

rub their cocks together. Never mind being calm about having his ass fondled...

Giulio sighs and pulls away entirely. "See what I have to put up with, Vanessa? You've got it so easy." He ends up squatting next to my head, his cock waving prominently at me. "You'll never know the suffering of wanting to fuck a closeted guy."

Easy? He thinks I have it *easy*? I stare at him, unable to hide my disbelief. He can't actually believe that.

Slayer snorts. "Oh, yeah, you have it so bad. Having a chick at your beck and call. What the fuck do you need a guy's mouth or ass for? Vanessa has both, plus a cunt you're trying to plant your baby in."

"Variety is the spice of life. I would hate for things to get repetitive," Giulio answers, shifting so his cock is rubbing against my lips. I grimace, but I know better than to pull away. "Vanessa knows what I mean, right? She loves all the different ways we fuck her."

"Y-yes," I whisper, my mouth dry.

"You don't have to worry about things getting repetitive, Jules. You can suck my dick or eat her out, you can fuck her cunt or her mouth or her ass, or fuck Damien's sour mouth and tight ass. You have plenty of options without trying to drag me into servicing you," Slayer retorts.

I wish he would just give in. It would mean the attention would be off of me, if only for a little while.

"All right, all right, just get in her cunt already so I can have my turn." Giulio keeps rubbing the tip of his cock over my lips, my cheeks, even my nose. I do my best not to breathe in at all, but the scent of him still permeates everything, especially when a few drops of precum smear onto my skin.

Slayer sneers at him, but he walks out of my view. I can feel him, though, standing behind me as he spreads my legs. He slides a finger into me, and he laughs. "She's a little wet, Jules. I don't know what about this is getting you off, Vanessa. Why don't you tell us so we can get you even hotter for us?"

I'm mortified. I don't know why I'm getting wet. They have to be lying, just like they always do, but... I don't feel the harsh drag of a finger against me like I did earlier when Giulio had started to finger me.

"I don't... I don't know," I whimper.

"Well, at least you're not lying and saying you aren't wet," Slayer says. "Whatcha think, Jules?"

Giulio pauses with his cock pressed against my lower lip. He puts one hand on my head, keeping me from pulling away. "I think... Vanessa's really into being humiliated. And we're so nice, we'll cater to her kinks." He laughs and bends down to kiss the top of my head. "What's your favorite part of this, Mama?"

Slayer rubs his cock against my folds, and the heat of his tip feels like it's almost too much to handle.

"None of it," I whimper. I catch myself immediately, though, and before Giulio can 'correct' me, I say, "The... the..." Damn it. No. I don't even know what to say. I can't even make something up.

Giulio's fingers tighten in my hair. "Come on. Don't be shy. Nothing you say would scandalize me." After a beat, he adds, "I really do insist. Honest communication is important in any successful relationship."

I try to pull back, but he keeps me firmly in place. I can't get away from him, and I can't get away from Slayer, either, who starts to push inside of me with a loud groan. "Man, she always feels so fucking good."

"I don't know," I say, my voice a little muffled by how firmly his cock is pressed against my lips. "I really don't know, Giulio, I don't!" My voice gets higher and higher as panic fills me. I have to be able to tell them something, but I have no idea what. I don't know what they're doing to me that gets me like... this.

Giulio makes a disappointed sound. "Fine, if you don't want to talk, make yourself useful and suck." He pushes his

hot, hard length against my lips once more, much more insistently than earlier.

I instinctively press my lips shut, but Giulio pushes his thumb hard against my cheek.

“Vanessa...” Giulio’s voice has a sharp edge to it.

I flinch, and whether my lips part because of the way Slayer shoves into me or Giulio’s demand, I’m not certain. Either way, Giulio’s cock hits the back of my throat in a matter of seconds, and Slayer groans again as he bottoms out inside of me.

“Shit,” Slayer says with a huff of laughter. “I think all of it makes her wet. Being told she’s just a bitch for breeding, being humiliated, being the center of attention of two hot guys—and don’t read into that, Jules—and just getting all the cock she could ever want.”

I start to suck on Giulio, gagging around him. At least it’s not Damien’s, which is more than I can handle on a good day.

At least while I focus on Giulio’s cock, I can sort of ignore everything they’re saying. The pet names and the taunting, the way Giulio laughs every so often because of something I’m not paying attention to. The bindings keep me from slipping on the bench, and Giulio isn’t thrusting *too* deep, so I’m not even at risk of choking.

Tears threaten to spill again, especially when Slayer grips my ass, changing the angle of his thrusts just enough that more pleasure shoots up my spine.

And to think... this is a good day.

He picks up the pace, and I’m jarred back into reality by his harsh thrusts. “The angle’s too awkward for me to finger her while I’m fucking her,” he says. “You’ll have to get her off. Too bad you can’t eat her out, but I gotta leave all my cum inside of her.”

He grips me harder, thrusts wilder, faster, until he’s groaning out his climax as he spills into me.

Giulio pulls out too, wiping his spit-drenched cock over my face. “Finger her? She’s gonna get off from my cock. You know she is.” He bends down to kiss my nose, apparently unbothered by the moisture his cock had left behind. “Aren’t you, girl? You always do.”

I wish I could say it wasn’t true. But it usually is enough to have just their cocks, and I hate my body for being like this.

“Yes,” I whisper, blinking hard against the tears.

Giulio chuckles and kisses the corner of my eye. “You are so hot like this, Mama.”

I squeeze my eyes closed.

Mama.

It’ll be true soon enough. It may already be true. My period needs to come soon so I can shake off this trepidation. On one hand, I know I need to get pregnant soon so they won’t put me out on the floor to work. On the other, I don’t want to get pregnant any time soon. But if I do get knocked up... Does that mean they’ll use me less?

Doubtful.

Slayer pulls out, dragging his cock over my ass cheeks. He ambles over to stand in front of me and tells me, “Suck me clean.”

“I told you, not until you reciprocate,” Giulio answers, flicking Slayer’s softening cock.

“Oh, fuck you,” Slayer says. “That’s if I want you to suck me. I’m telling our little bitch here to do it. Go fuck her, *Daddy.*”

“I think next time, we should have her set up as one of those bangmaid wives. Make her serve us snacks while we watch ‘the game’... I guess that’s football?” Giulio gets up and walks behind me, and if I didn’t have Slayer already shoving his cock at me, I would have craned my neck to keep track of him.

I’m always apprehensive now when I can’t tell what Giulio is up to. When he’s in a good mood, things are... not fine, but

usually bearable. He's the most personable of them. The least scary.

I can't forget what he looked like when he was in a bad mood.

I can't forget how he threw Stef to the wolves.

I can't forget the chilling terror I felt, looking at his cold, indifferent eyes.

"Bangmaid? Where the fuck do you get these terms?" Slayer asks as he pries my mouth open.

"Am I really the only person around here who uses the internet?" Giulio slaps my ass and tugs at the plug again.

I squirm when he toys with the plug, wishing he would just take it out.

I haven't heard the term either, but I can pretty much figure it out. A maid they can "bang" whenever the hell they want. That's probably what my life will turn into. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of a baby... If I'm lucky, I'll only be a stay-at-home mom. If I'm not, I'll have to juggle all of the other things that come along with being a 'bangmaid' with a baby's needs, too.

Giulio pushes the tail higher, changing the angle of the plug... right as he pushes his cock in. I gasp, only to almost choke on Slayer's cock. If it wasn't already soft, I might have gagged.

I begin to struggle, because Giulio has somehow managed to hit the right angle. He has the plug rubbing my inner wall from one side while his cock goes at it from the other. The pleasure that was a steady, subtle pulse before it ramps up. My clit throbs, and I do wish somebody would touch it, even though I can already feel my inevitable orgasm.

Giulio knows exactly how to use his cock, exactly where to put pressure and rub against me. I hate that he does. I hate that my body likes this. How can it, when I'm strapped to a *breeding bench*, being humiliated and somehow liking it?

I get closer and closer to climax, my body trembling, and Giulio leans down to nip my neck.

That's all it takes.

I let out a choked cry around Slayer's soft cock, my body jerking as I tighten around Giulio's cock and feel even more pleasure as he continues to fuck me through my orgasm. Slayer grabs me by the hair and pushes in deeper for a moment before relaxing his hold.

"Fuck, that's right, clamp up for me," Giulio groans, speeding up his thrusts.

The tears finally do fall as my orgasm begins to recede. Slayer's cock slips out of my mouth, and now my small sobs join Giulio's loud breathing in the room.

"Shit," Slayer says with a small laugh. "You weren't wrong. It's like she was made for this. Think she's more likely to get preggers if she comes while we're fucking her?"

That only makes me squeeze my eyes more tightly closed, and I hate myself for not being able to resist this pleasure.

Giulio laughs, but the sound devolves into a groan. He slams his hip forward hard enough that I move a few inches.

I feel the heat of his cum fill me up, only adding to my despair.

Finally, Giulio pulls out, and he collapses onto the floor next to me. "Isn't that what they say?" He drapes one arm over my back and rests his cheek against my ass. "Oops. You're dripping, Vanessa. What a messy bitch you are."

I cringe when his fingers run along my folds and push the cum back inside me.

"Yeah, that's right," Slayer croons. "Get it all in her. Don't waste a drop." He pats my head. "She's a good little bitch, though. Too bad she already got her treats."

My treats. Their cocks. Right.

I want some of the pizza, though. I'm so hungry. It's not like Slayer has been starving me or anything, but he doesn't

always make sure I'm full. And his idea of food isn't great at all.

“Speaking of treats, have you been feeding her?” Giulio asks.

Slayer shrugs. “Yeah. She doesn't eat much though. Just nibbles at it.”

I startle when Giulio begins to undo the bindings on the breeding bench.

“Really?” Giulio pulls me off the bench and onto his lap, apparently not caring that I'll get his clothes dirty. “Are you refusing to eat, girl?”

I don't know how to say that Slayer can't cook, and his idea of takeout is usually cheap fast food. It's not that I'm refusing to eat, but I have to admit—to myself, at least—that I'm used to better food. I shake my head, avoiding looking at Giulio or Slayer.

Slayer arches a brow. “You've barely been eating. I was starting to think I was going to have to force-feed you.”

I wince at the idea of him forcing greasy food down my throat. I'd have made myself eat it before it went that far, but it hadn't been a pleasant thought. “I... Um... Well... The food has been... Um...”

I want to say unpalatable, but I catch myself before completely insulting Slayer.

Giulio catches on, though, and starts laughing. “I see what the problem is! You don't want Slayer's shitty meals. Yeah, I wouldn't either. Come on, girl, let's get you some real food. Like artisanal pizza.”

“Oh, come on,” Slayer complains. “At least I tried to feed her. Next time I'll feed her Caesar salads and other boring shit so neither of you can complain. She's a spoiled little thing, isn't she?”

My stomach grumbles, and I blush. I shouldn't be picky, not when I know that even the food Slayer's offered is better

than most of what they get at Ntimacy. But I've never eaten that crap before, and I don't want to start now.

"She can be picky. We need to make sure she gets her nutrition," Giulio admonishes. "For the baby."

Yeah.

For the baby.

VANESSA

I stumble away from the toilet. My hands are shaking when I reach for the tampons in the basket under the sink.

I'm not pregnant.

I'm not pregnant.

It's almost impossible to fathom, after Damien had been starting to get excited as a few more days had passed without any sign of my period. But now I get to tell him I've started, and I get a reprieve. I doubt they'll want to fuck me while I'm bleeding—well, Slayer might, which is a disconcerting thought. But I might actually get a break from all of this.

Or maybe they'll just use my ass and mouth.

My euphoria at starting my period fades quickly, and I sigh. I'm not going to be free of them no matter what. But at least I'm buying time before I'm pregnant. One month has passed. More. It has to be more, right? How late *was* I?

It's so hard to keep track of time here.

Giulio had brought me back to Ntimacy, to my “upgraded” room that has a deadbolt on the outside and a chain attached to the bed. “Much more secure now,” he'd said, still smiling. “But you're not going to try to run again, are you?”

Of course I'm not. Where could I go that they wouldn't find me? The tracker is still embedded under my skin. The girls are still trapped here. And everybody's under orders to keep my ankle chained to the bed when I'm locked in here.

It seems like overkill, especially when he's already dangling Stef's fate over my head, but I wasn't going to argue. If he wants to keep me chained and bolted inside, I'll deal with it, even though the solitude is already driving me crazy. The only person who's brought me food is Cat, and if I'd thought she hated me before... It was nothing compared to how it is now.

I clean myself up as best I can with the chain getting in the way. The worst part is how I can't even get dressed properly. I have to make do with Damien's shirts and the panties I'm already wearing.

When that's all done, I'm left staring at the ceiling again.

I try to distract myself somehow, but my mind only circles around my inevitable fate. If I had a book, at least. A TV. A phone! Anything to entertain myself.

I can't even sleep, because I'd already napped for who knows how many hours. There are only the blank walls to stare at.

I'm starting to think that Giulio is right, and people *can* die of boredom.

Boredom, and the sudden cramp that hits me. I grimace. After everything I've gone through, a little bit of period pain should have been nothing, but my body disagrees. I've never had awful periods, but I also used to be a lot more active—and I took painkillers liberally.

Sex does not count as exercise; cum is not a painkiller.

I close my eyes, trying to breathe through the pain. If this is bad, I can only imagine what childbirth will feel like. Labor pains have to be ten times worse than this.

That only makes me more desperate not to get pregnant at all.

I hear the bolt on the door slide open, and I sit up. The chain on my ankle jingles as I move, but I manage to get into a reasonably comfortable position.

I'm prepared for it to be Cat, but this time it's Stef.

I stare at her. It's the first time I've seen her since the night Giulio had let all of those men use her until she'd passed out. That was all my fault, and both of us know it. I hadn't thought she'd come to see me any time soon, and I don't blame her either.

She ducks her head, closing the door behind her and bringing my tray over to the bed. After my time at Slayer's, the food has gotten decidedly better, with gourmet meals I can't even finish half the time because the spread is so large. I imagine that's another reason Cat hates me, but the one time I'd tried to offer to share, she'd thrown the tray against the wall. She'd had to clean it up, but I hadn't eaten that night.

I hadn't offered to share again.

"Hi," I say tentatively, taking the tray off her hands. I want to ask her if she's all right, but the bruising on her face and arms is enough of an answer. I should apologize, but what good will that do? It can't change the past.

Stef doesn't say a word. She turns to leave, and I can already see the emptiness stretch out around me once more.

"Wait! Please!" I shout, grabbing her wrist.

She shakes me off, not looking at me. "What do you want?" she mumbles, her voice flat.

My heart is aching for her, but there's nothing I can say to make things better. "I just... I want to apologize. I know it's not enough, and I know it doesn't help, but if I'd known what was going to happen, I'd have never gotten you in trouble. I won't do it again."

She finally glances at me, and my heart breaks all over again at just how listless she looks.

"You didn't know? That pissing off Giulio would have consequences?" she asks flatly. "All the warnings everybody gave you weren't enough? Or when he made me get back on the floor after that nasty customer? Or when he served you up to some client of his?"

I blink back tears, and they have nothing to do with my own pain. She'd hate me even more if she knew there hadn't

even been any client that time, that the worst part of that night had been when Giulio had terrorized me with the snake.

“I thought he’d punish *me*,” I say softly. “I never thought he’d take it out on you or any of the others.”

Stef’s lower lip trembles. “Traci was livid. Because Cat stepped in to help me. They kept calling you naive and stupid.”

“I am,” I mumble, looking away from her. “I didn’t...” The tears start to fall, and I don’t bother to brush them away. “I’m so sorry, Stef. I really, really am. I thought he’d hurt me for it. It never even crossed my mind that he’d take it out on you.”

It’s almost a relief when Stef starts crying too. “Vanessa... you tried to leave. I was worried about you, and then you ran? I thought they’d kill you for that.”

I bite my bottom lip. “I went... I went to the police. I thought they’d help us, all of us. I thought I could get us all out of this.” I sob, remembering all too well how I’d felt when Slayer had been the one to step through that door. “I really... I really thought I could.”

Stef lets out a sobbing laugh. “You... You can’t trust the cops, Vanessa. They’re all corrupt dicks. Where the fuck did you live before all this?”

With my head in the ground, obviously, because there had been so much I hadn’t been willing to admit even to myself. I can’t tell her that my family is all mafia, too, because she’d think I’m even more stupid.

My sister never would’ve gotten herself into this. She’d rescued herself from a similar situation, and she’d survived the near-marriage to Pavone. I know she’s back with Victor Corvi and his men, but... She’ll be fine, because she’s always fine.

And she’ll know better than to go to the police.

“In a fantasy, apparently,” I mumble bitterly. I wipe at my tears then set the tray down. “Come eat with me,” I invite her. “There’s more than I can handle anyway.”

Stef sits down on the edge of the bed next to me. “Thanks. Um. I know... I know you were only trying to help. Even if I have to ask you to please not from now on.” She picks up a piece of fruit and quickly downs it. “Also, what is this food even?”

I glance at the tray, my body still shaking with a mixture of sobs and laughter. “Some of Giulio’s stuff? That looks like an egg white omelet. He’s a weird foodie. I bet he’d fuck his meals if he could get away with it.”

That startles Stef into laughing properly. “No! He seems... normal? When he isn’t pissed off.”

“Not when it comes to his food,” I say, offering her a tentative smile. “He gets so into it, and it’s never normal stuff. Like he’d die before he’d buy strawberry jam. It’s all weird stuff, like rose petals and hibiscus. I don’t even know what all of this *is*.” I feel self-conscious talking about the food, because it only reinforces how damn spoiled I am here.

“It tastes good though,” Stef says, taking some of the omelet. “I like the hint of spice.”

I eat a few bites for myself. Of course it does taste good, because Giulio wouldn’t send subpar food. “If you want spice... Damien eats really spicy things. Unbearably so. Meanwhile, Slayer’s favorite foods come in bland and also greasy but still somehow bland anyway.”

It feels strange to be sharing information about these awful men, but I’m glad that I can entertain Stef like this, and she seems eager to hear what I have to say.

It’s the most fun I’ve had in days. I slow my eating pace just to prolong the conversation, but the plates are empty soon enough.

Stef looks at me for a few seconds, then sighs. “I should take that back and help everybody with clean-up.”

“I’ll help,” I say instantly, maybe a little too quickly, because she stares at me. “I need to get out of this room. I’m not going to make a run for it, I’m not going to get anyone in

trouble. I just really, really need to get out of here for a little while before I go crazy.”

I can see her hesitation, but she slowly nods. “Okay. They said it was okay to let you walk around a bit. Just as long as there’s always somebody with you.”

She pulls a small key out of her shorts pocket and reaches down to unlock the cuff around my ankle.

I let out a sigh of relief. The cuff hasn’t been on long enough to leave a mark, but I could already feel it chafing a little despite how well padded it is.

“I was going to help clean the dressing room. Wipe the mirrors and tables, organize stuff.” Stef takes the tray and gets up.

“I’d even take scrubbing toilets at this point,” I mutter. Not that I want to, but I’d do next to anything to walk around for a little while. “Not that I’ll tell Paul that.”

She laughs a little. “Don’t worry. Donny’s in right now, and he’s pretty cool about things like that. He won’t try to make you do the shitty jobs.”

I nod, but I still grab my jeans and pull them on, followed by my sandals. I don’t want to walk on the bare floor unless they force me to. “Ready,” I say.

She heads to the door, opening it and letting me out.

My breath catches, and I feel like I’ve just been let out of prison. I guess I have, in a way, even though I have to go back to my cell before long.

Except for the door to my room—and new bars over the window I’d escaped from—nothing has changed. It’s the same dim hallway, the same gross floor. Even the women mopping the floor downstairs are all the same.

I’d forgotten about my period cramps while we were talking, but as we make our way to the dressing room, I wince against a particularly painful cramp. How in the world did women put up with this before the invention of modern medicine?

The dressing room is mostly empty, save one other woman who is sweeping the floor. I don't remember her name, but at least she isn't Traci or Cat. I don't need their snark and accusations.

"Hi, Bobbi," Stef says, waving to the other woman. "Vanessa's gonna help us."

Bobbi has a stand-offish air, but it all changes when she smiles at Stef. "Okay."

At least she doesn't hate me, or she's not going to take it out on me, at least.

"Nice to meet you, Bobbi," I tell her.

She nods to me. All right, so maybe she's a little chilly to me, but it could be much worse.

"Just let me know—"

I hear footsteps, and I freeze. What if it's Giulio or Damien? What if they didn't really mean I could go downstairs for a while? Panic threatens to overwhelm me, but I can't even catch my breath.

To my relief, it's Donny, though he looks frazzled and annoyed. "Bobbi! There you are. Did you get any cash tips last night—I mean, I know you did, but how much?"

Bobbi glares at Donny. "Why? I gave you everything."

"Just tell me anyway!" Donny holds up his notepad and pen. "Come on. Don't tell me you also don't remember."

"I do." Bobbi gives Donny a number that sounds pretty decent until you account for the house's cut and what they charge the girls for "rent" and drugs.

Donny doesn't seem happy with the number either. "Ugh. Fuck."

"What's wrong?" I ask, more curious than I want to admit.

He shakes his head. "Just trying to figure out some accounting stuff. Thanks, Bobbi. Okay, um... Stef, what about you?"

Stef hunches her shoulders together. “I didn’t make that much last night.”

“I know, I know, you suck at earning. Just tell me how much.” Donny makes an impatient gesture. “I really don’t want to spend another day on this shit.”

The mention of accounting has my interest though, and I sidle up to Donny and peer at his notepad. So far, it’s just a list of numbers, with each girl’s name next to it. There’s a total listed at the top of one of the columns, but that number seems divorced from whatever Donny’s doing now.

“Do you need help?” I ask. “I studied accounting. And I like this kind of stuff.”

Donny jerks the notepad to the side. “What? Uh, thanks, but no. I mean, I’d love it if you did, because I hate this shit, but this stuff’s confidential.”

I’m sure it is, and I’m sure this is the real record, not the one they keep for the feds that he might be willing to share. “Maybe you can ask Giulio or Damien?” I suggest. “I’m dying of boredom up there. It would be nice to have some numbers to work on.” And maybe I’d get a computer... No. I’d be lucky if they gave me a scientific calculator.

“Sure, sure. Now, Stef?”

Stef reluctantly gives her own earnings for the previous night, which were significantly lower than what Bobbi had earned. I feel a pang of embarrassment for her, even though I know I wouldn’t be able to do any better—and we shouldn’t *have* to do better.

Donny writes it down and grumbles again, turning to leave. “Okay, maybe... Ugh.”

My curiosity about the accounting is disrupted by another hard period cramp. I wince and rub my lower belly.

“Wait!” I call out, jogging up to Donny. “Um, Donny... Before you go, are there any painkillers? I’ve got the worst cramps.”

Donny waves dismissively. “Yeah, yeah, supply closet, box at the bottom. Use the sheet to mark down anything that’s low stock.”

I nod. “Thank you.” The supply closet isn’t far, and I tell Stef, “I’ll be right back.”

She hesitates. “I’m not supposed to let you wander by yourself...”

I gesture to the hall. “I’m just going right over there. I promise I’ll be right back.”

Stef doesn’t look convinced, but Bobbi says, “I think she’s learned her lesson. Just let her go so we can get this shit finished.”

Stef nods slowly. “If you’re not back in like a minute, I’m going to come looking for you. I’ll walk with you to the kitchen to get something to drink.”

“Okay.”

Bobbi is right. I’m not going to try anything dumb. But I don’t need an escort to the closet that’s barely ten steps away, even if it is out of sight.

But my resolve to not do anything dumb instantly evaporates when I see what else is in the box with the ibuprofen.

Contraceptive sponges.

I recognize them from freshman orientation. I need to hurry, and I don’t have time to think my way through this. I snatch up a few and shove them into my jean pockets, putting a few more under the waistband of my pants. Heart racing, I grab the bottle of painkillers and shake out a few before tossing it back into the box.

Am I going to get away with this?

No. Probably not. I don’t want to risk endangering the other girls. But it’d be nice to have the option... Just in case.

I close the door and turn back to the other room. I feel like I can barely breathe, and I’m so sure I’m going to get caught. I

have to try to play it cool and hope no one notices the bulges in my pockets and pants. At least Damien's shirt is long enough to cover it all.

Nobody says anything at all while I help clean.

"It was nice to hang out with you again," Stef says when we're done and she leads me back to my room. "Sorry I have to lock you up again."

I shake my head. "It's okay. I understand. I'm not going to give you a hard time or anything." I force a smile and go back into my room, sitting down so she can chain my ankle back to the bed.

My heart is still racing, and I can't believe I got away with this. Maybe I can get away with using them... I know their prevention rate isn't as high as birth control pills or condoms, but it's at least a chance.

"See you later," Stef says. She lets herself out of my room, and I hear the deadbolt slide into place.

I glance up at the camera, the light slowly blinking and reminding me of its presence. Damn it. I need to figure out how to hide these without being caught. I hadn't quite thought that through when I'd grabbed them, but I hadn't had the time.

Good thing I have hours of boredom to use to think it through.

DAMIEN

“I don’t know what to tell you. Your accountant’s wrong,” Donny says, handing me the ledger. “Everything works out.”

The small office is dimly lit, so it’s hard to make out the numbers, especially with Donny’s bad handwriting. I scan the columns, trying to find obvious mistakes, but this is all a lot easier sitting at a computer with accounting software.

Our main accountant insisted there was something off with Ntimacy’s numbers, but he couldn’t tell us what, exactly, the problem was. “Based on past earnings, and all your other clubs, I just don’t think it makes sense.”

Another headache to deal with. It doesn’t help that Donny hates math, and Paul is too useless to be trusted with any of this.

“Double-check it,” I tell him. “I don’t want to have to tell Giulio in a month that you’ve been fucking things up.”

Donny groans loudly and covers his face with his hand. “I’ve got other shit to do, come on. My eyes are swimming because of squinting at this crap. Can’t you call in an expert? Or let your girl handle it, I don’t know.”

I close the ledger and stare at him. “My girl?”

Donny laughs, shaking his head. “Vanessa. She saw me working on it. She said she studied accounting. Anyway, she complained that she was bored and said she’d help me out. Don’t worry, I didn’t actually let her see anything.”

A strange feeling settles in my chest. I know Vanessa can't be trusted with something like this, but that she even offered... I can pretend, for a few seconds, that she truly wants to be part of the organization. Part of the family.

I look down at the ledger again, flipping through the pages. "Can you make a copy of this?"

"That's already a copy," Donny says. "I didn't want to fuck up our existing records. You gonna take it to your accountant?"

"I'm going to give it to Vanessa," I say, frowning when I notice one of the entries. "After I do a bit of censoring."

"For real? Uh... she ran off and tried to talk to the cops. I don't think that's a good idea."

It isn't. I know very well that trusting the wrong person can lead to unpleasant results—just ask Emilio Pavone. But with a bit of blacking out, I don't see how Vanessa could use this information, even if she did escape again.

Of course, we're never letting her escape again.

"I'll take responsibility," I say. "You can get back to the club."

Donny shrugs and leaves me alone in the office.

I take a black marker from Donny's desk and settle on the armchair to black out the more salient bits.

It takes longer than I would have liked, and it's already past 9 p.m. when I finally finish. But it's presentable now.

Vanessa will be happy.

I almost have the urge to smile as I make my way to her cell. I wonder if I'll be able to see a small bump on her stomach already—no, that's silly. It takes at least several months for pregnancy to show.

"Good evening," I say as I enter Vanessa's cell. "How are you doing today? Morning sickness? Strange food cravings?"

Vanessa looks up at me then gestures to the trash can in the room. "I started my period yesterday," she says, her voice

wobbling a little like she isn't sure if I'm going to get angry at her or not. She watches me warily, fidgeting with the blanket on the bed.

For a few moments, I don't move at all. The warmth, the small hope, I'd been nursing collapses in on itself, replaced only by a sudden chill.

"Are you... sure?" I ask, my voice flat. "Sometimes there's spotting."

She blinks at me. "Yes?" She doesn't sound too certain at first, but she goes on, "It's not spotting. It's a heavier flow. I've had to change out my... my tampons several times."

"I see." I have to take a moment to collect myself. "It was a bit optimistic of us to believe you'd get pregnant so fast."

Vanessa nods, but her smile looks forced. "Yeah. That would've been pretty quick," she says. "Sorry. I... I still have time, right?" She suddenly looks afraid, and I go to her, sitting down on the bed next to her and wrapping an arm around her. She tenses, but she doesn't pull away from me.

"Of course you have time. I'll tell Giulio, so he knows. It's good this is all happening now, anyway. He's busy with a few things, so he wouldn't have been able to visit much this week as it is." I kiss the side of her head gently.

"Good," she says.

I frown at her. "He wants to be here."

She nods again. "I... Yes," she says lamely.

We sit with our disappointment for a little while, taking comfort in each other. I know how unrealistic it was to assume she was already pregnant, but when she didn't get her period...

With a sigh, I set the ledger on my lap and pull out my phone. I tap over to the period tracking app and input her cycle. Started yesterday, still going today...

"You'll let me know when your period is over, of course," I say. The app is already recalibrating itself, giving suggestions as to when Vanessa's most fertile days might be.

Vanessa doesn't look enthusiastic at all, but she nods. "I'll let you know." She glances at my lap, seeing the papers, and it seems to pique her interest. "What's that?"

I'm much less enthusiastic about it now, but I flip open the ledger to a random page. "Donny said you were asking to help out. This is a copy of the accounting. I can leave this here, if you want to take a look."

She perks up a little. "Really?" She peers down at the page. "What do I need to be looking for? He seemed to be a little... ah... messy when it came to his record keeping."

"Honestly, I'm unsure," I say, flipping another few pages. "Our accountant seems to believe that something is off about the numbers, that we should be earning more than we are. I asked Donny to double-check, but he hasn't spotted anything. He insists we're just down in profits. I simply want to be certain before I report this to Giulio."

Vanessa nods slowly. She peers down at the papers. "I mean, I don't know what kind of profits to expect for... a place like this," she says delicately after a moment. "But I can look through and see if anything seems... strange."

"You've got the entire past year of information here. And I'll let Donny know to help you out, at his discretion." I kiss her head again. "I am eager to see you at work."

Her eyes widen a little. "The entire year?" she asks. "Isn't that a little... Aren't you afraid I'll..." She seems to catch herself, then gives a shake of her head. "You don't have to worry. I won't like... tell anyone what I see or anything."

"There shouldn't be anything here that is particularly incriminating. Although I hope I don't need to emphasize how... disappointed... Giulio would be if you were to attempt any form of betrayal, again."

Her slim hand pages through the ledger. Her body is still warm against me, trembling a little as she replies quietly, "I wouldn't. I won't." She obviously doesn't need a reminder of what would happen if she did.

If we'd known from the start how effective threatening Stef would be in keeping her in line, we'd have just begun with that. But now that we know how sensitive Vanessa is, it's something we need to keep at the front of her mind.

With her empathy, she really will make a good mother.

I pull her a little closer to me, kissing her cheek before gently touching her jaw to turn her head toward me. I kiss her, and she startles, dropping the ledger. She goes to reach for it, but I stop her, kissing her again.

“There's no need to worry about that right now,” I murmur. “Are you all right? Any cramps or pain? Do you need anything?”

Vanessa hesitates, then says, “I would appreciate some painkillers. I do get bad cramps.”

I nod and settle my hand on her stomach, rubbing gently. “Of course. I'll have them send some up later.”

I kiss her again, sighing when I hear her cute whimper. My hand moves from her stomach up to her small breast. I massage it, my thumb running circles over her nipple.

She shudders, trying to squirm away from me, but I keep her firmly in my grasp. “Shh. Just let me help you relax,” I tell her. “Here, do you want to lie down?”

Vanessa shakes her head. “N-no. I'll sit up.”

I shouldn't have given her the option, because I like the idea of lying down next to her and cuddling her, petting her and imagining we're celebrating instead of planning the next phase of trying to get her pregnant.

“Come on,” I tell her anyway, urging her down on the bed. “Let's just rest for a little bit.”

She gives me an irritated look, but she lets me push her onto the small bed beside me.

Once we're facing each other, I slide my hand along her side and give her ass a small squeeze. She gasps and jumps a little, biting her lip to swallow any other noises.

She's so adorable.

I press my lips against hers once more, running my tongue over her lower lip and gently coaxing her to open up for me.

She parts her lips, obediently and easily, and I explore her mouth with my tongue. She tries to shrink away a little, but I put my hand at the back of her head to keep her from moving away from me.

“Shh,” I murmur against her lips. “Just relax, Vanessa. I’m not asking for anything. I’m just taking care of you.”

“I don’t—”

I kiss her again, cutting off her words. Although I would love to take her, I know there’s no point while she’s on her period. If she’s in pain, though, I’m willing to give her all the comfort she needs.

I move my hand from her ass to her belly, rubbing gently again as I continue to kiss her. Her thigh rubs against my clothed cock, completely by accident, but it has me groaning regardless.

I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed simply kissing a person the way I enjoy it with Vanessa. Giulio would get bored too fast, and anyway, I’d rather Giulio spend time with Vanessa than with me.

It would be nice if he were here right now, spooning Vanessa from the other side, though.

But he has to work, and I wouldn’t do anything to discourage him from taking his role seriously. He won’t begrudge me a few minutes here, though, especially this late at night. If Giulio needs me, he’ll call.

I take her hand and slowly draw it down until it’s pressing against my cock. “Here,” I coax her. “Touch me right here.”

Vanessa hesitates, but she can’t really argue unless she wants to jerk away from my touch. She’s being very, very obedient, though, and she lets me put her hand on my hardening but still clothed cock.

“You aren’t going to…” Vanessa starts, hesitating. “It’s kind of gross.”

It takes me a moment to follow where she’s going with it. I huff in amusement and kiss her forehead. “No. Unless you think it would help with your pain, I won’t take you.”

“Why would it help with the pain?” she asks, shaking her head. “No, it’s okay. I’ll… do this for you, but I don’t want to be touched right now. Plus, there’s a tampon and it’s all…” She wrinkles her nose, making it clear just how gross she thinks it is.

The expression is adorable. A little blood wouldn’t bother me, and there’s the shower right there, but there wouldn’t be much of a point since she’s unlikely to get pregnant right now.

Not that it would make much of a difference. It’s Giulio’s child she’s going to have, not mine.

I help her undo my belt and fly, but I wait for her to take my cock out on her own. Her hand trembles, but she wraps her warm, slender fingers around my length and strokes lightly.

“Good,” I whisper. I make sure not to move too much, so she has the chance to explore to her heart’s desire. She doesn’t seem to want to, of course, but I guide her gently. “Just a little more of that. It feels so good. Doesn’t it feel good for you, too, Vanessa? To know that you’re bringing me pleasure?”

Her lip curls slightly in distaste, but I choose to ignore it. Eventually, she will learn that bringing me pleasure can make her feel good too. She says nothing, though, for all that she continues to carefully run her hand up and down my cock.

“A bit more pressure,” I coax. “Do you remember? When we were with Giulio—I told you I like it rougher than him.”

She squeezes her eyes shut, but she nods and tightens her grasp too.

I let out a long, stuttering breath at the sudden pleasure. I could stay here for hours with Vanessa, letting her tease me. There’s a languid softness to this moment, the two of us in our own little world.

Taking comfort in each other's presence.

I lean in to kiss her again, sweetly, coaxing her to enjoy my presence and the feeling of my cock in her hand. She reluctantly kisses back, opening for me, and my tongue explores her mouth. I groan against her lips as she pumps my cock a little faster, a little rougher, and it feels so good.

It's easy to imagine she wants this as much as I do, as much as Giulio does. She surrenders so easily. I'm so glad I chose her for this, to be bred for Giulio's child. She'll be utterly perfect.

She speeds up her touch, and I can't help but chuckle as I realize she's trying to hurry this along.

"A little slower," I tell her, touching her wrist. "We're not in any hurry to finish this any time soon, are we?"

The look on her face tells me she's more than ready for it to be over with, but that's only a temporary setback.

She slows her pace, although her grip remains tight the way I like it. I reward her with another kiss, and I move my hand under her shirt—my shirt, really—to play with her breast. She jumps, and I feel her legs squirm a little.

"You're so perfect," I murmur. "I'm so glad I met you, Vanessa."

"I'm not perfect," she says, a little sullenly, as her movements slow a little more. "And..."

I can practically feel her trying not to say it, that she isn't glad at all, and I chuckle. "You'll be grateful for it. You really, really will. It's so much better than it could be. Being mine and Giulio's... We'll take care of you forever."

Vanessa shudders, clearly not enjoying the idea of that as much as I do. But I gently tweak one of her nipples, surprising a little gasp out of her.

"You can move a little faster again," I tell her. "Just don't be so quick to get it finished. We want to enjoy our time together."

She closes her eyes, but she doesn't respond, only starting to stroke me a little more quickly.

She always wonders why I chose her, but when I see her like this, trying so hard to obey, trembling and breathing quickly, the question is "How could I not have?"

I press my lips to her forehead and move my hips a little to meet her stroking. She startles, but she keeps her hand moving.

I'm sure there have been better hand jobs out there. Giulio has gotten me off faster, with more expertise. But because it's Vanessa's hand, because of her timid strokes, because of her soft hair and skin and gasps, everything is amplified. I can feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge at this languid pace.

She's breathing slowly, though there's a hitch to the sound as I keep toying with her nipples. I can't help but wonder if she's getting aroused, period or not.

I groan at the idea of her feeling pleasure *all* of the time, not just when she expects it. We have so much to teach her. It strikes me how young she is compared to me, only half my age, but it only fills me with affection. She's so inexperienced, but she takes to every lesson so beautifully.

I finally tip over the edge, spilling out into her hand, and she startles, drawing back so I end up spilling onto my pants. I frown at her.

"Why did you pull away?" I ask, disappointed.

"Sorry." She holds up her hand, stained with some of my semen. "I was surprised. It was so... hot."

I wish she meant *hot* in the good sense, but I know what she actually means. I sigh. It's tempting to make her lick her hand clean, or lick my cock clean at least, but instead, I choose to get a cloth and clean us both up. It's a good thing I don't have any meetings scheduled for the rest of the evening.

When I'm done, I coax her down into the bed with me again, wrapping my arms around her.

"Sleep," I whisper. "You've earned it."

Vanessa sighs, but she doesn't argue. I lie there with her for a long time, and it's only when her breathing has evened out and I realize she's actually managed to fall asleep in my arms that I gently extract myself from her. I get up, gazing at her from the doorway.

It was too early to get my hopes up. But she *will* get pregnant soon.

She has to.

SLAYER

Monday morning meetings are the fucking worst. Not because I'm not awake yet—I've been up for a few hours already—but because everybody else is still sleep deprived and grumbling about how they hate Mondays and they'd rather be doing anything else.

A meeting this early in the week, this early in the morning, means something important is up, too. Nobody wants important shit to happen.

My precinct's captain is sitting near the front, but the person at the little podium is somebody I recognize as a sergeant from a neighboring district. He's tall and dark skinned, with a beard, and I bet Giulio would have called him hot—but he likes the hairy types. Like Damien.

"If you're all done complaining," the man says with a scowl. "We've got a serious matter to discuss."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. He doesn't have to say it's serious for us to know it, not with all of us gathered here like sardines.

Captain Parker nods and sits up in his seat a little. He's a round man, the donuts and lack of gym making him soft in all the wrong places. Or maybe it was all the burgers—wouldn't want to stereotype an officer of the law.

"Get your asses into your seats, you deadbeats. Sergeant Conteh's from the 52nd Precinct, and they need our cooperation."

“What, they can’t handle their own cases?” somebody behind me says. Everybody breaks out into laughter, although Conteh isn’t smiling.

“Yeah, funny.” Conteh uses the clicker to start up his slideshow presentation.

The first image to flicker on the screen in front is one that stops my heart in my chest.

It’s the undercover cop I murdered.

He’s looking a lot nicer with his hair slicked back and wearing a proper uniform, but there’s no denying it’s him.

I force myself to breathe, but thankfully, nobody’s paying attention to me. Shit. I’d known there was a good chance someone would investigate his disappearance, but I hadn’t thought they’d bring it straight to my precinct. Obviously, they aren’t having any luck following his tracks and they’re running into dead ends.

That’s good, because it means they aren’t looking into Ntimacy as his last known target.

“This is Officer Fernando Baca,” Conteh says. “He’s been missing for almost three weeks now.”

Has it been that long? Damn, time flies when you’re having fun trying to knock up a chick. I get the feeling I won’t be as carefree in the coming days, though.

Fucking Paul for bringing this mess on all of us. Fucking Giulio for not giving me proper warning before sending me to clean up the mess.

“Officer Baca was working undercover for our vice department. In particular, he was focusing on prostitution.”

“Just missing? You sure he didn’t run off with a whore?” Officer Davidson asks, although even he sounds more serious now.

You don’t joke about dead or missing officers.

Conteh glares at Davidson. “No. He has a wife and a young daughter at home. His assignment was only meant to

last a week. While we are hopeful we'll still find him alive, at this point we have to work on the assumption that he's been murdered."

Murmurs sound from all around me. My precinct might not be all on the up-and-up, but cop killers are serious business. We band together against anyone who might try to take us down, and if I didn't know what had happened to the good officer, I'd be as righteously pissed off as those around me.

It makes me a little nervous. It wasn't that I didn't know the chance I was taking in offing him, but the alternative would've been worse. Just letting him go and spread shit about Ntimacy could've really caused a domino effect that even my captain couldn't ignore—that even Giulio couldn't buy off.

I'm going to wring Paul's neck the next time I see him.

"He disappeared between check-ins," Conteh goes on. "He hadn't found anything at any of the targets he'd visited, but he was still following a list. Unfortunately, we don't have that list. We've been investigating all of the strip clubs and potential brothels in our district, but we've come up with nothing."

Of course they hadn't. Ntimacy was out of their direct jurisdiction.

What had brought him over here, into our domain? Had he heard rumors? Was he checking out a lead, or did he just decide to expand his search?

"We know which clubs he'd already investigated," Conteh says. "But as you know, New Bristol has no shortage of shady strip clubs and similar establishments. We've compiled our own list of potential targets in your area." He nods to me. "Detective Graham? Captain Parker says you'll be taking lead on this investigation."

I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. We'll have to make sure everything is thorough but not too thorough. Maybe we need to end up having a few strikes against a

different club, one Giulio doesn't own, and misdirect the investigation that way.

I nod. "Yes, Sergeant."

The rest of the meeting goes like they usually do. We ask questions, Conteh answers with increasing annoyance. I find out who my contact on the 52nd Precinct is and get the files sent to me.

Thank fuck Damien's thorough in his body disposal. As long as nobody finds pieces of Baca's corpse, there isn't much to go on. It's all circumstantial shit. Any good lawyer would point out that there's no proof of murder.

"Detective Graham, a word before you go," Conteh says once the meeting wraps up.

I nod and wait as everybody else files out—including the captain.

Conteh closes the door, leaving us in private. "I realize you have your own cases to deal with, so I appreciate your cooperation on this matter."

"Of course. Anything for a fellow officer," I say, keeping my eye on Conteh. I can't tell what kind of guy he is, whether his own precinct is as... unscrupulous as mine, if he's the kind of guy Giulio would be able to bribe.

I wouldn't suggest it to him, though. Attempting to bribe anybody now would only draw attention.

"I didn't want to mention it in front of the other officers, because I know how prejudiced people can be. But I have... some reason to believe that Baca might have been having an affair with a man. I've spoken with that individual and determined he is unrelated to the case. However, when looking for leads, I don't want you to limit yourself to simply heterosexual establishments." Conteh's lip is curled in disgust, and I have to resist the urge to bark out a laugh.

When he says he knows people can be prejudiced, he must be including himself in that line-up.

“No worries,” I answer calmly. “I know a few places where men sell themselves. I can check those out. Wouldn’t be bad to have an excuse to scare a few of them straight.” I laugh at the stupid pun, although Conteh only glowers. I bet Giulio would have thought that one was funny.

I shrug, unapologetic.

Conteh finally nods at me. “Thank you for your discretion, Detective. I look forward to hearing your updates.”

Giulio will get a kick out of the investigation turning more toward male prostitutes instead of Ntimacy. This will work in our favor since he doesn’t traffic in men. Some of his rivals do, though...

I step out of the room, joining the other detectives and officers on the floor. All of them are gossiping like old women about the case.

“So what do you think, Graham?” Davidson asks me. “Think he went for a nice vacay with a side piece?”

I snort. “Not likely, but who knows? I’ve got a few things to check out that Conteh didn’t want to talk about in public.”

“Ooh, how mysterious,” he says, quirking a brow as he waits for me to clarify.

I only grin at him. “Need to know basis, my man.” I clap him on the shoulder.

“My money’s on chickening out,” Detective Kawano says. She’s the only Asian chick in my precinct, but she does her job all right, and she looks the other way when she needs to. “You saw the list of places he’d already hit up. Club Ruby’s, Xxtreme, The Web... That’s the Pavones, the Fierros, and the Mancinis. You want to bet at least one of them noticed?”

“Fuck me, can I go undercover at one of those places?” Officer Hernandez says, tapping through his phone. “Look, Ruby’s got new girls listed on their website. Can I expense a visit? Gotta make sure there’s really, really no prostitution happening there.”

He holds up his phone, and we all look with interest as he scrolls through the photos. I recognize a few of the girls from when I was there last with Giulio.

“Just tell them you’re an officer at the front door. They might cut you a deal,” I tell him. “I know Xxtreme has that unwritten policy.”

“Guess I should probably stop in, then,” Hernandez says. “I mean, to help you out with your investigation. Always gotta get in the detectives’ good graces.” He smirks at me, and I smirk right back.

“Yeah, you let me know what you find out, but remember those girls expect twenties in their panties, not ones,” I tell him.

He groans. “That reminds me why I never go,” he laments. “You sure the department won’t cover it, since I’m helping you out?”

I grin at him. “I’m positive. If anyone gets to go, it’s me.”

This gives me the perfect excuse to check out Giulio’s competition over the next few weeks—not to mention an excuse to go to Ntimacy without having to watch my back. It’ll be nice to visit with Vanessa without worrying about someone thinking I’ve got a habit that’s only satisfied with time there.

“Okay, being serious,” Davidson says, sighing loudly. “We’ve got that tip about the secret casino over on Campbell, and I’ve made no fucking progress with the street whores in De La Rouge. You’d think they’d want to suck my cock, but nooo, none of them are taking my money.”

“More like they can tell you’re a cop from your smell,” Kawano snarks. “You couldn’t pay me to go near your dick either.”

“Well, I don’t want your fugly mug,” Davidson responds with enough aggression that I think he was actually insulted.

“Yeah, yeah. Quit playing around. We’ve got work to do. Don’t worry about this Baca case. I’ll poke around a few places, then tell the 52nd they should figure out their own shit.

We've got enough cases as is." I head over to my own desk and log onto the computer to take a closer look at the files I'd been sent.

I can probably combine a few of my cases, take a nice stroll around town with Davidson, and end the night at Ntimacy.

I send a quick text to Giulio on my private phone, and I'm not surprised when he responds almost immediately.

Come by my place tomorrow! For a fun night in. You, me, her, and him.

I fight the urge to groan. Nothing with Damien is particularly fun, and I know there's no other *him* it could be. But the idea of spending the evening with Giulio and Vanessa and tolerating Damien sounds fun to me. Even fewer rules apply when we're at Giulio's condo, and it should be a hell of a good time.

GIULIO

The crested gecko on the other side of the glass opens her mouth wide as soon as Slayer steps up next to me. It looks pretty cute, even if that does mean she's scared of Slayer. Not that I blame her. All the ladies are scared of Slayer.

Except Antonia.

"Did you get another one?" Slayer asks, grimacing. "What's this? An iguana?"

I roll my eyes at him. "I've had her for almost a year now. And she's as much an iguana as your toy train line is Thomas the Tank Engine." I unlatch the enclosure so I can place Carmen's food inside. Unsurprisingly, she makes no move to actually eat, not with the two of us staring at her.

"They aren't *toy* trains," Slayer complains. "These aren't some cheap plastic trinkets. All of mine are highly detailed, made of brass, I've upgraded the electronics to digital control... Can toy trains run on the same track at different speeds? And, as a bonus, my hobby doesn't stink."

"Why do you think I've invested hundreds of thousands into these bioactive enclosures, man? They have minimal stink." I close up Carmen's enclosure again and head over to Antonia, the largest of said enclosures. It goes from floor to ceiling, wall to wall, and has live plants, healthy substrate, isopods and springtails and other insects that will break down Antonia's waste. There's still maintenance and clean-up to be done, but it's not a daily or even weekly thing.

Antonia notices me and lifts her head, clearly eager to be fed, but her food is still defrosting.

“Want to pet Antonia?” I ask Slayer, hand already on the enclosure latch.

Slayer glares at me. “Fuck no. You know I don’t want to be near that thing.”

“Aww, she just wants to say hello,” I say innocently, not even bothering to hide my grin as I open it up. “Don’t you want to be polite?”

“It can just stay in there,” Slayer says firmly.

Just like Vanessa, he calls Antonia *it*, which would offend me on my girl’s behalf if I thought she actually cared.

“I think she needs enrichment,” I say, reaching in to take Antonia off her low branch. She immediately slithers up my arm to settle around my shoulders. I have to make sure she doesn’t attempt to coil around my neck, but I’m well-practiced by now. Antonia is a familiar weight, and I love the sensation of her cool scales against my neck.

Slayer grimaces the entire time. “I can’t believe you touch that thing, man.”

“This *thing* is a beautiful ball python,” I correct him, stroking Antonia’s scales. “And she’s way more interesting than any toy train.”

He continues to glower at me. “They aren’t toys!” he says again. “And at least they won’t try to murder me if I let my guard down. I can’t believe you let it near your neck.” He shakes his head. “You’re fucking crazy, man.”

“Duh,” I answer, grinning widely. “Now, what were you going to talk about? Something about work.”

He grimaces. “So, about Paul. You don’t actually need him *alive*, do you?” he asks, deadpan.

I take a moment to think about it. I’ve been pretty annoyed with Paul for a while now, and if his brother hadn’t been one of our better capos, I wouldn’t have let him stick around for as

long as he had. “Not really, but I don’t really feel like doing any recruiting right now. What’s he done to piss you off?”

“Sergeant from the 52nd precinct is digging around into that detective’s death,” Slayer says grimly. “And a bunch of strip clubs, too. Apparently, the guy was undercover looking for prostitution. Only good thing is that yours truly is the lead detective on the case in this precinct. Still, it’s a cop missing, man, and they want to find out what happened to him.”

Not this headache. I’ve got enough trouble with Victor fucking Corvi sabotaging my operations in Benton City. I don’t need the cops breathing down my neck too.

“Should we try to set up a false trail?” I ask, lifting my arm when Antonia tries to slither down. “Or paint him to be dirty or something? Since we’ve got a name now, we could try to access his bank accounts...”

“No, they’re watching those now. We’re better off laying low on that front.” Slayer makes an annoyed sound. “The only good thing is that apparently, he was having a fling with a guy. Poor wife and kids had no idea he was screwing around, but the good sergeant wants me to look into male prostitutes. That means I’ll have to do a precursory ‘check’ on Ntimacy, Ruby’s, etc., but I’ll be handling those myself. The focus will be on some male strip clubs and the guys on the street.”

“Ooh, can you bother the club run by the Risottis? Last time I saw Benny, we, uh. Well, we didn’t part on the best terms.” I laugh, remembering how I’d left a long slice along Benny’s side. Of course, he’d shot me, so I think that’s only fair.

Damien had wanted to kill me himself, afterward, but I did appreciate his tender care while I was recovering.

And this, so he says, is why I’m not allowed to go anywhere without at least one bodyguard, because shit like this happened even *before* I took over.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Slayer says. “Just make sure nobody ever finds even a piece of the body.”

“You know Damien would never—” I start, but the buzzer goes off then. There’s no pause before I hear the front door opening, too. “I guess that’s Damien and Vanessa. We can talk more business later.”

I set Antonia back in her enclosure and secure it. Slayer waits impatiently for me, eager to see Vanessa again. He’s probably less eager to see Damien, but that’s perfectly fine by me.

We head out of the reptile room to meet them. Damien is dressed in a business casual look, with nice slacks, expensive shoes, and a dark shirt with a faint, shimmery pattern. The first two buttons on the shirt are undone, showing off some of his chest hair already.

Slayer stops when he sees Vanessa and wolf-whistles. “Damn, they really got you cleaned up. You almost look respectable.”

Vanessa blushes, fidgeting self-consciously with the dress she’s wearing. It’s nothing too fancy, just a simple wrap dress with a bright pattern. She has matching tights and properly fitting shoes.

I’d once said she had the girl-next-door look, but with how we’d basically kept her naked the past month, she’d mostly resembled a whore. Now she really does embody that innocent air of somebody’s first crush.

Not *my* first crush, but I’d been more into the tall, dark, broody type back then.

“Wow, all ready for a college hangout,” I say, half mocking. “Damien, are there any job fairs we can take her to? I bet she interviews well.”

“I’m not the one who picked out the clothes,” Vanessa cuts in, making Slayer laugh.

“Of course not. Damien would be the one who’d dress her like that instead of something sexy,” Slayer says. “Then again, we’ve already seen you look plenty sexy, haven’t we? All nice and naked, sweating and moaning...”

That has Vanessa shutting up fast, her brief spark of defiance extinguished with the taunting.

Damien puts his hand on the back of her neck and shoots a glare at Slayer. “I thought this was supposed to be a nice date, Giulio.”

“Yep! All four of us. A nice, big, happy family. With baby... not on the way quite yet, but we’ll get there, right?”

Vanessa pales and she presses her lips together. It’s hilarious watching her trying so very, very hard not to piss us off, when she wants nothing more than to protest her role in all this.

I’d have more sympathy for her if she hadn’t tried to run once already.

...Who am I kidding? I’d still think it was hilarious even if she’d been the perfect little broodmare for us.

“Damien, Slayer, you two can go sit down at the table. I’ve labeled the seats. Vanessa and I are gonna grab the food.” I wave Vanessa over to my side. My condo is open concept, so the dining area and the kitchen are well within view of each other. At least I’ll know that Slayer and Damien haven’t started murdering each other while I’m not looking.

Which would also be kind of hot.

Vanessa leaves Damien’s side, but she doesn’t snuggle up to me, opting to walk over to the kitchen instead. “What are we having?”

“Coq-au-vin.” I step up behind Vanessa and wrap my arms around her stomach. “That’s French for rooster, but if you want to imagine wine-marinated cocks, you’re welcome to.” I lightly massage her lower belly like I’ve seen Damien do so many times, just because it makes her fidget against me.

“Funny,” she says in a tone that makes it clear she doesn’t think it’s funny at all.

I kiss the side of her neck. She’s tall enough that I don’t have to bend down to do it. “Are you wearing panties?” I ask

as I nibble her neck. “Or did Damien make you put on the tights without anything underneath?”

Vanessa squirms even more, and I don’t have to see her face to know she’s blushing, especially when she says, “I’m... not wearing anything beneath them.” She mutters the words quickly, like saying them fast enough will make them somehow less true.

I glance over at the table, where Damien and Slayer are openly staring at us. Neither of them has sat down yet. I didn’t think they were going to have quality time without us, but it pleases me to know we’re the center of attention. I massage Vanessa’s stomach a little more as I lock eyes with Damien, then nip her throat hard enough to make her yelp—just for Slayer.

“All right, stop distracting me.” I slap her ass, making her jump, then pull away from her. “Serving spoons are over there, here are all the dishes. No, Slayer, you don’t get to decline the veggies.”

Slayer sneers at me. “I eat vegetables sometimes, smartass,” he retorts.

I raise my eyebrows at him, but he only stares stubbornly at me. I snort, shaking my head in amusement.

Vanessa silently takes the bowls and brings them to the table while I grab the Dutch oven and set that down as well.

Damien goes to take a seat and stops by his chair. “Giulio...”

“Is there a problem?” I ask innocently.

The table is a longer one, comfortably fitting eight adults. I’d arranged the place settings with two on each side, near the middle of the table. Vanessa and I are on one side, which leaves...

Slayer notices as well, and immediately picks up his name tag and tries to switch it with mine. I swat his hand with one of the serving spoons.

“Nope, it’s my date, so I’ve got Vanessa with me,” I say cheerfully. “When you cook a five-star meal and invite us over, you can decide the seating arrangements.”

Slayer groans. “How about I buy a five-star meal and invite you and Vanessa over?” he asks, purposely excluding Damien—which isn’t surprising. I’m sure Damien would exclude Slayer, too.

One of these days, I’ll figure out a way to have them kiss and make up. Or almost kill each other and fuck, same difference.

Vanessa mutters, “Because we all know he can’t cook one.”

Slayer pauses just before sitting down, and he bursts out laughing. “Oh, look at that. That’s cute. Baby Mama has jokes.”

Damien grudgingly sits down as well. “I’ll invite you over, Giulio. I could cook—”

“Nope!” I interrupt, taking my seat. “Vanessa and I want to have a nice meal without our insides trying to murder us from the heat. Now come on, Mama, hurry up and serve us so we can get started.”

“Why do I have to serve everyone? I’m not your maid,” Vanessa says, glaring at me.

“But you are my... wife,” I suggest, nodding. “Yeah. We’re having a nice dinner party. I think we’re a hot, young, *kinky* couple, hoping this evening will lead into a gangbang. I invited my two besties, who are probably DTF, but you gotta be delicate with these things. What if they’re completely insulted we even suggested it?”

“I can only hope,” Vanessa mutters. “Because I’m not... *DTF*.”

I have to wonder if she even knows what it means. Hell, she went to college, so she should. But she’s definitely not down to fuck.

Yet.

Vanessa reluctantly takes the serving spoon to ladle coq-au-vin and mashed sweet potatoes onto Damien's plate. She even serves him salad in the small bowl, drawing out the entire act.

"Thank you," Damien says, staring at her, although I don't miss that he strokes her ass, too.

"I don't need salad," Slayer drawls when she moves around to his spot.

"Give him salad, so he doesn't die of scurvy," I answer, amused. "We need to make sure his swimmers are healthy and strong, right?"

I know Damien doesn't agree with me, and the tightening of his lips proves me right. But he doesn't argue.

Vanessa fills Slayer's small bowl with salad then comes over to me, filling my plate and bowl as well. I grab for her waist, but she sidles back. "I still need to pour the wine," she says, like she just can't wait.

"She's so cute and domesticated," Slayer comments.

"My wife's love language is service, after all," I say, and Vanessa flinches. "It gets her a bit hot, to be ordered around like a maid. To think about being used by other men."

She looks like she wants to stab me with the wine opener, but instead, she uses it for the cork, if a bit more savagely than absolutely necessary. "It needs to breathe," she says a little tersely after she opens it and sets the cork and corkscrew aside. "Then I'll pour it."

Damien takes the wine off her hands. "I'll handle the alcohol. You shouldn't drink, anyway."

"On account of Vanessa being underage?" I joke, although I know the real answer.

Predictably, Damien responds, "No. In case she gets pregnant. Alcohol is bad for the baby."

Slayer rolls his eyes. "Oh, please. It's highly unlikely she's going to get knocked up tonight. One glass of wine won't hurt anything."

“I don’t drink anyway,” Vanessa interrupts them as she finally takes her seat next to me.

Damien pours wine for me, then for himself. He sets the bottle of wine down on the table without serving Slayer. “You did mention that. Your sister was the party-goer, not you.”

“Besides, aren’t you supposed to be the *cop*?” Vanessa asks, her voice a little icy as she stares at Slayer. “You’re the last person who should be encouraging an underage woman to drink.”

He grins at her. “I never said I was a good cop. In fact, I think you’re the one who said I made a shitty cop.”

I put an arm around Vanessa’s shoulders and pull her closer for a quick kiss to her forehead. “That’s not how we’re gonna encourage him to fuck you, sweetheart. We gotta play nice! Do all the small talk stuff, give vague hints so Damien and Slayer aren’t sure if we’re flirting with them or not.”

Vanessa gives a long-suffering sigh, finally ladling out her own food. She doesn’t put much on the plate, and I notice Damien frowning at her. She seems oblivious, though, as she pokes at her food.

“Come on, ask a few questions,” I prod. “I bet you’re dying to know about us.”

At that, she pauses with her fork halfway to her mouth. She sets it down, looking quizzically at me. “You mean you’ll actually answer me if I ask you questions?”

Slayer snorts. “I’ve got nothing to hide.” The smirk that flits across his lips makes Vanessa flinch a little, but he softens a little as though remembering this is supposed to be a date. “I’m an open book to you tonight.”

“Why’d you become a cop, if you don’t actually care about protecting anybody?” she asks quietly, lowering her gaze.

Damien and I exchange a look. Apparently, this whole cop thing is really weighing on poor, sweet Vanessa.

“You know he’s not the only corrupt cop, right?” I say, poking her side. “Slayer and I are tight, but there’s a lot of

them on my payroll. Never mind the other mafia families.”

Vanessa takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. She doesn't like that answer, judging from the way her lips tighten.

“I do want to protect people,” Slayer says with a shrug. “Most people, anyway. It's just that Giulio pays much better than a cop's salary, and he's been there for me through some serious shit. No one else would've done as much for me as he has.”

I don't miss the side-eye Damien gives Slayer. He knows some of what happened, but to him, Slayer's still just an informant, somebody who shouldn't be trusted this much.

Other cops aren't half as fun as Slayer, though.

“It's that easy to give up on your morals?” Vanessa twists her fingers in her lap. “Just a bit of money, and never mind all the girls suffering?”

Slayer sighs, his own meal abandoned for the moment. “Look. If the girls weren't at these clubs, they'd be on the streets. At least here, they're being taken care of.”

“You don't really believe that, do you?” Vanessa asks, incredulous. “It's basically slavery.”

“Are any of us truly free, under a capitalist society?” I rub her shoulder absently. “The poor, the downtrodden, all being forced to slave away so that the rich can get richer, hoping for a small scrap that will allow them to avoid hunger and destitution.” Then I laugh. “Of course, I'm benefiting under that system, so I don't give a crap. Next question.”

Vanessa glowers at me, but she considers for a moment. “Have you ever been in love?” she asks me.

I keep smiling, although I unconsciously dig my fingers deeper into Vanessa's shoulder. She flinches, but she can't escape me.

“Love? Nah. Childhood crushes. You shoulda seen me chasing after Damien's cock before he finally gave in.” I laugh and loosen my hold on her. “What about you, darling? Did you have a high school or college sweetheart? Ooh, did we steal

you away from some man who is now worrying about you not returning to your classes?”

Vanessa frowns at that, clearly not liking the way I've turned the question around on her. Or maybe she just doesn't like thinking about her ex—or exes—any more than I do. “I had a boyfriend in college. Friends. There will be people who worry about me, yes,” she says.

Not that it'll make a difference. They'll never find her here. They'd never even know where to look. They'll just assume she dropped out and was too ashamed to keep in touch.

“What boyfriend?” Damien asks, suddenly very intense. “What was his name?”

Vanessa squirms a little under his scrutiny. “Um. Brad. But we broke up like... a year and a half ago?” Her smile looks forced. “Anyway, it doesn't really matter.”

“Damien had a girlfriend a few years ago, too. Then he dumped her because she was offended he was fucking me, or something.” I let go of Vanessa to finally eat some of the food I'd slaved away to cook. “Why'd you dump your guy? Was he too controlling? Cock too small? Made too many dumb jokes?”

Vanessa's smile completely fades, and she stares down at her food. Her fork remains next to the plate, and she doesn't move to pick it up. “He dumped me,” she says quietly. “But I don't want to talk about it.”

“Who would be stupid enough to dump you?” Slayer scoffs. “Fucking idiot.”

“Want us to drag him out here and torture him as punishment for making you cry?” I suggest.

“What was his last name?” Damien adds, and I think he actually does want to murder this guy for daring to have touched Vanessa.

She blinks, looking a little overwhelmed by the onslaught of questions. She gives a quick shake of her head, though. “It

doesn't matter. It's been long enough. Anyway, what about you, Slayer?" she asks.

Slayer shrugs. "I've had a few girlfriends in the past few years, but nothing serious. Married to the job, you could say. I don't have enough time to pamper some chick who wants all of my attention."

Vanessa nods like that makes sense to her. I reach out to ruffle her hair, and she flinches in surprise.

I let my hand trail down her scalp, to the back of her neck. For Damien's benefit, I wrap my fingers around that slim neck of hers and squeeze very, very lightly. Damien notices immediately, his mouth parting lightly.

"Are you done with questions?" I ask Vanessa, smirking at her. "Because I was thinking... It's just a standard dinner party right now. We should give our guests a little taste of what's to come."

Vanessa has gone still, as though she's afraid I'm going to squeeze if she moves. She nibbles on her bottom lip so cutely that I want to do the same to her, to taste her. "Like what?" she mumbles.

"Yeah, what do you have in mind, Jules?" Slayer asks, paying no attention to his food—and he'd better not think I didn't notice he hasn't touched the salad, either.

I spear a bit of chicken onto my fork and lift it up to Vanessa's lips. "You like how the... *coq* tastes?"

Vanessa clamps her mouth shut, but I smear the food over her lips until she gets the hint. She takes the food off the fork and swallows quickly, like she's trying to get it over with as fast as possible.

"The chicken's good," Vanessa answers quietly. "But I can feed myself."

I put the fork down and place my hand on her belly. "I'm sure you can. But it's a shame to leave your craving for... *coq* unsatisfied. I know you want some English *cock* instead of French *coq*."

“Technically, it’d be... half-Italian cock,” Slayer points out. “Or American cock. We aren’t Brits.”

“We’re all just American,” Damien says flatly.

“I don’t want any of it,” Vanessa mutters, to absolutely no one’s surprise.

I laugh and kiss her cheek. “That’s cute, Mama, but we all know you’re a desperate little cockslut for us.” I squeeze her neck in warning. “I’ll give you a choice. Pull those tights off, then pick a lap to sit on. There’s Damien, with his giant trouser snake. He’ll probably make sure you’re very well fed while you’re squeezing around him.”

Damien inhales sharply, the only hint that he’s affected by what I’m saying. “I would.”

Slayer scoffs. “Yeah, but he won’t let her drink. I’ll top you up with wine, Vanessa.”

“She said she doesn’t drink,” I remind him. “So far, all you have going for you is the small cock.”

“Wait,” Vanessa says, paling as she looks at us. “I thought you said... sitting in your lap. Not... like that.”

“Honey, keep up,” I say. “Why else did I want your tights down around your ankles?” I point at Slayer. “If you sit on Slayer’s lap, you get wine even if you don’t want it, and maybe you won’t even feel it in your cunt.”

“I’m going to fucking throw my wine at you like a scorned lover here in a second,” Slayer growls at me.

Vanessa looks pleadingly at Damien, which amuses me even more. What does she really think he’s going to do? Stop this?

Damien nods encouragingly at her. “You can sit with me if you want. We’ll both get you filled up after dinner, so you don’t have to worry about missing out on Giulio if you choose me.”

I almost burst out laughing at Vanessa’s dismayed expression. I’m pretty sure Damien wasn’t trying to be funny, but his casual way of ignoring Slayer, and acting like Vanessa

must be fucking eager for us, like she actually wants the baby as much as we do...

Slayer rolls his eyes, but he doesn't comment. He knows I'll give him a shot at Vanessa's cunt, too. I always take care of him, just like he's always taken care of me.

I look pointedly at her.

Vanessa gets up—I have to reluctantly let go of her neck—and slowly lowers her tights, pulling them down to her ankles and sliding them all the way off. “I'll take Giulio,” she mumbles.

“Aww, I'm touched.” I reach out for her dress and pull her closer to me. “What made you pick me? My stunning smile? Your never-ending amusement with my jokes?”

“No,” she says flatly.

I wait, but she doesn't go on, so I shrug. “Well, come on over here, Mama. You'll have to get my cock hard for you. So I can keep you properly filled.”

Vanessa doesn't look thrilled, but she unfastens my pants readily enough.

“It's definitely not the jokes,” Slayer says.

I groan as her fingers brush my cock, and I push up into her touch.

She starts to stroke me, and I lean back in my chair, spreading my legs a little wider to give her better access. “Man, you're getting good at that,” I tell her. “You just can't wait for me to get inside you, can you?”

The look on her face is unimpressed.

Damien's eyes are fixated on us. I'm not sure how well he can see her hand on my lap, but I lick my lips in his direction and let out a loud, showy groan.

“I think I figured it out,” I say, putting my hand on her hip. “Slayer's cock is obviously too small. Damien's cock is too large. But my cock is just right for little Goldilocks here.”

Damien huffs and covers his mouth, hiding his amusement.

“If you’re not careful, I’m going to cut off enough of your cock to give you the smallest cock mankind has ever seen,” Slayer says between bites of his food, glowering at me. “Remember I keep a fucking knife on me.”

Vanessa shudders, obviously remembering Slayer using that knife on her. I’ll have to let him do it again, but this time, a little deeper. She tries to ignore him, though, instead stroking me more hurriedly. Even those little abortive touches send pleasure racing up my spine.

It helps to have Damien and Slayer watching us. I notice Slayer reaching under the table, probably to adjust himself or give himself a slight squeeze, too.

I run my hand up her side and give her nipple a squeeze through her dress. “You’re just gonna let him talk to me like that, darling? Didn’t our wedding vows include standing up for each other, through thick and thin, blood and death, and... uh, Damien, what else should my vows include?”

Damien finally rips his gaze away from us to his plate. “Fertility, and having children...”

“We aren’t married,” Vanessa says, her voice sharp as she releases my cock. “Stop pretending we are. I’m not marrying you. Not now, not ever.”

Slayer snorts. “Because you have so many options,” he remarks. “But hey, if you decide to give him a penectomy, I’ll be right there to help you, sweetcheeks.”

“If we get married, that’ll be the Pavone-Bellini union my old man always dreamed of!” I laugh and pull her closer to me. “If we did it for real, I wouldn’t have to simply roleplay. Which do you prefer?”

Her hand doesn’t go back to my cock, and I feel her trembling. She glances up at my face, and there’s a fierceness there that’s so at odds with the meekness she’s shown since she got caught at Slayer’s precinct. “I’m not marrying you,” she repeats. “Not for real, not fake. I’d rather Slayer help me

with cut—” She seems to realize what she’s saying, and she goes abruptly silent.

Slayer bursts out laughing. “So the kitten *does* have claws. I thought you got them removed, with how soft and sweet she’s been lately.”

“It’d be very fitting,” I say with amusement. “Seeing as how your sister’s men cut off my old man’s balls. You Bellini girls, so bloodthirsty.”

“It wasn’t Lucia’s idea!” Vanessa snaps. “Lucia isn’t... She’s not like that.”

It takes everything I can muster not to burst out laughing. If the reports I’ve been getting out of Benton City are correct, Vanessa really, really doesn’t know anything about her sister.

But I’ll let her find out on her own.

“All right, enough small talk.” I scoot forward in the chair a little bit. “Come, make yourself comfortable on my lap.” I pat my thigh to beckon her.

Vanessa is still shaking a little, and for a moment, I think she’s going to refuse me. I arch my brows at her, silently daring her to argue. The night’s been good so far, even if we have been teasing her, and I’d like it to stay that way.

Not that it means I won’t hesitate to make her do what I want.

Either she realizes that, or she just thinks better of pissing me off, because she settles awkwardly down in my lap—keeping the fabric of her dress between my hard cock and her soft pussy.

“Honey, you know I wouldn’t tease you like that.” I pull on the fabric of her dress and get a hand under her ass to force her up. She clutches the edge of the table and does her best to sit up the bare minimum, but I manage to get her skirt free.

“We... We have company. Darling,” Vanessa says.

I chuckle and press a kiss between her shoulder blades. “I love that you’re playing along.” Now unhindered, I run a

finger along the folds of her pussy. “But I believe I said we were kinky swingers. And our guests are here for a reason.”

She whimpers, squirming, but I keep touching her. It isn't long before I'm rewarded with moisture on my fingertips.

“My beautiful, nymphomaniac wife,” I murmur, pulling my fingers away. I hold them up for Damien and Slayer to see, then I rub them along Vanessa's lips. “All ready for me. Come on, let's show our guests what's in store for them.”

VANESSA

Mortified doesn't even begin to describe what I'm feeling right now.

It's bad enough that Giulio is playing like we're married, like we're some sort of adventurous swinger couple, but for my body to react to his touch like this... Will I ever get some sort of reprieve?

Stef had said she was always bone dry, and I wish I was. I wish they weren't so easily able to get my body to betray me.

I try to keep my mouth closed, but Giulio pushes his fingers past my lips until I can taste myself on them. It only makes things that much worse. I don't humiliate myself further by sucking on his fingers, even though I know it would probably make him happy.

"All right. Impale yourself on my cock. You need somebody to help you with that? I'm sure Damien and Slayer would give you a hand," Giulio says, thrusting his fingers slowly in and out of my mouth like they're his cock.

I shake my head quickly, pulling back as much as I can, but his fingers chase me, so I have no choice but to continue to take them past my lips, over and over. For a second, I'm tempted to bite down, but I know that would be a terrible idea.

It doesn't stop me from wanting to, though.

I adjust the dress, my cheeks burning as I stall. I don't dare look at Damien or Slayer, not wanting to see the hunger I know will be so prevalent on their features. I close my eyes,

focusing only on Giulio and pretending I'm not humiliating myself in front of all three of them for their twisted pleasure.

Slowly, I lift myself up, and I fumble with Giulio's hard, leaking cock.

The only mercy is that I managed to get one of those contraceptive sponges inside of me before this mockery of a "date." He might be forcing me to take him bare—like always—but I don't have to worry about getting pregnant from this.

Well.

There's still a chance. It's not as good as a condom or the pill, but it's *something*, and I need to cling to that. I brace myself, though, hoping he won't feel it and realize there's something different about how it feels inside of me.

But really, how much attention can he possibly be paying when he's just fucking me?

I position the head of his cock against my hole, my heart thundering in my ears as I brace myself. It isn't hard to get the tip inside, and I whimper as I slip a little and end up taking more of him at once than I'd intended.

Giulio finally pulls his fingers out of my mouth, only to grab my hips and push me down. I cry out as the rest of him slides into me, and I'm left fully impaled on his lap.

I hear him groan, and he pushes my hair aside to kiss the back of my neck.

"Fuck, that's good. Tighten up for me, sweetie. Let me feel you squeeze real good."

My mouth is dry as I wonder if he's going to feel the sponge, if he's going to know something isn't quite right. It should be enough to make me dry with terror, but no. I'm as slick as ever, and I whimper as I force my body to tighten around his cock. Anything to distract him. Anything to keep him from realizing what I've done.

In the wake of it all, I find myself wondering if it was worth it... but if I get through this without him noticing, it

absolutely will be. I can put this off for so much longer and maybe find a real way to get out of this mess.

He suddenly thrusts up into me, startling me out of my thoughts, and a soft moan spills from my lips.

“Fuck, she’s hot for it,” Slayer says, drawing my attention to him. His arm moves rhythmically, and I realize he must be jerking off under the table.

I quickly look away, toward Damien. Damien has both hands on the table, but his stare isn’t any better.

“Yeah, she is,” Giulio says. He winds one hand around my torso and squeezes one of my breasts. “But we shouldn’t leave our guests out. That’s not very... ugh, what’s that word?”

“Hospitable?” Slayer suggests. “I mean, you did promise us a very good time if we were down with it. Didn’t expect you to share your beautiful wife with us, but now that you’ve teased us with it...” He groans, maybe just for show, maybe because he’s actually getting off on this that much.

I whimper, not wanting to have to service all three of them. One is bad enough, and the more they fuck me, the higher the chance of them discovering my little secret.

“Yeah. Hospitable.” Giulio pushes the chair back, and I squeak as we both move back a little. His cock slides inside me, rubbing my inner walls awkwardly but still making me pulse with need.

I hate my body’s reactions.

“Let’s show them what good hosts we are, Mama.” Giulio beckons Damien and Slayer over. “And you two, isn’t it customary for guests to bring gifts? Poor Vanessa might think you’re ungrateful. If you don’t... if you don’t give her something.” Giulio bites down softly on my collar as he rolls his hips. There’s no leverage and the angle is awkward, but it makes me whimper all the same.

I don’t know what he means by them giving me something, but I don’t think I’m going to like it no matter what it is. It’s not like they brought fine chocolates or anything like

that. They were just... there, and I know Damien didn't bring anything either.

Slayer chuckles, low in his throat, coming around to stand beside me as he continues to stroke his cock. "What kind of gift do you think she'd like? I definitely haven't come... empty-handed."

Damien walks around the table to stand on the other side of me. I'm completely surrounded now. He strokes my jaw with his knuckles.

When I turn my face away from him, his hand moves on to Giulio's cheek.

"Heh. Damien, what do you think would make a good gift for her?" Giulio asks. He licks Damien's fingers briefly.

"Cock," Damien answers, voice as flat as always.

My eyes widen as Giulio bursts out laughing. His laughter has his entire body shifting, including his cock inside me.

"You can't just... say it so deadpan," Giulio says between laughs. "He's funny, isn't he, Vanessa?"

"No," I mumble, because he's really not. It's also so predictable. They don't want to give me anything other than their cocks. They've made that perfectly clear. I'd thought based on the conversation we'd had earlier that I might get some sort of reprieve, but here I am with Giulio's cock buried balls-deep inside of me while the other two men make plans to use me as they wish.

Slayer's already dropping his pants to the floor, while Damien simply waits until Giulio fumbles for his fly.

I don't understand why Damien and Giulio can't just fuck each other and leave me out of it.

"Whose do you want first?" Giulio places kisses along my neck. "Damien's amazing mouthful, or Slayer's warm-up cock?"

"Neither," I mumble, even though I know that's not going to pass for an answer they'll accept.

“Fuck you, man,” Slayer says with a sneer, and I’m pretty sure one day he’s going to deck Giulio for the constant taunting about his cock size.

“I’m just joking, man,” Giulio leans forward, forcing me to bend, and kisses the tip of Slayer’s exposed cock. “You know I don’t care how small you are.”

“Do you have to keep harping on it?” Slayer gripes, but he grabs the back of Giulio’s neck and forces him down a little more. “May as well suck it while you’re down there, especially if it’s only a *warmup cock*.”

“Sure. Vanessa, you take Damien, we can’t exclude him.”

Slayer gets a bit closer, and Giulio wraps his lips around Slayer’s cock. My entire face heats up even more, seeing and feeling this going on right in front of me, while Giulio’s cock twitches inside me.

But they won’t let me forget why I’m really here. Damien takes hold of my jaw and forces me to look up at him. He gives me a small smile.

His smiles are always a little condescending, a little creepy, and this is no exception.

“Here. A better... *mouthful* than Slayer would give you.” He grips his cock, which is only half hard, and starts running it over my lips.

I try to turn my head, but he just chases me. He finally grabs my chin and forces me closer to him.

“Don’t be shy,” he tells me. “Just open your mouth for me.” His fingers slide down to my throat, flexing around it, and I part my lips for him.

Slayer is groaning, and Giulio is making noises of his own that are all making me...

Wetter.

They should be freaking me out, making me less aroused, but there’s something about the animalistic grunts and growls that has me wanting more.

Damien slides his cock inside my mouth, forcing me to open it wider. All joking aside, Damien really is much larger than Slayer, and I wonder if I should have simply said Slayer in order to spare myself getting my mouth stuffed like this—especially when Damien’s cock threatens to reach the back of my throat and cut off my air.

I whimper and pull back a little, only for Damien’s grip on me to tighten.

Giulio pulls away from Slayer and rests his head on my shoulder. “Fuck, that’s hot.” His voice sounds a little hoarse—probably because of the blow job.

“Hey, I wasn’t done,” Slayer complains. “Get back here.”

“You really want to come in my mouth? Not in Vanessa’s?” Giulio asks while he pinches one of my nipples through the dress.

I cry out around Damien’s cock, squirming, but all it does is make me writhe more on Giulio’s cock, making the sensations of it that much more intense.

“Well, when you put it like that...” Slayer says, pulling back. “Damien, get out of the way. Let the starter cock do its job.”

Giulio chuckles, but Damien shakes his head.

“It’s my turn right now,” Damien says, pulling out a little and thrusting back in.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to concentrate on breathing.

“Nah, just let him. Here, I’ll keep your cock warm while you wait for Vanessa to be done with Slayer. I bet I’m better at it too.” Giulio raps his knuckles against Damien’s stomach, and of course Damien pulls away on Giulio’s order.

I’m not going to argue with the change, not when it lets me gulp in a full breath before Slayer’s shoving his cock in my mouth. I gag because he pushes in all at once, but unlike Damien, he doesn’t push deep into my throat.

Slayer groans, patting my head. “See? You get to take it nice and easy. Gotta admit, though... Giulio’s mouth feels

better than yours.”

It would be offensive if I cared what Slayer thinks of my cocksucking skills.

Damien isn't even touching Giulio—his hand settles on my head, stroking my scalp. His fingers bump against Slayer's occasionally, but I guess touching me is more important than avoiding Slayer.

My eyes prickle with tears.

There's a loud slurping sound, then Giulio says, “It's not her fault. She's got less practice. Maybe we should start giving her proper cocksucking lessons. She'll have a lot of time with nothing else to do once she's all knocked up, anyway.”

“Yeah. It'd be a waste to give her those lessons now, really, since she needs every drop of our cum she can possibly get,” Slayer says, pushing more deeply into my mouth.

I gag on him, but that seems to only encourage him because he thrusts again and again.

“Hey,” Giulio suddenly says. “You think she could take both of you at once? In her mouth.” He groans and thrusts up a little. “Fuck, that would be so hot. Damien, do it, do it, get your cock in her mouth too.”

I startle, pulling back quickly enough to keep Slayer from following me. “What? No! I can barely even take Damien in my mouth. I can't take both of them!” I protest.

Slayer laughs. “C'mon, Jules. I'm not getting my cock anywhere close to Damien's. Just let us take turns.”

“Your cock is already close to Damien's. Come on, I want to see it. Both your cocks rubbing against each other, all over her face. Leaving a huge mess behind. Wreck her pretty lips.” Giulio hooks his fingers into my mouth again and pushes down, forcing my mouth open. “Imagine how good it'll feel, with her choking around both of you.”

I cast a pleading look at Slayer, and he narrows his eyes at me. It's clear he's torn, weighing his options between having to rub up against Damien's cock and seeing me choke.

“Yeah, whatever,” Slayer says, which is both horrifying and unsurprising all at once. He pushes back into my mouth. “But you gotta work for it, Big D.”

While I’m trying to adjust to having Slayer in my mouth again, Damien grips my hair and narrows his eyes at Slayer. “Don’t ever call me that again.”

Slayer smirks, and I can tell he’s going to call him that again just to piss him off.

I hope the animosity between them is enough to keep Damien from playing along, but of course he’s not going to ignore one of Giulio’s requests. Damien tightens his hold on my hair and starts rubbing his cock over my cheek and jaw—and sliding it along the exposed portion of Slayer’s shaft.

Giulio groans loudly. “That is so hot, man. Fuck, and she’s already squeezing around me. She wants you both so bad.”

“No!” I try to get out, but the word is garbled around Slayer’s cock. He shoves deep into my mouth, into my throat, briefly choking me before pulling out again. For all their talk, Slayer doesn’t really seem to give a fuck that his cock is rubbing right against Damien’s against my face, but he doesn’t let up.

Damien’s erection pushes against my already stretched wide lips. Despite what Giulio said, there’s no way I can take both of them at once. I wouldn’t even be able to take Giulio and Slayer together, never mind Damien and his monster. I try to turn my head away, but Damien’s hold on me is absolute.

The head of his cock pushes into my mouth a little, and that’s as wide as I can go. I whimper and close my eyes, unable to stop a few tears from rolling down my cheeks.

Slayer doesn’t move to try to make it easier on Damien, either. He keeps fucking my mouth, teasing Damien’s cock but not letting him in. They have to know there’s no way they can both fit in my mouth. It’s just impossible. But from the way Damien is trying...

God, is there anything he won’t do for Giulio?

Damien's cock glides over my cheek, over my nose, getting close to my lips before Slayer's in there to push him away again. It's like it's some kind of game to him, and I don't have to look up at him to know he's grinning as he keeps Damien out of my mouth.

"Look how red she is. So turned on. Loves being our little slut," Giulio says, mouthing at my neck. "Although, Slayer, you're *both* supposed to get in her mouth."

"She's a chick, Jules. She doesn't have your massive trap. Not my fault she can't handle Damien's... *mouthful*." Slayer thrusts into my mouth again, not at all concerned about what I can or can't handle. I have to swallow the saliva that's building up. Some of it escapes anyway, slipping down my chin.

Giulio chuckles and pinches my nipple again. "Yeah, yeah. But I want to see her stretched around Damien now. Just take turns. If I can share my.... Uh, beautiful wife? That's what we were doing, right? If I can share my beautiful wife with you, you can be gracious guests."

"You could kick out your ungrateful guest," Damien suggests, still deadpan, still rubbing his cock all over my face.

I reach up to try to grab his wrist and push him away, but it's like trying to move a brick wall. It always is, with Damien, who sets his sights on something and goes after it with a one-track mind.

"I'm not being ungrateful," Slayer protests. "I'm just making sure to give the missus a proper gift here." But reluctantly, he pulls back.

My mouth is only free long enough for me to get in a quick breath of air before Damien's cock is replacing it, wider and longer, already jamming into my throat as I gag around him. There's nowhere to go, but I still struggle, because this is more intense than giving Slayer a blowjob.

All that does, though, is make Giulio moan as I writhe around on him.

And it makes his cock rub up against those perfect places inside of me, threatening to push me closer to yet another unwanted climax.

“Hey,” Giulio says, because even while having sex he can’t shut up. “Hey, you should... you should leave your... gifts.” He laughs, but it devolves into a moan. “Leave your gifts on her. On her face. So I can kiss it off her.”

Damien freezes for a second before slamming into me again, cutting off my air and making me choke around his cock. I start to panic and struggle, and despite how desperate I am to breathe and the way the pain is already building, my movements only cause Giulio’s cock to pulse and slide inside me. The pleasure almost overwhelms the fear.

Almost.

Slayer rubs the head of his cock against my cheek, against my nose. I close my eyes as I try to think about anything other than cock even when I’m confronted with three of them that I can’t escape no matter how hard I try. Even while I’m choking on Damien’s cock, Slayer doesn’t let off at all, and I hear the furious slap of flesh on flesh as he starts jacking himself off.

“She’s gonna look so hot with cum all over her face,” Slayer crows, then lets out another groan before I feel the first wave of it splash across my face.

My tears are rolling faster down my cheeks now, but it’ll do nothing to get rid of any of his thick cum.

“Damien, come on, you too, you too.” Giulio slaps Damien’s thigh, and Damien pulls out.

I take a shuddering sob of a breath, squeezing my eyes shut, to keep the cum out or to try to stem the flow of my tears.

I hear the distinct sound of flesh against flesh again, then I feel the next hot spurt land on my other cheek.

The worst part of it all is that Giulio has started pumping up into me, and the pleasure keeps building and building, augmented by the scent of cum so close to my nostrils, the scent of so much that’s *male* and *sexual*. My body can’t seem to separate itself from my mind now any more than it ever can,

and before I know it, I'm clenching Giulio's cock inside of me out of pleasure instead of from coercion as I come around him.

"Fuck, fuck," Giulio repeats, mouthing at my exposed neck. It's going to bruise. Everybody is going to take one look at me and know what they've been doing to me.

It doesn't stop my climax from feeling good. It doesn't stop my cunt from trying to wring Giulio's cock dry.

I'm openly sobbing when I finally feel Giulio finish inside me. He pulls me closer, so that I'm resting against him, and he tilts my head to kiss my cum-stained face.

"So fucking hot," Giulio murmurs. "I felt her squeeze me while you guys were coming on her face. That turn you on, Mama?"

"No," I whimper, shaking my head desperately even though it's mostly a lie. Something about it had gotten me going, and I don't even know what it was. "Please, just... leave me alone, I didn't want it."

"You should get her a pretty pearl necklace for her to remember tonight by," Slayer says with a laugh. "I think housewives look good in pearls and an apron."

Giulio chuckles and licks my jaw. "I heard about, um, some people are making literal cum necklaces. On the internet. Can you believe that?"

"Shut up. That's not real," Slayer says. He grabs a napkin off the table and wipes his dick before grabbing his pants. "Stop believing everything you read online."

"We are not putting a cum necklace on Vanessa," Damien says while he cleans himself up. "Although I agree with Slayer. It's not real."

My heart is finally starting to slow down, and all I want is to get off Giulio's lap. But his arms are still firmly around me, keeping me in place.

"They don't believe me!" Giulio says with mock hurt. "But look, they can agree on something. Now... Who's up for dessert?"

VANESSA

Slayer's arm on me is too heavy. I want to move it, but I don't want to risk waking him and having him decide to do... anything else. I'm already sore all over from the fun they've had with me this evening.

At least they finally got bored of torturing me, their orgasms catching up to them. I'd heard most men can't handle many—especially not somebody of Damien's age—but apparently, I just got so lucky, landing with men who don't understand the definition of a refractory period.

I squirm, and I feel the sticky semen clinging to my thighs. Ugh, I want to clean up. At least I... I probably won't get pregnant from all this. The sponge is still inside me, but I know I can't risk removing it while I'm here at Giulio's apartment.

I do want to use the bathroom though. I shift carefully, wondering how I can get Slayer's arm off me.

The mattress dips a bit.

"You're awake?" Giulio whispers, directly into my ear. "We didn't tire you out?"

Damn it. The last thing I need is for him to have had an even more exceptional recovery time and decide he wants me just because I'm awake. But I can't pretend to be asleep, especially since I'm not even close. As exhausted as I am, it's just too hot and too full of overwhelming testosterone in the room.

“Exhausted,” I say. “Just... can’t sleep. Need to use the bathroom,” I tell him. Maybe he can get Slayer to move and distract him if he wakes up.

Giulio yawns and sits up, tossing Damien’s arm aside. I tense up, expecting Damien to wake, but he only grumbles and rolls onto his other side.

“Sure. Come on.” He tosses the sheet off himself—one of three they’d dragged onto the bed—and climbs over Damien to get off the bed.

The curtains are still open, and the city lights offer just enough illumination for me to watch Giulio grab a pair of boxer briefs from his drawer and pull them on. He yawns again, then turns around to face me. “Aren’t you coming?”

I hesitate again. Slayer’s arm feels so heavy on me. I go to move it, expecting him to just shift out of the way like Damien had, but his eyes snap open and he stares at me. He grabs my wrist, as though he’s just caught me doing something I’m not supposed to be, and I freeze.

“Where are you going?” he asks, his voice rough with sleep.

“Bathroom,” I whisper, trembling from his reaction.

Slayer glances up, seeing Giulio standing there. He nods, as though that’s all the confirmation he needs, and lets go. I quickly shuffle to the foot of the bed then slide off, my heart racing.

When I glance back over, Slayer has pulled a pillow over his head, hiding from the light.

I let out a slow breath and go to Giulio. “Is he part pit bull?” I can’t help but ask, still feeling a little shaky from Slayer’s response.

“Either that or part pig?” Giulio hands me an oversized shirt, which I quickly pull on.

It’s long enough that it reaches mid-thigh, at least. If I were shorter, it would have been a decent nightshirt.

Giulio smiles at me and presses a kiss to my lips softly. “Mm. You do look hot like that. Okay. Bathroom.” He guides me towards the ensuite... and to my dismay, he follows me inside.

Once the door is mostly closed, he flips the light switch. I blink against the bright light, but the bathroom doesn't look any different from the last time I was here.

Giulio wanders over to the sink and grabs a toothbrush. I watch with a strange disconnect as he starts casually brushing his teeth.

After a few moments, he turns around to look at me. “You forget how to pee?” he asks, words a bit muffled by the toothbrush.

I blush. “Well, no, but... I didn't think you'd be in here while I did. I'll just wait until you're done...” I trail off. Watching me pee seems like something Damien would do, not Giulio, so I go to the door to wait for him to finish brushing his teeth.

“Nah, go ahead. No point in waiting for me.” Giulio motions towards the toilet, which even has a bidet next to it. At least there's a little wall between the toilet and the sink, offering a very, very small measure of privacy.

I reluctantly go deeper into the bathroom to the toilet, but the idea of someone listening to me pee is almost enough to make me stop needing to go. Almost.

I sit down on the seat, my cheeks burning as I try to make myself pee with him standing so close.

The faucet turns on again, and I use that noise as a way to mask what I'm doing.

Of course, he turns the water off before I'm done, and I have to listen to the sound of my pissing echo in the marble bathroom.

Giulio walks over and leans against the dividing wall. He folds his arms across his chest while he watches me. “This embarrassing you?” he asks, with a slight quirk to his lips.

I glare at him. “Isn’t it obvious?” I retort, humiliation making my voice sharp. “You enjoying this?”

“Only ‘cause you look cute all red like that. Watersports isn’t really my thing.” Giulio taps his jaw, like he’s pretending to think. “I bet Damien gets off on it though. He seems like the type, right?”

I blink at him. “Watersports?” I wipe myself, getting quickly off the toilet and going to the sink to wash my hands while I try to get over some of the shame of feeling so violated.

Giulio laughs, and I hear him pissing too. I quickly turn the faucet on all the way to mask the sound. “Watersports, yeah. That means piss kink. Don’t ask me how it works, man. I’m pretty vanilla.”

“You?” I can’t help but laugh, though the sound is a bit forced, and my cheeks fill with color. “Vanilla?” I don’t want to think about how a piss kink would play into things, or whether Damien would be interested, or anything like that.

The toilet flushes, and Giulio wanders back toward the sink. He boxes me in, reaching forward to awkwardly wash his hands.

“You forgot to flush,” he says.

I blush. He has me so flustered that something that simple had completely escaped me, and I don’t know what to say about it. I mumble an apology, trying to squirm past him to dry my hands and put distance between us. He doesn’t let me move, though, keeping his front pressed against my back. His cock is thankfully uninterested, but I go still, not wanting to change that.

I’m surprised when he finishes washing his hands and backs away without more than a small kiss to my neck.

“You heading back to bed?” Giulio asks, glancing toward the door. “I bet Damien and Slayer are missing you.”

I shudder. Yeah. I’m sure they are missing me, but not in ways I want to be missed. Damien had been out cold, but I know Slayer will wake up the second I try to get back into

bed. I'm not ready to be used like a human teddy bear just yet, but I don't know what Giulio has planned, either. "I'm pretty awake," I say cautiously. "What are you going to do?" Hopefully just watch some TV or something *normal* for once.

"Go take care of Antonia and watch some of the others. I've got a few nocturnal reptiles that are more interesting to observe at this time of night." Giulio grins at me. "You want to watch me feed one of them?"

I blanch at that. Why would I want to get closer to those things than I need to be? I still remember the last time he showed me his reptile room, far too well. "I... Not really," I say honestly. "I don't like them. And you like scaring me with them."

Giulio chuckles and shakes his head. "Nah. I mean, yeah, you're fun to scare, but I'm really not a teenager anymore. Plus, I don't want to stress them out too much. There's no point in investing this much money in my pets if I'm going to endanger their health."

He has no problem scaring *me*, or endangering *my* health, I think darkly. He's well aware of that, though, and there's no need to point it out. I do give him a look, though, one he only returns with a smirk.

Yeah, he definitely knows what I'm thinking.

If sex is off the table, it might be interesting to see the things. After how many times the guys had fucked me earlier that night, I'm not surprised he needs recovery time, and I'm pretty sure I can count on him not being up for it any time soon.

"They still scare me," I say. "Can I just watch TV or something?"

"And risk you getting more ideas? Next you'll want to read books!" Giulio hooks his arm around my waist. "Come on. They're only scary if you don't know anything about them. You're hundreds of times bigger and heavier than most of them. Trust me, they're more worried you'll squash or eat them than the other way around."

“Okay,” I say weakly. “But I want to be able to go back to bed if I get too freaked out.”

“They will never leave their enclosures,” Giulio promises as he leads me out. He hits the light switch on the bathroom before we go, plunging us into darkness.

I glance over to the bed, and although it’s hard to see, I think Slayer and Damien have drifted closer to the center of the large bed. There isn’t space for both Giulio and me in the middle anymore.

Maybe I can convince Giulio to take that spot, and I’ll just sleep on the couch.

The rest of the condo is just as dark, and I have to rely on Giulio to guide us through the place.

“Do you walk around in the dark a lot?” I ask in a whisper.

“Only when I’ve got guests I don’t want to disturb,” Giulio answers. I can hear the smile in his voice.

He stops in front of one door and pushes in. I expect it to be just as dark, so I’m surprised by the low, red light that illuminates some of the enclosures. Dim floor lights highlight a path around the room.

Giulio shuts the door behind us and lets go of me. “Any of the red light enclosures are the nocturnal reptiles. Leave the other ones alone. They’re all asleep.”

Yeah, somehow I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.

He wanders away to a wall with shelves, a mini fridge, and a sink. Giulio takes something out of the sink with tongs and places it on a plate.

He really is going to feed something. And it was sitting in the sink for at least the entirety of dinner, while they were having their way with me. Ugh.

I quickly look away from him to focus on the nocturnal enclosures. It’s hard to see what’s in any of them from over here. I don’t want to go closer, but I don’t just want to stand there like an idiot, either. I inch a bit nearer to one of the larger enclosures, startled when I see a lizard moving along a wide

branch suspended from one end to the other. I freeze like it's going to jump through the glass and maim me, but it only flicks its tongue in the air.

“What's it doing?” I ask, my voice a little breathless with fear. Is it some sort of threat?

Giulio wanders over with the plate of... something I'm not going to look at. He stops next to me to peer into the enclosure.

“Oh, that's Carmen. She's a crested gecko. I already fed her today, so she's just chilling. You know, she was terrified when Slayer got close, but I guess you aren't as threatening.” Giulio points towards the corner of the enclosure. “If she wanted to, she could hide there. Or among the other plants. But she's chilled a lot in the year since I've gotten her.” Giulio holds up the plate and wraps his hand around my wrist. “Let's go give Antonia a treat.”

“Let's not,” I squeak, trying to pull away from him with even more vigor than I'd have expected from myself. “I don't want to go near that... that thing. The other ones are... are okay.” No, they're really not. “But not that one. The snake is... No.”

Giulio laughs again, but he keeps pulling me along. “I promise, she's not coming out of her enclosure today. As soon as she spots the rat, all she's going to do is spend the next hour swallowing it. And I wouldn't bother her while she's eating.”

No matter how much I resist, I find myself being drawn closer to the snake's enclosure. I'm trembling, and I wish I had just gone back to bed and risked Slayer waking up for another quickie.

I shake my head. “N-no. I wouldn't bother it while it's eating either.” I shudder as we get closer and closer. “Please, Giulio, just let me go stand by the door,” I plead. “It was dumb of me to come in here with you.”

“Come on, Antonia has been way better to you than Slayer, Damien, or I have been,” Giulio says, still smiling. “Look, you

can grab that stool and just sit right there in front of the enclosure. Think of it as exposure therapy.”

From the way he squeezes my wrist, I don't think he's asking me nicely.

My shoulders slump, and I nod. “I'll go get the stool,” I say, hating how defeated I sound. But then, I'm never going to come out on top when it comes to Giulio or the others. They have me firmly outclassed in every way, and if Giulio wants me to get near the snake, I'm... going to have to get near the snake.

Giulio kisses my forehead, the plate—and the dead rat on it—coming dangerously close to me.

Then he turns to the enclosure, unlatching the front and sliding the glass to the side. “Antonia, baby. Aren't you lucky, you get to join the dinner party after all.”

The snake, which had been sitting coiled at the bottom of one of the branches, lifts its head and begins slithering closer to Giulio. I grimace as it approaches.

What if Giulio is wrong? What if it darts past him and out of the enclosure, into the room. Slithering around me, constricting me—

Giulio uses the tongs to wave the rat around a bit. The snake's tongue flicks a few times before it strikes the dead rat, its body coiling around it.

Giulio closes the enclosure again and comes to stand next to me, putting the plate and tongs on the nearby table. “Watching her never gets old.”

I shudder, staring without daring to move as I watch it. That could be me. That could've been me. It could've curled around my neck and strangled me with its long body. I grope for the stool I never bothered to sit in, sitting heavily down onto it as I struggle to keep my composure. “It's terrifying,” I whisper.

“Why? You're too big for her. Her mouth wouldn't stretch to fit even a baby, never mind anybody your height.”

Great. Now I'm going to have nightmares about snakes trying to eat babies. Thanks a lot, Giulio.

"It doesn't have to try to eat me. It could strangle me. Aren't you afraid it'll curl around your neck and do... that?" I ask. I want to close my eyes, but I feel like if I stop looking, it'll come for me.

"Eh, she's large, but as long as you keep her from wrapping around your neck entirely, no big deal. She's not stronger than I am, and I've raised her since she was practically born. She has no reason to attack at all." Giulio ruffles my hair. "In the wild, they'll eat maybe once every few weeks. Her favorite prey is small mammals, birds, and lizards. We really aren't on the menu."

I shake my head. I'm still not convinced that it isn't something to be afraid of. Giulio casually calls it *her* and references it like it's a person or a proper pet, but no. "Can we look at one of the others?" I ask, my voice trembling a little as I watch the snake start to devour its... snack.

"Sure. Most of the geckos are nocturnal, and I've got a few smaller snakes that should be active. I fed them all earlier today though. It's just Antonia's food that takes a bit longer to thaw."

I don't really want to see any of them, but they're better than... *Antonia*.

"Why do you even like these things?" I blurt out. "They're all scaly and creepy and just..." I shudder. At least they don't smell bad, which is something I would've expected.

Giulio wanders over to a long enclosure that's halfway up the shelves. "They're so cool, though. Beautiful and elegant. Sure, most of them are stupider than your average baby, but it's still nice to watch them."

I quickly go to stand next to him, glad to be away from the big snake. The dim light makes it hard to see what's inside this enclosure, which is styled more like a desert environment than a tropical one.

“Why not like... a cat or a dog? They’d have to be worlds easier to deal with than reptiles,” I remark, peering into the enclosure. There’s another lizard inside, with a proper amount of legs, at least. Its skin is a tan color with dark spots patterning its entire body.

“Dogs and cats are pretty boring, though. Common.” Giulio moves his finger in front of the enclosure without tapping the glass. The lizard’s eyes follow the movement. “Plus, my old man got rid of the family dog when I was like eight.”

I stare at him. I don’t know what exactly he means by ‘get rid of,’ but from everything I know about Emilio Pavone, it probably wasn’t pretty. “I’m sorry,” I say quietly. I don’t even ask why. I don’t want to know, don’t want him to confirm that there probably wasn’t even a reason for it. Not that having a reason would make it any better. “You just seem more like a cat person,” I say feebly.

“I’m clearly a snake person,” Giulio answers with a chuckle. “Colorado here is a leopard gecko, by the way. He’s about six years old. Did you know, most reptiles live longer than mammals of similar sizes?”

“How long do they live?” I ask, edging back just a little when I don’t think he’s paying attention. Maybe he’s distracted enough by the talk about the lizard to realize I’m trying to get farther away from them.

“Leopard geckos can get to fifteen years or so. Ball pythons, thirty. So Antonia’s got a good twenty years left in her. Why would I want a dog with a ten-year lifespan, and so overbred it’ll probably get cancer before the end?” Giulio grabs my waist and pulls me closer to him.

I tense, but all he does is rest his chin against my shoulder.

“I know I said I liked you being tall, but it’s really convenient. Don’t have to bend down for you or anything.”

Somehow, I don’t think Giulio has a problem bending over for anyone, especially Damien or Slayer, but I don’t say that aloud. I don’t know if he’d find it funny or if it would piss him

off. Probably the former, but... I'm not willing to risk it. I make a noncommittal sound because I don't really know what to say.

"You never said why your college boyfriend broke up with you." Giulio places one hand flat against my stomach. Even through the shirt, it feels really hot. "Since I answered all of your questions, it's only fair you answer mine."

"I still don't know that you answered mine honestly," I point out. "And I don't want to talk about it."

"What do you want to do instead?" Giulio's hand moves a little lower. "And I'm always honest."

I fight the urge to grimace. I don't want him to get any ideas. I grab his hand, trying to keep it from sliding down even more. "I wasn't good enough for him, all right?" I respond sharply, and I shouldn't be so fucking surprised to find tears rolling down my cheeks. I'd cried plenty after he broke up with me, after all. "I wasn't what he wanted."

But he'd been content to keep using me even after we'd broken up, something my sister had been absolutely furious about. For a while, I was half-convinced she was going to go off and confront him behind my back.

Giulio pulls away and gives me a strange expression. "Not good enough for him? What the fuck does that mean?"

I give a noncommittal shrug. "You said so yourself. I'm too tall. Too flat. Too boring."

He spins me so we're looking directly at each other, but I avert my gaze.

"No, I did not say you were too tall. I just said you're a great height. I definitely don't think you're too flat, because in case you haven't noticed, I really dig your body type. And trust me, if I actually thought you were boring, not even Damien could have convinced me to keep you around."

I still don't look at him. "Look, it's no big deal. I am what I am, and I just wasn't what he wanted. He let me down gently enough." After we'd started having sex. After I'd given him my virginity. After I'd started to really like him. "So yeah." I

shrug as nonchalantly as I can, but my shoulders are too tense for it to be convincing.

Giulio doesn't say anything for long enough that I get worried. I dare to peek at him. His face is only highlighted by the red light of the terrarium, but there's a terrifying grin on his lips.

"Sure. No big deal. You said his name was Brad? And you went to... Benton U, right?"

I don't like the look on his face. My sister would probably gleefully plot his demise with Giulio, but I'm just... not like that. I don't want anything bad to happen to him just because I wasn't his type.

Even if his words had hurt so much.

"Chad," I lie with as much conviction as I can muster. "But I'm not giving you his last name. For fuck's sake, you'd think you cared about me or something with how pissed you're getting about this."

"Right, so this *Brad* guy, what's he look like?" Giulio takes my hand and finally leads us out of the reptile room. "Your height, possibly an inch or so shorter, I bet. The kind of guy who can't handle a lady who's taller than him. I bet he had a small dick too, right? Smaller than Slayer—who isn't actually small, let's be real here, but it's hilarious how pissed he gets when I bring it up."

I breathe a sigh of relief when we exit the room, but I'm still tense from the line of questioning. "I'm not answering your questions. I'm ready to go back to bed." I start toward the bedroom, and I remember I'm going to have to figure out a new sleeping arrangement. Damien seems like he sleeps the heaviest, so he's the one I want to sleep by.

But something that surprises a laugh out of me is that now there's plenty of room on both sides of Damien and Slayer, because they're practically cuddled up against each other in the middle of the bed.

Giulio covers his mouth to suppress a laugh of his own. "Fuck, where's my phone. I need a pic of this." He lets go of

me and walks to the nightstand, picking up the phone lying there. There's a brief flash of light as he takes a picture.

Neither Damien nor Slayer stir.

"You want to spoon Damien or Slayer?" Giulio asks me. "I don't care which side I sleep on."

"Damien," I say, hoping I'm not making the wrong decision. But Slayer seems like he'll snap awake the second someone lies down next to him, and I don't want to be trapped in his arms again.

"Sure." Giulio walks over to the other side of the bed, grabbing the sheet that had pooled near the foot of the bed. He carefully sits down next to Slayer's sleeping body. "I think the last time I cuddled with Slayer, he'd been stabbed. He's gonna love waking up like this."

I can't suppress my smile. Oh, yeah. He's going to love waking up between Damien and Giulio, all right. It's all worth it to lie next to Damien, just for that alone.

I just hope I wake up when they realize they're cuddled close enough to be lovers.

DAMIEN

I park my car in the lot behind Ntimacy and finally pick up my phone, which has been buzzing with texts from Giulio for the past hour.

I know they're from Giulio, because he's the only one who would bother me this incessantly even after I'd texted that I was driving.

There are several photos included in the long text chain. They're all identical except for the filters and overlays.

It's the photo of me and Slayer sleeping next to each other. In one version, Giulio stamped hearts all around us. In another, he did a horrible edit job to make it look like we're almost kissing. One has sparkles.

I can't decide which version is my favorite. Maybe I should print and frame them all.

After two days, I had hoped Giulio would grow bored of this. Reacting in any way at all will only encourage him, though, so I simply text back, *I'm at Ntimacy now.*

If Giulio wants to display the photo, there's nothing I can do to stop him.

My phone buzzes again.

Say hi to Vanessa for me. Give her a nice big dick for me.

After a few seconds, another text follows. *Not too big. My cock's not as large as yours.*

Since I'm alone, I allow myself a small smile. It's a bad idea to encourage Giulio, but I admit, he does make me laugh... when he isn't giving me headaches.

There's nothing else to say to Giulio, so I grab the plastic bag sitting next to me and head inside the club.

It's almost midnight on a Friday, which means there are a decent number of clients packed into the club. It's strange that even a place as seedy as this has its steady clientele, but we're practically the only game in this part of town. It's a far cry from what our operations in Benton City had looked like.

That's a headache I don't want to think about right now.

I notice Paul sitting by the bar, so I squeeze past the tables toward him. "Paul," I greet.

Paul visibly startles at my voice. "Oh! Damien, uh, hi."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes at him. He isn't cut out for this job, something I'm even more aware of after the incident with the undercover cop.

Which is another situation I hope has already resolved itself. I'll need to reach out to Slayer to see how that investigation is going. As far as I know, the body should be unrecoverable, but it's still a huge risk we took for no good reason.

"Are you being careful?" I ask, keeping my eyes trained on him. A good stare is often all I need to intimidate somebody, especially a man as spineless as Paul.

Paul laughs nervously. "Careful? About what?"

"The clients." I stop there, because we are still in public, and Paul isn't *that* dumb. I hope.

"Oh. That. Um. Yeah. I'll keep an eye on... shoes. And I'll call you if I notice anything at all." Paul shrugs.

He doesn't sound that sure of himself. I really need to sit down with him at some point and go over protocol again, but I'm exhausted from all the work I've already done today, and all I want is to see Vanessa.

“Don’t leave until I’ve spoken to you later,” I say. I wait until he nods, then I head toward the employees only door and up the stairs to Vanessa’s room.

The new lock is more secure, although I wish it weren’t necessary. Maybe in the future we can have her walking around freely again, once she’s settled in and realized that we’re the best thing for her.

I open the door, gripping my bag tightly, and head inside.

Vanessa is on the bed, fast asleep. She doesn’t even stir when I close the door behind me, and it gives me a moment to properly study her. She’s beautiful when she’s awake, even if she’s so wary and skittish. But seeing how peaceful she looks right now reminds me of what we can have when she just gives in. She could be this way all of the time.

I set the bag down on the foot of the bed and lean down, lightly stroking her hair. She shifts a little in her sleep, her lips slightly parting, and I run my fingers along them. They’re so soft and plush, and it’s tempting to wake her with my cock in her mouth.

But I don’t want to startle her too much.

I draw back, whispering, “Vanessa?”

Her breathing changes, no longer as deep and peaceful, and she blinks her eyes open. Groggily, she stares at me, rubbing her eyes and fighting back a yawn. The contentedness she’d shown in sleep turns to that same wariness she always shows around me, and it’s really a shame. “Hi,” she mumbles.

“Hi,” I answer, leaning down to kiss her gently.

She tenses briefly, then gives in and parts her lips for me.

I linger a little on the kiss, enjoying how pliant she is for me, before reluctantly standing up again. “How was your day?” I ask, stroking her arm.

She shrugs, sitting up to look at me. “It was okay. I—” A yawn interrupts her words, and she smothers it with the back of her hand. “I went through some of the books today.” She frowns.

“And?” I ask, curious about why she looks disturbed. Going through the books I gave her shouldn’t be that difficult. There are numbers about some of the girls being sold, but it’s disguised, so she wouldn’t realize what they were about.

“Something isn’t adding up right,” Vanessa says slowly. “I can’t find where the discrepancy is, but there’s... something.” She shakes her head. “I was supposed to take forensic accounting when I went back to school, so it’s not something I’m really experienced with, but I’ll keep looking at it.”

“Forensic accounting?” I grab the bag I’d brought along. “I thought you were planning to become a simple CPA in California. A very standard job.”

“It’s a requirement for my curriculum,” Vanessa explains. “It’s mostly just a way to track things down.”

I nod and pass the bag to Vanessa. “I brought you a souvenir, by the way.”

She takes the bag slowly and peers inside. “What’s this?”

“I was in Benton City today. I saw it and thought of you.” I watch as she pulls out the small assortment of soap, shampoo, conditioner, and lotions. They’re from an indie store Benton City is famous for, which happened to be on my way between meetings. I couldn’t resist picking up a gift for Vanessa.

These are better than the bath products supplied by the club.

Vanessa has never seemed vain, but surely what I brought will be welcome. It’ll be enjoyable to rub lotion all over her body, too, and run my fingers through especially silken hair. The gift is for her, certainly, but I’ll still benefit from it.

She sniffs one of the lotions, then another, taking her time as she goes through the items in the bag. “Thank you,” she finally says after a few moments.

I can’t tell what she really thinks of them, which is disappointing. It’s not like I expected her to gush all over them like a schoolgirl, but something other than a tepid ‘thank you’ would’ve been nice. I frown at her. “Do you like them?” I press, sitting down next to her.

“I do,” she says, and she offers me a small smile. “It’s much nicer than what I’ve been using. Thank you. I’m used to having... quality things for my hair, and I’ve missed having lotion.”

I smile back at her, then I put my hand on the back of her neck and rub gently. “Let me know if you need anything else. I can always put in an order for more items.”

“Can I have more clothes?” Vanessa asks immediately. Her muscles tense underneath my touch.

My smile slips away. “I’ll tell Giulio you requested it. He probably has a few things in mind for you to wear.”

She doesn’t look happy about that. She stares down at the bottles in front of her, popping open one of the lotions and using it on her hands and arms. “You mean schoolgirl uniforms and puppy play outfits? Or for me to dress like one of his snakes?” she asks, though the words sound more dejected than vitriolic.

I snort a small laugh. “I don’t think he has any snake costumes. I won’t tell him you suggested it. But, Vanessa, the last time you had a full set of clothing, you attempted to run. We’re being cautious.”

“It wasn’t a suggestion,” Vanessa mutters. “But no, don’t even tell him I mentioned it sarcastically or he’ll probably find one.” She sighs though, rubbing the lotion into her skin without looking up at me. “And I know why you’re being cautious, but that was before he told me about Stef. I’m not going to do anything to make life harder for her here.”

I want to believe Vanessa. She’s empathetic and caring, which is the reason I was drawn to her in the first place. But plenty of people... change, when kept in environments like this. Hopefully, she holds on to her pure core.

I let my hand trail down her back, along her spine. “Did anybody visit you today?” I ask, changing the subject.

She sets the bottle of lotion aside, then picks it up again to put the bath products in the bag I’d brought them in. “No,” she

says. “Stef brought me downstairs for a little bit, but that was all.”

“You must have been lonely,” I say, leaning down to kiss her shoulder. “I missed you, too.”

Giulio would be laughing now, because we both know that Vanessa doesn’t miss us when we’re gone. But someday, she will. I put my hand on her hip to keep her from moving away from me.

She’s learning to pretend for Giulio. She can let me pretend, too.

“Damien... I just want to go back to sleep,” she tells me, shaking my head. She puts her hand on top of mine, trying to push it away. “Thanks for the gifts and all, but I’m really tired.”

I tilt her head so I can look her in the eyes. She doesn’t look any different from usual, and if the only thing she’s done today is walk around a bit with Stef, she hasn’t been doing anything strenuous. Since it’s close to midnight, she’d probably been sleeping for hours already by the time I arrived.

“I had a long day,” I tell her. “I had to negotiate with people who have high tempers and are very upset about your father’s convenient death, and how the Bellini women are now getting away with everything consequence free. Do you know how I stayed calm throughout it all?”

“What do you mean, the Bellini women are getting away with everything without consequences?” she demands, tensing as she tries again to pull away from me. She completely ignores my question. “I think we’re experiencing some pretty severe consequences, don’t you?”

I’ve seen the photos of what Victor Corvi has had done to our men, and I’ve heard the stories of the new person who clings to his side, ordering the vicious hits.

The rumors that one Bellini woman, at least, is thriving in captivity.

I don’t think Vanessa needs to know about that.

“You’re both being pampered and protected by powerful people. A lot of your father’s former allies would rather see you tortured and killed.” I tighten my grip on her jaw. “How do you think I stayed calm all day?”

“You always stay calm,” she snaps. “Even when Giulio is being a dick. You don’t lose your temper. It’s not like it’s anything new, and it certainly has nothing to do with me. You’ve always been like this.”

It would be easy to move my hand to her beautiful, slim neck and squeeze. To see her gasping for air, eyes turning glassy.

But that’s another game I don’t want to play when I’m not feeling my best. I kiss her cheek gently in apology for even having thought about it.

“I don’t lose sight of my goal,” I answer. “I know what I’m working toward, and why. I knew I’d see you today, and that everything I’ve done so far has been worth it simply for that.”

Vanessa shakes her head. “You really are delusional, aren’t you?” she asks, her voice sounding so bitter that I’m a little surprised. She’s been so well-behaved recently. I don’t know why she’s being so prickly with me.

“I’m realistic,” I respond calmly. “I know how this world works. I thought you’ve been learning it, too.” Then I sigh and back off a little. “Would you prefer if I call Giulio and tell him about how my day’s been going?”

She goes still at that. “What are you saying? I know you’re threatening me, but I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

I pull out my phone and open the texts from Giulio. One of the photos is still visible in the texting chain.

I click over to the response line and begin typing, *Vanessa doesn’t want a dicking.*

“Should I send this?” I ask her. It feels a little underhanded, invoking Giulio, but I really am tired, and all I want is to enjoy an hour or so with Vanessa. I don’t get to see her as often as I would like, not with how busy I am managing the messes Giulio’s father—and Vanessa’s father—left behind.

“N-no,” Vanessa says hurriedly. “You don’t need to tell him anything like that. What do you want from me, Damien? For me to pretend I want this? That I want you?”

“I want you to accept us.” I put my phone away without sending the message and place my hands on her shoulders, rubbing soothingly. “And we always make sure you enjoy yourself too. You’re... extremely lucky that it wasn’t *you* Emilio took a liking to.”

She’d seen what Emilio Pavone, Giulio’s father, had done to her sister. Even for Emilio, I thought it was a bit gruesome to fuck the sister in front of Vanessa and their mother, with their father’s corpse cooling in the room.

She pales at that, shuddering as the same memory probably hits her. Whatever thought it is that pops into her mind is enough to make her back down. “Okay,” she whispers. “What do you want me to do?”

“Unbutton my shirt,” I say. “Help me undress. And then you can ride me. That way, you’ll be in control.”

Vanessa flinches and shakes her head minutely, but she does begin unbuttoning my shirt with trembling hands. It’s adorable how carefully she does it—to stall for time, probably, but I don’t mind.

Once my shirt is open, I reluctantly let go of her so I can take it and my undershirt off. Then I reach for the hem of the shirt she’s wearing. “Take this off. I want to see all of you.”

She briefly closes her eyes, but she nods and unbuttons the shirt she’s wearing—one of mine that looks so gorgeous on her—and lets it fall down to the bed around her.

I kiss the side of her neck while tugging at her leg. She allows me to get her ankle on the bed, and I pull away from her to unlock the ankle cuff.

Throughout it all, Vanessa eyes me warily.

I wish the chains weren’t necessary, but I can’t risk a repeat of her escape attempt.

“Now your panties,” I tell her.

She gets out of bed, her cheeks filling with color as she steps out of her panties. She's completely nude in front of me now and just as utterly gorgeous as ever, and I urge her down for a kiss.

"And my pants," I prompt her, kicking off my shoes. "You can just shove them down if you want, or you can take them the whole way off so I can embrace you after we've both had our orgasms."

I lift my hips to accommodate her. Somewhat predictably, she only pushes my pants and boxers to my knees, and it makes me a little sad because I want to cuddle with her after. An hour here and there just isn't enough for me, but it's so hard to even find that much time.

I stretch out along the bed, and without being told, she gets astride me. She goes meek and shy, sitting back just behind my half-hard cock, tantalizingly close.

I smile at her and move her hand to my cock. "Get me hard. Feel free to use your mouth, if you want, but I want to come inside you. To... to help you get pregnant."

I wish I could say that last bit with more conviction, but I doubt she notices my hesitation. Giulio had fucked her two days ago, but it was extremely early in her cycle, so she probably isn't pregnant yet.

I can pretend she is, though. I look at her stomach, which is soft and has just a small hint of a belly. She used to be very active, but now that she's confined to one room, her entire body has grown a little softer.

She doesn't look happy, but she starts stroking my cock. She's gotten better at it since we'd first taken her, though I wish she'd have chosen to use her mouth instead. Well, that's what I get for having given her an option. I should know by now that I simply need to be firm with her and tell her what I want her to do.

I don't like that I nearly had to tell Giulio she wasn't cooperating to get her to comply, but she'll learn in time. She

just needs to be around me more and realize I'm not going to hurt her or humiliate her like I know Slayer does.

I groan in encouragement as she strokes my cock, and it doesn't take long for me to get hard. She still keeps stroking with her hand, though, like she expects to make me spend that way instead of getting inside of her.

I put my hand on her wrist and pull. "Come here. Straddle my head and I'll get you nice and wet." I lick my lips so she understands exactly what I mean. "Unless you're already wet?"

Vanessa blanches at that. "I'm wet enough," she says quickly. "I don't need you to... do that."

I arch a brow, reaching down to finger her. She's not wet enough. "Come on," I tell her. "Let me make you feel good. When you're about to come, you can start riding me so you can bring yourself to orgasm. It'll feel amazing."

"It's too..." She shifts uncertainly. "I can't like... get on your... your face like that."

"You can," I reassure her. I reach for her hips and pull. "I'll enjoy it, too. I love making you feel good. You remember from last time, don't you?"

Vanessa bites her lip and averts her gaze. Her skin flushes red, too, and I know she must be remembering how good it felt to have my tongue on her.

She lets me slide her forward, but she stays upright as much as she can instead of dipping down so I can get my tongue right up against her clit.

"Don't be shy," I coax her. "Settle down right here, just over my mouth."

Vanessa carefully lowers her body, and I use my grasp on her hips to guide her so that she's where I want her to be. I pull her farther down, until just a flick of my tongue can reach her clit.

She lets out a little squeak, and I smile against her cunt. Her legs are already trembling, and she reaches out to brace

herself with the wall by the bed as I start to lick her more intently.

Her juices smear across my face, wiped off mostly on my half-beard and scruff, and within a few minutes, she's rocking against me. I don't think she realizes she's doing it, but she's pushing down just a little harder. I don't mind. It makes it easier to thrust my tongue up into her, to tongue-fuck her in a semblance of what I intend to do with my cock as soon as she's close enough to orgasm.

While my tongue laves her clit, I run a finger over her hole. She freezes up, but once I have my finger inside her, rubbing insistently, she can't control her movements. Her thighs tremble and her clit throbs beneath my tongue.

"Please," Vanessa says, begging me to continue.

I'm happy to oblige her. I push my finger in more deeply, searching out her g-spot. The angle is awkward, but it doesn't stop me from finding my target. She squirms more and more, her entire body shuddering as she gets closer.

Only when I'm sure she's on the verge of climax do I withdraw my finger and urge her hips up. "On... on my cock," I grunt. "Hurry, you'll finish as soon as you slide onto me."

Which will feel incredible for me, having her cunt grab me and squeeze me tight inside of her.

She nearly loses her balance, but I notice with pride how quickly she scrambles to straddle me. She takes my pulsing cock into her hand, guiding the head of it to her hole. Without hesitation, she sinks down, letting out a soft, keening sound as she takes me inside of her.

I groan in pleasure, her warm cunt convulsing around me. I keep one hand on her hips while my other hand settles on her stomach, imagining how she'll feel once she's got Giulio's child inside her.

"You're so beautiful," I tell her, thrusting up into her with little movements. "Absolutely perfect."

Vanessa shakes her head again, like she doesn't believe me.

“You are,” I insist, moaning again when her cunt tightens. I let go of her hip and reach up to her small breast, giving the nipple a squeeze. Soon, she’ll be producing milk for our child. Soon, she’ll be glowing.

Soon.

I smile at her while she wrings pleasure out of me. “Keep moving.”

She bites her lip, but she tentatively starts to ride me properly, moving up and down. I can tell each time my cock brushes her g-spot, because her body trembles even more, and I can see how quickly she’s approaching climax. She was already almost there when I got her to move onto my cock, and it’s only seconds before she lets out another cry and tenses around me, her cunt wrapping around me like a warm fist.

I thrust up to get deeper into her, so I can feel her convulsions around my entire length. I drop what little restraint I had and let the pleasure wash over me until I reach my own climax, shooting into her.

She’s breathing hard, still spasming around me, when the last traces of my orgasm are wrung out of me. I set my hands on her hips, steadying her. “You are so beautiful,” I tell her.

Vanessa shivers, but she doesn’t comment.

“Reach down and touch me,” I encourage her. “Get used to the way I feel under you, or over you. We’re going to be together for a very long time, Vanessa. Us, and Giulio.” And Slayer, if Giulio has his way, but I’m not bringing him into this moment.

She hesitates then brings her hands down, running her fingers through the hair on my chest. She’s breathing heavily, her eyes a little dazed, and I take the time to enjoy her in her post-orgasmic state.

I brush her face with my knuckles. Her eyes glisten—the orgasm so good, it brought her to tears.

“Did it feel good, Vanessa?” I ask in a hushed voice so as not to ruin the moment.

She hesitates then nods, and I smile at her.

“Come here,” I tell her. I help her off of me, then pull my pants and boxers the whole way off. “Let’s just lie together for a little bit, all right?” I grab her waist to pull her in close, and she settles into me with her back to my front. I wrap my arm around her and fumble for the sheet to protect us both from the cold of the room, mouthing a kiss at the back of her neck.

She lets me move her, still in a clear daze from the intensity of her climax, and she shivers a little as she settles against me.

I have time for a nap, surely. The door isn’t locked, but she’s not going to get out of my arms without me realizing she’s moving, and it’s not like she can get anywhere without clothes.

“You wanted to go back to sleep,” I murmur against her skin. “Let’s rest together. Maybe I’ll help you come again before I leave.”

Vanessa whimpers, and I nuzzle her. She wants it.

Or at the very least, she’s starting to pretend she does.

VANESSA

Damien doesn't leave until hours later, and even with him gone it's hard for me to fall asleep. I wash off his cum as best I can once he's gone, but I have to hope the sponge inside me is doing its job to prevent me from getting pregnant.

It's a good thing I'd put one in before going to bed. I've been doing that every day, going through these things like tissues just to be sure I'm always prepared.

For all that, they still only offer an 80% protection rate from pregnancy. I squeeze my eyes shut and tell myself that's still better than no protection at all.

Unfortunately, my supply is already getting low. I've had to sneak them out a few at a time, and they never last long.

I'm still drifting in and out of a fitful sleep when the door opens. I tense up, expecting Giulio or Slayer to demand to use me, but it's just Stef with breakfast.

I sigh in relief. "Good morning."

Stef gives me a wan smile in return. "Hi. Um, Damien left something for you. Aside from food, I mean."

Dread pools in my stomach. I don't think anything Damien left would be a good thing, and I don't know why he wouldn't have just given it to me the night before. Maybe he'd just forgotten.

"Oh?" I ask, swinging my legs down to the side of the bed so I can stand up and take the tray from her. I return to the bed to sit back down, and I see it: a little paper cup that looks like

it's meant to be filled with ketchup at a fast food chain. In it is a single pill. "What's this?"

Stef shifts uncomfortably in front of me. "It's... vitamins. He wants us to start giving them to you every morning."

Bile rises up in my throat. Of course they're vitamins. "Prenatal vitamins," I guess in a hollow voice.

She gives me a small nod.

"I don't suppose you'd let me flush it down the toilet," I say, and when she blanches, I hold up a hand. "Sorry. Bad joke." It hadn't really been a joke at all, but I should've known better than to even suggest it.

"I'm supposed to watch you take it," she mumbles, running a hand through her short blonde hair.

Of course she is.

I open the little bottle of orange juice and down the pill, opening my mouth to show her that I've swallowed it.

She nods again, looking more than a little relieved, and unlocks the chain around my ankle.

I pat the spot next to me on the bed. "Come on. You can share with me," I invite her. I know the women here don't get things like fresh fruit, and their meals usually taste like cardboard.

Stef sits down next to me and doesn't hesitate to take some food. As she reaches for the fruit, though, I notice the dark bruising on the inside of her elbow.

I almost ask who hurt her, until I see the small, red pinpricks.

More drugs.

I shouldn't be surprised. I know saying something won't make a difference. Even if Stef wanted to quit, there's no way Donny and Paul would let her. After all, the drugs are how they keep everybody compliant.

It still makes me angry to see it.

“Were you on the floor last night?” I ask, just to break the silence.

Stef nods. “Yeah. I gave three private dances. And only teared up for one of them.” She laughs darkly. “Guess I really am getting used to things around here.”

My heart aches for her, and I regret asking her. “I’m sorry,” I say quietly. I poke at the food, but my appetite has been all but destroyed.

Hers, on the other hand, seems well intact, and she eats like she expects me to take it away from her.

I nudge the tray a little closer to her and get up, grabbing my jeans. I pull them on, then make sure the overly large shirt I’m wearing is all buttoned up.

“I take it I’m on toilet cleaning duty again,” I say, and while my voice sounds disgusted, my heart pounds in my chest with hope. It’s the easiest to take out and restock on sponges when I’m cleaning the toilets. As disgusting as the bathrooms in here get—it’s like the men *try* to avoid the urinals and aim for the walls instead—it still offers me the chance I need.

“Yeah,” Stef says, wincing. “Sorry. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

Thankfully, she and the other women have mostly started leaving me alone while I’m cleaning. It’s like they can read my resignation to my situation. Unlike Damien, who seems to think I still have it in me to run, they know better.

They’re in the same shoes as me, after all.

The two of us make our way downstairs. Stef heads straight to the kitchen, while I detour to the supply closet. I need gloves, a mop, and a bucket to clean the bathroom. And, while I’m there...

I look around to make sure I’m alone, then I grab more of the contraceptive sponges from the first aid box. I notice with dismay that even the supply in here is getting low again. I stuff all but one of the sponges into my jeans pockets.

Donny had said to mark things that needed to be restocked, though, so I make a note on the supply sheet taped to the

inside of the door. Not even a full note—just a little checkbox in the “order more” column.

There. Just a few days, and somebody will buy more.

I hurry to the bathroom and get to work mopping the floor. When that’s as clean as I’ll likely get it, I scrub my hands and arms clean.

I slip into one of the stalls and get to work removing and replacing the sponge currently inside me. I wish I could just flush it, but I don’t want to cause a plumbing issue, so the best I can do is wrap it up in toilet paper. I get out of the stall to throw the sponge away in the large bin outside. Men’s restrooms, unfortunately, don’t include little private disposal bins.

I should have paid more attention, though.

“What are you doing?”

I startle at the sound, clutching the used contraceptive sponge tightly in an attempt to hide it. “Um. Hi! Elena!”

Elena’s expression is always hard to read, but I notice how her gaze travels to my hand, and the way one corner of her lips curls down. The other side has been marred by scarring.

“What’s that?” she asks quietly.

I let out a nervous laugh. My heart races, and no matter how much I try to control my breathing, it comes in shallow waves. “Just some trash. Let me get rid of it. What can I help you with? I’m almost done in here.” I move toward the big trash can and quickly dispose of the sponge.

“I came to see you,” Elena says, watching me intently as I pick up the cleaning rag.

I try to sound nonchalant while I begin wiping down the sinks. “Really? What about? I really should be getting back to cleaning.”

“I’ve been a bit worried about you. Ever since... Well, you’ve been a bit low energy.” She huffs a short laugh. “I suppose I was the same, at first.”

“You were?” I ask, eager to get the conversation off of me and back onto her. “I mean... Sorry, of course you were. How did you get through it?”

“I broke every mirror.” Elena reaches up to touch the scarred side of her face. “It’s taken me a long time to get used to this face.”

I remember her saying she’d wanted to slit her wrists, and I still can’t claim to understand that. But then, if I’d had acid splashed into my face, I’d probably be in an even worse state than I am now. Low energy? That wouldn’t even begin to cover it.

A chill runs down my spine. What if Giulio decides to follow in his father’s footsteps and do the same to me so I can’t ever, ever run? He doesn’t seem to mind her appearance, though he’s had time to get used to it.

“I can’t even imagine how difficult that had to be,” I say softly. My situation is bad enough, but hers? She was injured, disfigured, and set up in a seedy brothel that masquerades as a strip club. In comparison, I’m positively pampered.

“No, I don’t think you could.” Elena shakes her head and wraps her arms around herself. “If it hadn’t been for Giulio... He saved me. He gave me something to look forward to, even when I was at my lowest.”

I have a hard time comprehending that. Giulio just doesn’t seem like the type to *save* anyone or give them anything to look forward to. “What did he do?” I ask.

She smiles, the expression strange on her face. “He visited me. As often as he could. Brought me food, because of course he would want to share all the exotic things he’s eaten. And he never once flinched away from my face. Even if I’d just been brutally raped by five men, he’d insist on seeing me so he could sit with me and distract me from all of that.”

I look down at the cleaning rag in my hands. I’ve long since stopped even pretending to be cleaning the sinks, too caught up in the conversation. “That doesn’t sound like the Giulio I know,” I mumble. “He’s not like that with me.”

But there have been moments. He's treated me kindly a few times, even going so far as to give me some of his mother's clothes. I can see how there might be something more than the faux jovial front, or maybe that isn't as much of a front as I think it is. I just don't know.

"You know he improved this place a lot. He insisted on taking over the clubs." Elena meets my eyes. "Compared to what it was like when Emilio was in charge... The man he had running the clubs was worse. A lot worse."

But Giulio hasn't closed the clubs entirely. That's what a good man would have done.

"He offered to set you up with a condo," I say, mostly to change the subject. "You'd be a lot more comfortable there than here. And you'd get to see Giulio more often."

Elena shakes her head. "What would I do in a nice, big condo? I can't really go shopping, looking like this. Or even get a job. And I don't want to spend all day cooped up, worrying about getting comments from the neighbors."

"You could order things online," I point out. Elena's excuses sound weak to my ears. I'd rather live in a nice condo than here, that's for sure.

Although at least here, I have company that isn't just Giulio, Damien, and Slayer.

"It would be lonely," Elena says. "I have friends here."

But does she, though? Traci and Cat certainly aren't friends with her. Stef, maybe, and some of the women I don't know as well, but she seems to stay in her room more often than not. I'm sure it's nicer than mine—and she certainly isn't locked inside all day except to do chores—but still. This club is rundown and horrible.

I nod anyway, but I think I'd rather be alone, away from the constant reminders of my situation. If I could have my own condo, with an internet connection, an e-reader, and a television, it might not be so bad. I might even be able to continue my classes for my degree. Not that I'd have a chance

at using it any time soon, but at least I'd be working on something.

Looking at the club's books is something, but it's not nearly enough.

"I'm glad," I say, feeling awkward as the conversation goes on. "You deserve that, and better." I remember why she'd come looking for me in the first place, and I add, "I'm okay, though. A little tired. Damien likes to visit me at night." Never mind that I sleep most of the time I'm in my room because there's nothing else to do. "Thanks for checking in on me. I should probably finish the bathroom before Paul gets pissed, though."

"Good point. Here, I can help a bit." Elena takes a cleaning sponge from the supply set and uses it to wipe down some of the other surfaces.

I tense up as I watch her, but she really is simply helping me.

Between the two of us, we get the bathroom done fairly quickly.

"I'll take the trash out back. You really aren't allowed outside," Elena says, sounding almost apologetic. "But go check on the girls in the private rooms. I think they might still need help cleaning there."

I nod. "Thanks for the help." I wash my hands thoroughly, watching as she exits the bathroom, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

The old sponge is out, and the new one is in.

For now, at least, I'm safe.

GIULIO

There's no lock on the outside of Elena's room. That was one of the first things I had removed when I took control of Ntimacy. I couldn't let her leave, not while my old man was alive and stopping by regularly to check on things, but I could offer her a little bit of freedom.

"I still think you should let me set you up in a nice condo," I say as I step into her room. This one has a window, and I'd brought nice blankets and pillows to make her bed more inviting. It's small and cramped, but between my gifts and Elena's own creativity, it actually looks cozy.

Elena unfolds the small table and sets it up by the bed. "I told you, there's nothing for me out there. And I like helping the women here."

She and Vanessa have that in common, apparently. I set the take-out bag on the table and start sorting through all the food.

"Let me know if you change your mind. I brought Ethiopian food. Don't worry, I told them I wanted the American, unspicy version. I'm not Damien."

Elena laughs a little and grabs her container of food. "I can handle a little bit of spice. But..." Her expression turns a bit darker. "I do have something to tell you."

From her tone, it's something that'll potentially spoil the meal. I sigh and sit down on the bed next to her, on her "good" side. I don't really care, but she's self-conscious and appreciates being able to hide her scars.

“Can it wait until after we eat? Or, if it’s anything about Paul, just tell Damien and let him handle it.” I grab my own food container and tear off a piece of injera, using the flatbread to scoop up some of the doro wat. The stewed chicken in berbere spices smells heavenly, and while it might not be Damien levels of spice, it’s far from bland.

“It’s not about Paul,” Elena says. “And I don’t think you’ll want to wait to hear this.”

I probably do. Elena isn’t the kind to make a big deal out of nothing. But I’ve had a good day, with business finally turning a bit in my favor. My gamble with Romano had paid off, and more of the other mafia families are eager to partner with me.

It helps that I’d delivered some of Corvi’s men to Romano—the ones who had stolen his shipment of goods. I do try to be generous with my friends.

After another few bites of my food, I say, “Fine, fine. Lay it on me. Who do I need to deal with?”

Elena lowers her gaze, looking down at her own container of food. “It’s about Vanessa, Giulio.”

I force myself to smile as I answer. “Yeah? What about her? Did she try to replace Stef again? Ooh, start another cat fight with Cat? Or... did she try to convince somebody to call the cops again?” I chuckle to myself. “That worked out so well for her the first time.”

She slowly looks back at me, and I’m disturbed by how little humor there is in her eyes.

I set my food down, my appetite gone. “You have my attention,” I say quietly. “What’s going on, Elena?”

Elena sighs, unable to hold my gaze for long. “She’s been using the contraceptive sponges meant for the girls.”

There’s this one second where I don’t understand what she’s talking about, where I want to make a joke or tell Elena not to lie.

But Elena wouldn't lie to me. She's one of the few people who I know I can trust, who has stuck by me and *cared*.

I still shake my head in denial. "She... She what? No. Are you sure?"

"I was helping Donny with the inventory, and they've been checked off as being low for the second time in a row. It's usually rare for us to go through them like that. The girls prefer to use the condoms, obviously. I went to talk to her while she was cleaning the bathroom, and she had something in her hand she was very quick to get rid of," Elena says quietly. "I went through the trash before I took it out, and I found it."

I look at her, and I realize I can't be in the room anymore. I scoot the table aside and get up, my body already tensing.

"Thanks for telling me," I say, my voice sounding distant to me.

If it's the second time the stuff has been ordered... That means Vanessa's been doing this for a while. How long? How long has she been lying to us? How long has she pretended—and oh, I thought she was a terrible actress, but apparently, she knows enough to lie through her fucking teeth about something like this.

Vanessa's room is right next door to Elena's. I don't bother to knock before unlocking it, and I slam the door open as hard as I can.

Vanessa shrieks and sits up in her bed. Her hand goes to her chest, her breathing already quickening. "Giulio! You just scared the crap out of me!" she exclaims. She looks at me, really looks at me, and she goes still. I don't know what she sees in my face, but I know it isn't good.

I shut the door behind me and lean against it, crossing my arms. My cheeks hurt with how much I'm grinning. "I hear you've been holding out on me."

She shrinks back, pressing against the wall. She tries to smile, but it comes out more like a grimace. "What? I don't know what you're talking about." But she does. She's not

stupid. Like Damien always says, she's *smart*, but she obviously has no fucking common sense.

“Well, if you don't know, then I'll have to show you. Strip. Then get on your back and spread your fucking legs.” I huff a laugh. “Like when you were playing puppy for Slayer.”

All of the color has drained from her face. She knows I know, but she doesn't seem to have any idea what to do about that knowledge. She does know better than to argue, though, because she quickly gets up and strips before I rip her fucking clothes off of her.

Her panties dangle from one leg, but I don't unlock her ankle cuff so she can take them off the rest of the way.

Trembling, she lies back on the bed, spreading her legs just a little.

“Giulio...”

“You can do better than that,” I say, surprised by how sharp my voice sounds. “Grab your thighs and spread 'em wide. I want to get a nice, close look at your cunt.”

Vanessa swallows hard, the sound almost audible in the otherwise quiet room, and she slowly obeys. “Giulio, I'm not... I didn't...”

I make a frustrated sound and stride over to her, grabbing her thighs roughly and pushing them up. “Is this really so hard for you to do?”

She trembles, and her breathing gets heavier. It'd be a good look on her, if I wasn't so fucking—

Fucking angry.

I kneel on the floor next to the cot and rest my elbow on the space between her legs. I trace the sensitive skin of her cunt with my other hand, occasionally tugging on the hairs. “Y'know, Damien, Slayer, and I have been a bit remiss, haven't we? I made fun of your college boyfriend, but we've been lax in paying attention to you. I don't know that I've given you a proper fingering.”

My fingers push a little into her hole, and she gasps sharply, squirming.

“G-Giulio,” she protests, trying to press her legs closed again. “You don’t need to. Really. You don’t.” Sweat is trickling down her forehead, her panic starting to become palpable. “Just... Just fuck me. I like it when you fuck me.” She almost sounds convincing, too, which only makes my rage rear its ugly head inside of me.

I circle her clit and begin to massage it. “Yeah? I know you’re always ready for big, fat cock. You gotta tell me, whose cock do you like the most? Slayer’s, because you can pretend nothing’s happening? Damien’s, because it’s so massive it reaches all the good spots at once?”

“Yours,” she says in a strangled whisper. “I like yours.” Where were these acting skills when I wanted to play a simple game of horny teenagers, or swinger couple?

“That’s so sweet.” I consider what I want to do next while I keep massaging her clit. She squirms again, and from the flush on her chest, I think this is starting to affect her.

She really does get off on everything.

“Are you going to beg for my cock?” I ask, failing to sound nonchalant. “Otherwise, I might get you off with just my fingers.”

I’m so pissed that we weren’t able to tell the sponge was in her from just fucking her. Even Damien hadn’t been able to feel anything different, or at least, he hadn’t recognized what it was. But Vanessa knows as well as I do that my fingers will be able to identify it.

“N-no,” she protests, just as I predicted she would. “I want your... your cock. In me. I want you to fuck me, not with your fingers. Please, Giulio.” She doesn’t sound as convincing now, but I have to give her credit for trying, even if she just sounds *desperate*.

If only the situation was different, I would love hearing her sound like this.

“You sure? I knew some chicks who could only get off from having their clit played with.” I laugh sarcastically. “Not you, though. You’re a cockslut, huh? Can’t wait to be filled?”

Tears have started to gather in her eyes, one spilling down her cheek toward her ear. I wonder if she’s going to tap out, if she’s going to admit what she’s done to stop me from humiliating her further. But she only nods minutely to me and hiccups, “I want it. I want you.”

“That’s what I love about your body,” I tell her, and I manage to pull off a more amused tone. I’ve got a plan brewing now, and I can’t wait to see her reactions. “It’s really made to be fucked. Made to get pregnant, right?”

Vanessa sobs, but she nods. “Yes. That’s what... what my body is... is for,” she chokes out. “For you to use. And... and get pregnant.”

“I guess there’s no point in fingering you, then. Because knocking you up is more important than making *you* feel good. Don’t you agree?” I don’t stop massaging her clit though, which throbs under my touch.

She’s squirming, and I almost delight in the way her features are torn between pleasure and mortification. “Yes,” she whispers. “What you want is... is more important.” She bites her bottom lip, her tears spilling freely down her face now.

“All right. Since we’re in agreement. I’ll be nice and fuck you.” I let go of her to undo my jeans and push them and my underwear down. It’s a little awkward to get on the bed, but Vanessa doesn’t seem to be in the mood to comment on how silly I must look.

I grab her legs and push them back farther. “Reach down and finger your hole. I want to see how wet you are.”

Vanessa’s hand is shaking as she reaches down to obey. Her touch is clumsy, like she’s not even familiar with touching her own body—and maybe she isn’t. Maybe she really was that much of a prude before us. She touches herself, sliding a

finger inside her cunt. When she pulls it out, it's glistening with her fluids.

"Nice. Desperate to be filled up and pumped full. Guide my cock inside you." I get my cock a bit closer to her hole to help her out.

Her eyes are glazed with the rapidly falling tears, and her humiliation gets me even harder. If only I wasn't here because of what Elena said, I'd be enjoying this.

I push away that thought as her fingers wrap around me and she starts to guide the tip of my cock to her slick hole. I groan as I push inside in one smooth thrust, making her cry out in surprise. But within seconds, she's moaning.

I was provoking her when I said she was made for this, but from how her cunt convulses around me, it might almost be true. I've been with plenty of men and women, but there's something about Vanessa that's different. Maybe it's just the fact that her body seems to react without any of her mind's input at all, and that's just fucking hot.

I bottom out inside her, and I wonder if I can feel the sponge. But, as sensitive as my cock is, warmth is warmth, and her walls don't feel any different from all the other times I've been inside her.

I feel a rush of anger again, and I thrust in and out more vigorously than I'd intended. Her body slides up the bed, and the frame squeaks in protest. She's making little pained noises, like she does when Slayer is fucking her especially hard, but her body just gets slicker and slicker around me. She's tight like a glove, fitting my cock flawlessly, and each time she flinches, she bears down on me.

"How's it feel?" I ask her, suppressing a snarl. My fingers dig into her thighs a little harder than I mean to, but she's lucky I didn't call Slayer in to really do some damage.

There's an idea, though.

Vanessa looks helplessly up at me, and I can see the confusion, arousal, and discomfort all in her expression at

once. She seems lost, but she has to know by now that I've discovered her dirty little secret.

"It feels good," she whimpers. "F-fuck me harder, Giulio."

I don't really need the encouragement to pound into her harder. My anger is making it easy to use her more carelessly, less like the precious thing Damien treats her as. He's going to be *devastated* when he finds out what she's been doing, and that only makes me rage harder at her. After all he's done for me, I want to give him this in return. He doesn't ask for much, and he deserves to have this one, simple thing.

Why did she have to ruin this for all of us?

"By the way," I say, slamming into her harder, "we've been treating you well, haven't we?"

Her fingers dig into the blankets, gripping them tightly. "Y-yes," she says, stammering over the simple answer as she winces in pain.

I swallow a groan when her cunt squeezes around me. "Right. I haven't pimped you out. I feed you well. I even forgave your little escape attempt. Better than being one of the other girls here."

"Giulio," she whispers. "I'm sorry."

I stop moving to stare down at her. "Sorry? What are you sorry for?"

I'm really fucking curious to see if she'll be honest now. I know what I'm hoping for.

She licks her lips, and for a moment, I think she'll admit to what she's done. Instead, she says, "For trying to run away." She doesn't look at me as she speaks, though, which makes me wonder what she was really going to say. Not that it matters. She's still fucking lying to me.

I growl and pull out entirely. "You know. I've heard stories from Benton City. About what Victor Corvi is doing with his new toy—I mean, 'girlfriend.' There's a lot of bloodshed involved. You really should be thanking Damien for insisting we take you."

Vanessa's breathing hard, and she stares up at me. She brushes at her tears, but they just fall faster. I've hit her where it hurts, which is good because she's managed to hit Damien below the belt, too.

I stroke my cock once, then slap the inside of her thigh. "Well? I said you should be thanking Damien. Thanking me. Because I've seen pictures. They aren't pretty."

Never mind that the pictures were of my men, and the stories were about Corvi's new toy luring them into traps.

"I... Thank you," she manages to get out, but her fear seems to be heightening even more.

If I wasn't so fucking pissed, it would be so hot.

"Which is why, I really have to ask," I say as I sit down on the bed, "why the *fuck* you would try to betray us." I grip her thigh, and without warning, thrust my fingers inside her.

Vanessa screams and struggles, but my fingers find the sponge's fabric loop. I pull it out forcefully and discard it on her stomach.

Her eyes are wide with disbelief and pain, and she sobs harder before closing them tightly and trying to roll over onto her side.

I tighten my grasp on her inner thigh, using my other hand to pin her down on her back. "Oh, no you don't," I growl at her.

"Please, I'm sorry, please," she starts to babble. "I didn't... I wasn't..."

"You weren't what? Trying to keep us out? Trying to deny Damien the one thing he wants?" I slap her pussy twice in quick succession, making Vanessa sob loudly. "Now get your fucking legs open. Because I've been really fucking patient with you, Vanessa, but apparently you don't want me to be *nice*."

Vanessa is shaking from the force of her sobs, and her face is red and marred with tears and snot as she tries to speak. "Giulio—"

I slap her cunt again, and this time, she spreads her legs for me.

I drive in without care for her comfort, hissing out a breath.

“I gave you my mother’s clothes,” I growl at her as I thrust. “I let you enjoy my pets. I cooked for you.” I increase my speed, the sound of our bodies slapping against each other filling the small room. “Should I stop being kind? Should I just tie you down with your legs spread so we fill you every few hours?”

She shakes her head, hiccuping and choking on her words as she tries to speak. “N-no!” she manages to get out, though the word is hard to understand. “P-please. I—” She dissolves into another fit of sobs, her fingers digging hard into the sheets beneath her.

“I won’t need to roleplay that you’re our breeding bitch if I really do hook you up to a breeding bench twenty-four seven.” My movements stutter when I feel her tightening around me. She’s wet enough that the slide is easy, but the walls of her cunt ripple exquisitely. “I bet Slayer would love to keep you around all the time.”

Vanessa shakes her head again and again, but she’s trying to fight back the little mewling sound she’s making as she comes, hard, around my cock. I don’t know what it is that gets her off so easily, but I’m glad for it. It’ll make it stick in her brain better. Maybe I shouldn’t be pleased she’s getting anything out of this, after this stunt she pulled, but I love the way her body betrays her over and over again.

I love what it does to her mind.

Or at least, I thought I did, but it seems there was a part of her that hadn’t accepted her role in our life yet.

“Have you learned your lesson?” I ask, thrusting hard into her over and over again, punctuating each thrust with one of my words until I’m spilling inside of her now-unprotected pussy.

She nods frantically, looking at me through swollen, red-rimmed eyes.

“Then kiss me,” I grate out as I drive into her one last time.

Whimpering, Vanessa obeys, leaning up to brush her lips against mine. She’s the first to part her lips, and I demand more from her, sliding my tongue into her mouth and aggressively exploring it. For a long moment, I let her take solace from the kiss.

I keep kissing her through the rest of my orgasm, and only pull out when I start to feel oversensitive. As soon as my cock is out, I go back to her, pulling her closer, so she can keep making out with me.

It’s cute how much effort she’s putting into it, even with tears still streaming down her face. I can taste the salt on her lips.

After a few minutes of this lazy, almost soft make-out session, I pull back a little so I can look her in the eyes. “What do you say?”

Vanessa’s expression breaks with confusion. She doesn’t know what I want, but she knows she has to give me something.

“Th-thank you?” she sobs out.

“For what?” I ask calmly.

Her lip trembles, and more tears spill. “F-for...” Vanessa sobs a few times.

I tenderly wipe away the tears. “Shh, no need for that. Take a breath and speak clearly.”

The breaths she takes are short and hurried, but it’s clear she’s trying to calm down. “F-for being... for being... nice... to me. For... for...” She whimpers and squeezes her eyes shut. “For stopping.”

I snort and let go of her. She watches me warily as I grab the blanket and wipe my cock off. The used sponge falls to the floor.

“Damn, that’s gross.” I get up and turn around to face the bed. “Okay, give my cock a nice goodbye kiss.”

She turns over and scoots over to me, wordlessly coming to me and taking the tip of my cock into her mouth. She gives it a full, open-mouthed kiss, then runs her tongue along my length. From there, she doesn’t seem to know what to do, and she keeps licking.

I sigh and push her away. “Enough, enough. I have things to do. Clients to speak to.” I pull out my phone and scroll through my list of contacts. “I’m sending Slayer over to do a proper search of your room later. He’s used to finding people’s secrets. You probably want to make sure there’s nothing... incriminating left behind.” Then I head to the door, stopping just in front. “One more thing.” I glance over my shoulder.

Vanessa is sitting with her knees pulled up to her chest, arms around her legs. “Wh-what?” she asks warily.

I grin at her. “You said ‘thanks for stopping.’ But I never said I was done punishing you.”

I laugh at her dismay, before heading out and locking the door behind me.

DAMIEN

Giulio storms into my apartment without waiting for me to answer his ring of the doorbell. I stop in the middle of the living room, rubbing my eyes. It's almost 1 a.m., and I'd intended to turn in early after the harrowing day Giulio had put me through.

As soon as I see the anger on Giulio's face, I'm fully awake, though. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Giulio closes the distance between us and wraps his arms around my shoulders, kissing me aggressively. I'm too stunned to do anything at first. Giulio doesn't stop, though, biting at my lip and demanding entrance.

I almost give in. It's been a long time since Giulio has attempted to make out with me without another person in the room with us. But I know whatever is going on with Giulio won't be solved by kissing.

My hands come up anyway, slowly wrapping around his throat, my thumbs stroking his skin. I squeeze just a little. I could calm him down like this. I could press down and deny him breath, take out some of my need to do this to Vanessa and calm him down just a little...

I gently push him away. "Giulio. What happened?"

Giulio snarls and turns away from me, flopping onto the couch. "We should dump Vanessa. You know any good ditches anywhere?"

My heart freezes. I stare at him, trying to discern where this sudden emotion is coming from. “What? I don’t want to dump Vanessa.” I fumble for my phone and pull up the period tracking app. “She’s in her fertile period now. And you’ve been fucking her very regularly, so it’s possible she’s—”

“She’s not fucking pregnant!” Giulio shouts suddenly. He gets up from the couch again and paces around the coffee table. “She’s been lying to us this entire fucking time!”

My throat is dry as I answer, “What do you mean?”

Giulio pulls his own phone out, but he doesn’t stop moving. “I’ve got two potential buyers for Stef, by the way. Who do you think is worse, Hart or Savage?”

“Savage,” I answer automatically. “But what’s this got to do with Vanessa?”

Giulio glances at me long enough for me to see the blistering rage in his eyes, but he starts tapping on his phone anyway.

He’s quiet long enough for me to prompt, “Giulio?”

His lip curls into a sneer. “You know how we let the girls use those sponge things for the idiots who don’t want to use condoms?”

My heart sinks as I start to connect the dots. “Vanessa wouldn’t do that,” I say automatically.

“She fucking did. And—” Giulio breaks off as the call goes through. “Yo, Dr. Savage! Remember how you were pestering me about a girl?”

It’s amazing how Giulio manages to completely change his tone while talking with the potential client, although I don’t think I would have worded it as “pestering.”

The client apparently agrees with me. “Pestering? I merely said I’m getting a bit tired of waiting.”

Giulio laughs and waves his hand dismissively, although Savage can’t see it. “Yeah, yeah. Anyway, you always said you wanted a project. A girl you can really work on and mold.

Well, have I got the chick for you. Small, blonde, completely hooked on heroin so you'll get to play doctor for her."

Giulio breaks out into even more laughter there.

"Normally that's not a selling point," Savage answers, a lot less amused.

I meet Giulio's eyes and shake my head. Even if Vanessa did... even if she did use contraceptives, selling Stef is going to lose us one of our best forms of leverage over her.

"Come on, I've seen how much you like the really broken ones. Why don't you stop by Ntimacy later this week? I'll let you take her for a test drive." Giulio just flashes a grin at me, even as I try to signal to him that this is a bad idea.

He's always reckless, but when he's pissed off, it's even worse.

The thing that confuses me, though, is that he's *so* angry. He didn't even want a child before I insisted on it, and now, he's acting like she let Antonia out of her cage.

I'm the one who should be angry, yet all I feel is a big, aching void of disappointment. Vanessa was supposed to be perfect. She was supposed to give Giulio a child.

Vanessa is supposed to be a glowing, beautiful mother.

"Is she at least disease-free?" Savage asks, sounding a little disgruntled.

"Negative on all her tests last week, and she's getting rechecked today, just for you," Giulio promises.

Interrupting Giulio when he's like this won't help anything. The most I can do is wait for him to get off the phone and try to dissuade him from selling Stef before he completes the transaction.

But that's the least of my worries right now, because I need to find out what happened with Vanessa first. Maybe Giulio misunderstood, or maybe he's overreacting, or maybe...

Maybe Vanessa found a way to trick all of us.

After a bit of back and forth on scheduling, Giulio finally ends the call. He sits down on the couch again and taps around on his phone. “Do you think we should display Vanessa naked for the entire club to see? Maybe let the customers cop a feel as they walk past. It’s not like she’s actually our baby mama right now.”

I scowl at him. “No, I don’t think you should do that. Vanessa is ours.” I’m still trying to wrap my mind around Vanessa using contraceptives. I know she’s reluctant to have Giulio’s child, but she said she’d always wanted children. She can’t be this shrewd.

That’s stupid. Of course she’d grab the opportunity to delay her pregnancy, because she doesn’t want to have *Giulio’s* child. But what she wants shouldn’t matter, and I’m heartbroken that she hasn’t learned that lesson yet.

Nobody gets everything they want in life.

Giulio glares up at me. “You still want to keep her around? After she fucking betrayed us like this? She’s been pretending for weeks! All those fun dates we had, every time we’ve fucked her... every time *you* fucked her, Damien. I know you want it to be my kid, but your delusions aside, I was kind of hoping she’d pop out a hairy beast with your eyes.”

My chest tightens, and I avert my gaze from Giulio. “That doesn’t matter, Giulio. She can make me wear a condom, and it wouldn’t make a difference to me.”

“Blah blah, you want it to be my kid. But it makes a difference to *me*.” Giulio’s voice is surprisingly harsh. “What if I don’t want a kid of my own? What if I just want to raise yours? Vanessa was my gift to you. You were smitten the first time you laid eyes on her, and you deserve to have nice things. What she did was not fucking nice.”

I’m beyond touched. I know that Giulio values me, but sometimes it’s easy to forget that with how he enjoys making life difficult for me. I know he could easily have said, months ago, that Vanessa wasn’t worth the trouble.

“Giulio,” I answer sadly, “It has to be yours. Or Slayer’s. It can’t be mine.”

Giulio growls and stands up again, pacing over to me. “Why the fuck not?”

“You must know already,” I say steadily. “You’ve suspected. You aren’t this dense.”

There’s a tense silence between us, one where Giulio searches my expression for something. I’m not sure if he finds it, but he turns away with a frustrated sound.

“Spell it out for me,” Giulio demands.

I wonder if this is him lashing out, wanting to hurt me. But I sigh and respond. “You’ve noticed I don’t have relationships of my own, despite how much I want... I want children.”

I’ve wanted children for as long as I can remember. Back when I was younger, I would take care of my younger siblings. I would still be helping them out now, if my family hadn’t cut ties with me after I joined the Pavone famiglia and started working my way up in the organization.

I’ve looked them up since then to see how they were doing. Both of my younger sisters are married and have kids of their own, while my younger brother has been in a steady relationship for years. There are pictures of family gatherings with a lot of happy, playing children, a far cry from how we’d all grown up.

It’s something I’ll never be a part of.

“I *can’t* have children, Giulio,” I say quietly. “I’ve tried. But I’m sterile.”

I don’t remember how the doctor told me, only the sudden, overwhelming despair at hearing the news. All of my dreams, gone with just one test. Relationships seemed pointless after that. Why bother, when I’d never have what I wanted most out of one?

“That’s why it doesn’t matter if she’s been using contraceptives with me.”

I'm startled when Giulio comes close behind me and rests his head against the back of my shoulder. "Why was this such a big secret?"

"I don't know. I don't like talking about it." It hurts to think about, even. "I just want to see a woman swell up with a child for me. But it'll never be mine."

"See," Giulio says, lifting his head. "This is why I'm extra pissed at Vanessa now. You've been waiting how many fucking years for this?"

I turn around to face him. "I can wait a little longer for it, Giulio. You're both still young." I want to tell him not to be mad at Vanessa, but I'm too hurt for that. "And maybe..." I nearly choke on my words. "Maybe she's too young to be a mother. Maybe this is a sign that she isn't the right one. Maybe we need to just... let her go."

My eyes prickle a bit to even suggest it, and I brace myself for Giulio's agreement.

"Fuck that!" Giulio shouts, and I'm taken aback by the sheer vitriol. "She's the one you want. She's having my fucking babies. You're going to get the Pavone-Bellini children of your dreams." Giulio backs away from me and looks at his phone again. "We just have to scare her into submission some more. She's gotten spoiled with how nice we've been to her."

"No," I protest, reaching out for him. "Don't— Don't do anything drastic, Giulio."

Giulio slaps my hand away, grinning. "I've never done anything drastic in my life, Damien." Then he laughs and heads toward the apartment door. "This is a great fucking idea, actually. Slayer's gonna love it too." He stops and laughs again, shoulders shaking. "Y'know, she once said I'd played my hand too early. That she knew how I worked."

Shit. I know that expression on Giulio's face. "I didn't tell you about my..." I can't even say the word. "I didn't tell you to make you more upset with her," I say feebly. Not that it matters once Giulio's set his mind to something.

“I told her that my creativity knows no bounds.” Giulio licks his lips. “This’ll be fun. And it’s a win-win. She’ll never try to deny you ever again after this.”

I should stop him. I should go to Vanessa and protect her somehow.

“Ciao! I’ll call you when I need you,” Giulio says as he leaves.

But with the door closed, I have to admit—I want that, too. I want Vanessa to finally accept that she’s going to have Giulio’s children.

VANESSA

“Yo! We’re going on a field trip!” Giulio announces cheerfully.

I try to make myself as small as possible, but there’s nowhere to hide in this room. Especially not after Slayer had done a thorough search and removed the bed frame, leaving me with only the mattress on the floor and a thin blanket. He’d taken the sandals and the jeans, too.

There’s a set of bruises on one of my breasts from where he’d gripped me a little too hard.

The only good thing is that when he’d removed the bed frame, he’d had to remove the chain around my ankle as well, so I’ve been able to pace—for better or worse.

Although Giulio’s acting upbeat, I notice the smile isn’t reaching his eyes. He’s still mad at me. I can’t say I expected any differently. Even though he’d acted nonchalant after our make out session, he’d made it perfectly clear with his words that he hadn’t forgiven me at all. I don’t trust this cheer any more than I trust anything else they’ve done to me, and I can’t help but wonder if this is the next stage of what Giulio meant when he said he wasn’t done punishing me.

I haven’t seen Damien since then, either, which makes me feel guilty for reasons I can’t even comprehend. I should be happy I’ve gotten away with it this long, but I can only imagine the look on his face when he found out. He’s so desperate for a child, for reasons I don’t understand, and maybe... Maybe he just can’t stand to look at me.

But I'm not going to let that get to me. It's not like I agreed to this. It's not like I was given any choice at all.

"Where are we going?" I ask warily.

"That's a surprise. The best things in life are surprises!" Giulio approaches me and extends his hand down to me. "Now come on, we're wasting daylight."

I don't take his hand, instead getting to my feet without his aid. I keep my distance from him, though I know that if he orders me close, I'll obey without needing to be told twice. I can't risk pissing him off again, but there's still that part of me that's so afraid he's going to lash out. He hasn't been violent with me...

But his father had been plenty violent. I don't know how much of that Giulio has in him.

Giulio laughs and puts an arm around my shoulders, forcing the issue. "Okay, Mama, I'd tell you to dress up a bit nicer but let's be real, this is about as nice as you deserve."

He squeezes my breast through the oversized shirt.

I blush. "Can I at least have pants?" I ask tentatively, trying not to squirm in his grasp but finding it hard to stay still. I don't know what he's up to, and that's one of the biggest things about Giulio. He's so impulsive and spontaneous that he's difficult to read.

"Why bother?" Giulio pats the front of my pussy, the sheer panties doing nothing to soften the sensation. "You won't need them where we're going."

That doesn't bode well, but it could also just be him screwing with my head, too. Maybe we're only going back to his condo again. He wouldn't want to walk me up there with just the shirt and panties, not when his neighbors might be able to see, but he fooled me the last time and it hadn't been that bad.

"I don't like surprises," I mumble. "What about shoes? I can't go walking around outside without shoes. There's broken glass and all sorts of things out there."

“We’re driving. There won’t be a lot of walking involved.” Giulio starts guiding me out of the room. “And funny, that you don’t like surprises. You sure *surprised* all of us with your latest little stunt.”

For some reason, my cheeks heat up from that, and I don’t even know why. I’m not embarrassed by what I did. Or ashamed. I would do it again in a heartbeat, because it’s been my saving grace over the past few weeks. “Giulio, I’ll still have to walk through the club and to the car,” I tell him. “Do you really want my feet getting filthy before I get in your car?”

“Yep.” Giulio grins widely. “If I wanted you to be wearing shoes, you’d be wearing shoes. Now stop trying to negotiate. It’s really not cute.”

I don’t really care if he thinks I’m cute at all, but I don’t say that. Instead, I let him guide me toward the door, ducking my head as he leads me into the hallway.

The floor in the halls isn’t as disgusting as in the main room, at least, although I still grimace when we go down the stairs. There’s an employees-only hall with a door that leads to the back parking lot.

Giulio doesn’t even pause here, fully expecting me to step onto the cold asphalt barefoot. I keep my eyes glued to the ground, hoping to avoid the worst of the dirt and sharp objects. At least it’s during the day, when I can see what I’m stepping on and around.

The car Giulio takes me to isn’t the nice sedan from last time, but a large SUV with dirt-stained wheels and mud along the undercarriage. Giulio opens the back door and pushes me in. “There’s a blindfold in the back seat. Put it on.”

I startle as I lose my balance, more falling into the back of the SUV than actually getting in. I sit down and reach out for the blindfold, picking it up and staring at it. “Is this really nec —” I start to ask, but I catch myself. What’s the point in arguing? Instead, I put the blindfold on, even going so far as to check to make sure I can’t see anything around it. It’s suddenly very, very dark, and I feel claustrophobic.

The door shuts behind me, and I hear Giulio getting into the driver's seat. "Make sure to fasten your seatbelt! We wouldn't want you hurtling through the windshield in case of an accident."

I wish I could glare at him, but it's pointless with the blindfold anyway—plus, it's probably not the best idea when he already has something planned. I settle back into the seat and pull the seatbelt across my chest and waist, clicking it into place after a few blind tries. I want to ask again where we're going, but it'd be a waste of words.

Giulio starts the car, and immediately some pop music in a foreign language begins to play.

"Y'know, I've really gotten into K-Pop recently," Giulio says as he starts driving. "What kind of music did you listen to, before we took you out of your boring life and into this exciting and fulfilling world?"

I'd give anything to go back to my *boring* life. There's nothing exciting or fulfilling about the life they've brought me into, and he knows it. "Do you always have to mock me?" I ask, feeling surly and not particularly in the mood to play along with his games.

There's a sharp edge to his voice when he answers. "I don't know, Vanessa, do I? Because you didn't value it when I was nice to you, so I might as well just have fun."

I flinch. All right, so it's better to have him asking me questions and pretending we're getting to know each other. "I like all sorts of music," I say, a little hesitantly. I know he probably thinks I'm into classical or pop. "I like alt rock, mostly." It's been forever since I've been able to listen to music of my own choosing, and I wonder what new songs I've missed from my favorite artists.

It's such a weird thing to care about all of a sudden.

Giulio is strangely silent after that, and I wonder if I've said something to annoy him. Maybe it's better this way, though. I'm tempted to remove the blindfold to check where

we're going, for all the good it would do in a large city I've never properly visited.

"Where do you think we're going?" Giulio suddenly asks. "It's not my condo."

The abrupt change in topic startles me, but then, I'm not sure what else we're supposed to talk about. "I don't know," I say. "I've never really been good at guessing things..." I pause, then add, "Especially when it comes to you."

"Hah. Damien wishes I were predictable. But y'know, if I were predictable, most of my old man's enemies would have offed me already." Giulio laughs briefly. "Do you think you'd do better with Romano? His son was very into you that night you decided to be a fucking idiot."

I can feel the heat in my cheeks, but he's not wrong. I've made a few mistakes.

"...I should be more specific," he amends, "You've been an idiot quite a few times already. The night Stef got gangbanged."

He didn't really have to remind me. I know when I met Romano's son, even though I can't for the life of me remember his name. I don't want to think about Stef being so horribly abused, about the aftermath, about what it had driven me to do...

"No," I say quietly, and it's true. I don't think I'd be better off with them. I hold value to Giulio because of my womb. He and Damien want children from me. They'll want me to raise those children, too. The other mafia man, on the other hand? They'd probably just use me and discard me after a little while, and I have no idea where I'd end up.

I realize after a while that the sounds of the city have disappeared, and we're no longer stopping and making turns as often as we had before.

"Are we leaving New Bristol?" I ask, turning my head to the window despite the blindfold.

"You figured that much out." Giulio drums the steering wheel loud enough for me to hear. "Y'know what'd be funny?"

If I took you to your old college campus and paraded you around as you are. I hear frat boys love taking advantage of vulnerable women.”

That wouldn't be funny at all, but there's no need to say that aloud. Giulio knows that. He just has to try to needle me, though, and I feel more stubbornly determined not to react because of it. I know better than to say he wouldn't, because that very well might be exactly what he's doing.

But maybe he's taking me to Benton City. What would I do if it turned out he'd sold me to Victor Corvi and his men? I'd be able to see Lucia, at least, though I don't know what would happen to me after that.

It doesn't feel like a very good alternative either.

Thankfully, Giulio stops talking after that. I have nothing but my own thoughts and anxieties to keep me company, and the ever-growing dread as the trip stretches out longer and longer. Wherever we're going, it's not good.

We make a turn, and the road gets bumpier. I grip the seat and try to tell myself that it's fine. This can't be Benton City. There are no unpaved roads around there.

Imagining what kinds of places *do* have unpaved roads doesn't help calm me down.

We finally come to a stop. Giulio parks the car, and once the music stops, we're left in complete and total silence.

We're definitely not in any city.

“Okay, you can take the blindfold off now,” Giulio says as he gets out of the car.

Now that he's given me permission, I find that I don't really want to. I'm terrified to see where he's brought me. But I reluctantly obey, pulling off the blindfold and blinking as my eyes adjust to the light. It streams through trees—trees that surround us from every direction.

My heart drops into my stomach.

We're in the middle of nowhere. Did he bring me out here just to leave me here to die? Had I willingly walked outside

and into his car to be taken to my death?

Giulio opens the car door, motioning for me to get out, but I stay in my seat.

“Are you going to kill me?” I blurt out, my voice shaking as I look around us.

Giulio quirks his eyebrow at me. “Isn’t that preferable to having our babies? That’s what your actions lead me to believe.”

I shudder, giving a quick shake of my head before I even realize I’ve thought about it. No, I’m not ready to die. I want to live, even if this life isn’t what I want. There’s always a chance to get out of it as long as I’m alive. “No,” I whisper. “I don’t want to die.”

“Oh, that’s good. Because you’re going to be running for your life. I’d hate to have you just sit there and give up. That’d be pretty boring.” Giulio reaches in to grab my arm and forcibly pulls me out.

I gasp as I stumble into his arms, trying to catch my footing. I wince when my foot lands on a twig on the dirt road. His words barely register in my mind, though. “Run for my… life?” I croak out. “Why… What’s the point? You’ll just catch me. You have a GPS tracker in me!” I have no desire to run barefoot through the trees, knowing Giulio is behind me. He may not be outdoorsy, but he’s at least dressed for the reasonably cool woods in his jeans, hiking jacket, and even a pair of boots. Me, on the other hand? I’m wearing a long shirt and panties and nothing else. There’s no chance I could outrun him.

“Oh, man, you’re right! I forgot about that.” Giulio reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone, but when he taps over to something labeled *GPS*, it gives him a *no signal* sign. “Guess you’re lucky. Fucking woods and their shitty reception. So, no reason for you not to start running away from me.”

I look at him in dismay. “I’ll get five feet from here and pierce my foot on something sharp. I’m going to die of

hypothermia. That's... That's not a fun game."

Giulio bursts out laughing and pats my head. "You're an expert on fun now? But, y'know, fair. Wait one second."

He walks over to the trunk of the SUV and pulls out a small duffel bag. He tosses it toward me, and it lands by my feet.

"Go ahead, open it."

I eye it warily, but I lean down to slowly unzip it. To my surprise, I find... clothes. Not just regular clothes, but a long-sleeved shirt, a pair of jeans, socks, hiking boots, a hoodie, gloves, and even a bra.

I stare at them, uncomprehending, for a few seconds.

"Or you can start running nearly naked," Giulio suggests, smirking. "It'd be a shorter game, but maybe more fun."

I give a quick shake of my head, fumbling with the clothes. I put the jeans on first, almost sighing in relief at the feeling of being covered from the chill in the air, then hesitate. I'm going to have to take off my shirt in the middle of nowhere, but then, it's not like there's anyone else around, and I've grown somewhat desensitized to my own nudity.

Still, I hurry as I unbutton the shirt, pull the bra on, and yank the long-sleeved shirt on. It all fits perfectly, which is something of a surprise. Even I have problems finding clothes that fit me right because of my tall, lean frame.

The hoodie is next, then the socks, then the brand-new boots. I look at the soft leather gloves, unsure if I need them, but decide to pull them on anyway.

I feel almost human for the first time since they took me.

"So, the rules. You get a ten-minute head start. I win if I catch you. *You* win if you manage to escape for... oh, let's say until dark. Or if you somehow manage to find another human being kind enough to listen to your tale of woe." Giulio laughs, like that's another hilarious joke. "I think the highway is north of here. Or maybe it was west? I'm not much of an outdoorsman, so you might even stand a chance against me."

I stare at him. There's something he's not saying. There's no way he's really giving me a shot at an escape. This is just another of his games. But I can't help it. I ask, "What happens if I win?"

"Well, you'd be all alone in the woods, but at least nobody's trying to knock you up." Giulio raises his hands in a gesture of mock innocence. "Because I was thinking about it, and you're really way too much fucking trouble. So I figured, I'd make it a game on whether I keep you around or not."

I don't know what to say to that. "So if I outlast you, I get to be lost in the woods and probably die of starvation or thirst? I think I'd rather be at Ntimacy," I say, shaking my head.

"Fine, fine." Giulio reaches into the trunk of the SUV again and pulls a backpack out, handing it to me. "Here, some water and some food. We really aren't that far from civilization. If you evade me, you'd have a good chance of stumbling across somebody."

I take the bag, but I still have the nagging sensation that something's off. This is just a trick. "No," I say, setting the bag down at my feet. "I'm not doing this. It's ridiculous, Giulio."

Giulio's expression goes cold. "You need more incentive than that? Fine. If you don't play along, we drive back right now, and I make you watch while I sell Stef to the highest bidder. Whoever it is will want a test drive, too. And I'll make sure Stef knows it's your fault."

My breath catches in my throat, and tears sting my eyes. That's not fucking fair, and he knows it. He knows I'd never risk someone else's well-being like that. I snatch the backpack up off the ground. "*Fine*," I snap. "I'll play your fucking game." The anger is a relief, a break in the constant fear and humiliation and confusion, and I pull the bag on and tighten the straps. "Leave Stef out of it. She never did anything to you."

"I would not give two fucks about Stef if you didn't care about her," Giulio answers. He taps on his phone. "Your ten minutes start... *now*."

I don't bother making a retort or trying to reason with him. There's no point. The only way out of this is to escape. If he finds me too quickly, he'll think I wasn't really trying, and he'll hurt Stef.

And there's this thin shimmer of hope that I might actually manage to escape.

Where I'd go, I have no idea, but that's something to figure out later.

I take off running in the opposite direction of Giulio. Once I put enough distance between us, I can try to figure out the survival things that might get me through this. Like figuring out which side of the trees moss is growing on... Is that north? Is there even a highway north? Or should I try a different direction?

It doesn't matter. Right now, all I care about is getting away.

For a good five minutes, I just run, blindly fighting my way through the tree branches. I'm glad for the gloves, which make it possible to deal with some of the thicker bushes that cling to my hoodie. They're thin, and not much help, but they're better than bare hands.

When I finally slow down, I double over, trying to catch my breath.

It's shameful, honestly. I was never a gym bunny, but I was always in good shape before. Now, a couple months of being trapped in a single room have made me incapable of even a simple adrenaline-fueled run.

I try to catch my breath, and as soon as I feel like I'm not going to pass out anymore, I slowly turn. I examine the trees, but there's nothing to indicate a direction. I have no idea where I am, or if there are just miles and miles of wilderness that lead to nothing at all.

There's a very real chance I'm just going to die out here, starving and desperate and alone, and it's a thought that hits me like a punch in the gut.

I don't have time to dwell on it, though. I continue moving, albeit keeping my pace more measured as I traipse in the same direction in the hopes that I might eventually find something. Higher ground, even, to try to find a way out. A river to follow. Something.

If I live through this, I'm taking survival classes.

When.

I talk myself through just what I'll do, trying to give myself as much hope as I can by saying that I'm *going* to do this. It's just a matter of how long it takes, and I'm strong. I've dealt with them; I can deal with a little time outside in nature. It's a gorgeous day, and I'm not even cold anymore because of the run.

I don't stop to appreciate it, though; that would just be ridiculous. Giulio may not be an outdoorsman, but you don't have to be super intelligent to see where I've crashed through the trees in my initial run. I have to go more slowly now, picking my way around trees instead of just breaking branches as I go, and I try to leave as few traces as possible of my passing.

I wish I had a watch to see how much time I've already been out here, but I have nothing but the backpack. I hesitate, not wanting to pause to check out its contents. My throat is burning, though, and I pull the bag off my shoulders to dig through it. There isn't much—a few bottles of water, a few protein bars. Nothing I could survive off for long, but then, I wasn't expecting much from Giulio.

I gulp down half of one water bottle before forcing myself to slow down, exhaling slowly and wiping my mouth before putting the cap back on. I put everything away and stand again, and I continue in the direction I was heading.

It takes me a while to realize I don't hear the sound of the birds chirping.

Instead, I hear twigs snapping in the distance. I spin around to face their source, but I see nothing. My heart is

hammering in my chest even more than it had been when I was running, because now I feel like I'm in a horror movie.

I pause each time I hear something in the distance, but the sounds always seem to be coming in different directions. They're prominent, too, not something I can excuse as coming from a squirrel or a small creature.

Everything is still, except for me.

Except for what's stalking me.

I swallow hard, slowly turning around to take in my surroundings. It's not possible that Giulio has found me, unless this is one of his unorthodox hobbies. There's no way he ran after me fast enough to keep up, or that he's managed to track me here.

But if it's not Giulio, what is it?

After a small eternity, I notice the trees starting to space out more, gradually opening up into what looks like a clearing up ahead. My heart skips a beat, and I don't know if I should go toward it and find out what's there, or if I should go as far away from it as I can.

Before I can make a decision, a branch snaps behind me.

Not a twig.

A full-on branch.

Holy shit.

I start running again, my sides and legs aching from the effort, but I have no choice but to keep moving. I keep going, right up until I see a modestly sized cabin in the middle of the clearing.

No lights are on. It looks abandoned, empty, and it just might be a place I can hide out in until dark. I slow down, glancing behind me but still seeing nothing, then start to circle the building. Nothing. Even if I can't get inside the cabin itself, there's a shed outside that might be unlocked.

Something creaks behind me, but that's the only warning I have before a gloved hand slaps over my mouth and I'm

pulled back against a large, heavily muscled body.

My scream is muffled, and even though I fight, the person holding me is unyielding. I try to kick and punch and grab, but nothing helps. The man—because it has to be a man from the erection pressed against my back—simply holds me in place until I wear myself out.

Giulio, I think hysterically. Except the door to the cabin suddenly opens, and Giulio strolls out, waving.

“Yo! Took you a while.” He smiles in my direction. “Hey, Vanessa, good job finding this place. It’s kind of remote.”

“Sorry,” Slayer’s voice comes from behind me, not sounding sorry at all. “It was too easy to catch up with her, so I entertained myself for a little bit. A few times, she tried to jackrabbit off in the wrong direction, but we got her here.”

I close my eyes and cry.

Of course this was a setup. Of *course* it was a fucking setup. There’s no way Giulio would ever give me a fair shot at escaping. I’d known as much, but with the threat against Stef, I hadn’t had a choice but to try.

Slayer takes his hand off my mouth. “I don’t think I have to tell you not to scream. Do I, Vanessa?”

I shake my head, my shoulders slumping as I realize this is it. Game over. There’s no way out of this.

“Good.” He grabs my arm and starts to drag me toward the cabin.

SLAYER

Vanessa presses against me, and it has my blood pumping hard as I think of how she'd writhed against me only seconds earlier. Giulio follows us, snapping photos on his phone every few minutes.

I'd tell him to knock it off, but I trust him not to get my face in the shots, and it'd be nice to have a few mementos.

It's not every day I get to indulge myself like this, after all.

Though the knowledge that we're doing this because she tricked all of us does take something away from the situation. I can't help but frown, my mood darkening just a little. I don't know when I started caring about Giulio Jr., but apparently, I'd gotten into the idea at some point.

"How close did she actually get to escaping?" Giulio asks once we're in the mudroom. There's a space for coats and boots on one side, and a small drain and hose on the other end of the room.

I unzip Vanessa's hoodie. "Not very," I say with a snort.

Vanessa shakes her head and tries to keep the hoodie on, but a light slap on her cheek has her sobbing and relaxing her arms enough for me to pull the hoodie off her.

"Yeah. She left such an obvious trail, even I might have been able to track her." Giulio circles around to Vanessa's other side. "Lift your arms for us, Vanessa."

Vanessa looks up at me with big, pleading eyes, and I grin savagely down at her. I can't wait to lick away her tears.

After we hose her down, obviously, because she's covered in dust and dirt from her trek through the woods.

She lifts her arms after a pause, and I yank her shirt off, tossing it carelessly onto the ground. "Oh, is she going to need that when we're done?" I laugh, glancing at the mud-covered shirt. "Whoops."

Vanessa wraps her arms around herself, drawing my attention to something else that's out of place.

"Why's she wearing a bra?" I ask.

Giulio shrugs. "I realize she's part of the no-titty committee, but I wanted it to be fair. Can't have her slowing down 'cause her chest hurts." He pinches one of her tiny tits through the bra. "You can cut the bra off her if you want. She definitely won't be needing it again... not unless her boobs grow with pregnancy."

"Even if they do, a nice jiggle isn't a problem," I say, grinning. "Let's get the pants off first. You're gonna take them off nice and fast so I don't have to cut those off too, right, Vanessa?"

She nods quickly and unbuttons the jeans. She has to take her boots off, something she seems to have forgotten until she tries to pull her jeans down, and I wait impatiently.

"I could've just cut them off by now," I complain.

Vanessa fumbles with the laces of her boots before finally getting them off, casting them off to the side and peeling off the jeans.

"Much better," I say, nodding in approval as she stands there in only her bra and panties... and socks. "Lose the socks."

She takes those off too, tucking them in the boots like she thinks she's going to be able to put them back on and walk out of this. It'd be cute if it wasn't slowing her down so much.

I smack her ass, and she yelps, but she doesn't protest.

She isn't even fighting me.

Giulio goes to sit on the bench by the coat rack. “So, Vanessa, on a scale from one to ten, how terrified are you right now?” He rests his chin on the palm of his hand and grins at her.

Vanessa swallows hard, her eyes wide and fearful. She looks like a fawn, caught in the trap of two hunters who know exactly what they want to do with her—and she may as well be. “T-ten,” she whispers.

“Good,” I say cheerfully. “Then you’re following pretty well. Now, I’d tell you to stay still, but I really don’t give a fuck if I end up cutting you by accident.” Since Damien isn’t here to watch and fuss, and Giulio already knows what’s coming, I don’t have to be as careful. I’m not going to let her bleed out, obviously, but a little bit of spilled blood would just blend in perfectly with the muddy ground.

I pull my karambit out of my back pocket, unsheathing the wickedly curved blade. I take it and put it between her breasts, slicing through the front of the bra where the cups come together.

Vanessa shrieks, and I quirk my brows at her. “Shh,” I admonish her. “Or I’ll have to gag you. You never know, someone might be listening.” I glance at Giulio. “Actually, is that even a chance, Jules?”

“We’re what, a good ten, fifteen miles away from the main road? And there’s plenty of *private property* markings all over. So unless there’s a seriously lost hiker around...” Giulio grins. “If there *is* a hiker, though, that’d be extra fun, wouldn’t it?” He reaches down to massage his cock through his jeans. “Ooh, we could play twenty questions with Vanessa, and every time she lies, you cut off more of the poor hiker’s digits.”

“Aww, man,” I complain. “If I’d known we could play that sort of game, I’d have brought someone else with us. There are a few people I’d love to cut pieces off of.” Like Paul, but I don’t think I need to say that aloud. Giulio knows he’s been a thorn in my side lately—a thorn in all of our sides, really, and it’s only a matter of time until Giulio turns Paul over to me to butcher out here.

I'll have to catch a deer or something soon, just to keep up the pretense of blood in the area, but that's for another day. I can wash most of it away with the hose into the drain anyway.

Vanessa looks up sharply, shaking her head. "No! No. I'll be quiet," she says.

"That's really no fun, though," I say. "Jules has my hopes up now."

"You'll have to entertain yourself with Vanessa alone. Speaking of, *I'm* getting bored. Let's get the show started." Giulio makes a little impatient gesture with his hand, which annoys me a bit.

He'd said I was allowed to run the show this time, which means we're doing things at my pace. But he's not entirely wrong that we need to get this going. I can't keep Vanessa's fear at a ten forever if I'm not actively fucking with her.

I don't give her a warning before I catch the side of her panties with the curved edge of the blade, easily slicing through the thin material. I do the same thing on the other side, and they fall away from her body, leaving her naked and shivering in front of me.

"You're filthy," I tell her. "Go over there by the hose." I slip the karambit back into its sheath and tuck it away.

She gives me a look like she doesn't understand, and I arch a brow at her, gesturing impatiently for her to move. She finally does, but she doesn't look happy about it. There's a chill in the air, especially because the sun has started to set, but there's plenty of light in the shed to see by. Her nipples have pebbled, and goosebumps have broken out all over her skin.

I grin as I grab the hose, and I direct the full cold blast at her, starting with her face. She starts coughing, and I take the time to wash the dust and dirt off the rest of her. I don't want her to get infected, after all, and cleanliness is important with knife... safety.

Giulio wolf-whistles in appreciation. "She looks hot like that. Vanessa, turn around, show me those cute little tits of yours."

Water is running down her face, and I'm sure some of the liquid is tears. She obediently turns around, displaying her front to Giulio as I continue to hose her down.

"She's such a good little bitch," I say cheerfully. "Ready for whelping, too. Wish I had the breeding bench here, huh? It'd be nice to have her ready for us all night. Oh well." I aim the spray between her legs. "Spread a little wider, bitch. Gotta make sure you're clean *all* over."

Vanessa whimpers, but she widens her stance so I can aim the water straight at her pussy. I can see her skin pebble up even more, and the more pronounced trembles in her body. I reach down to spread her folds so the water can really reach every last bit of her. She bites her bottom lip, but she doesn't close her legs.

I finally finish hosing her off and toss it to the side. I'm nearly salivating at the thought of what comes next. It's been too long since I've been able to let loose on someone, since I've been able to watch blood streaming from the wounds I've left...

Well.

At least a month.

I can't really let loose on Vanessa, and honestly... I don't want to. I'm pissed at her, but not to the point where I want to cut her into pieces.

"Hey, Jules? Do I have to worry about scarring, or should I just carve your name into her breast?" I ask casually, watching her shudder.

"That sounds really hot, but Damien might be upset if we damage her milkers." Giulio taps his jaw like he's thinking about it. "How about a mark on her side? So she remembers who she belongs to." He chuckles. "That's just the permanent one. If you want to give her small cuts, I don't really care where you do that."

"What kind of mark do you want? A big G?" I ask, turning Vanessa so I can examine her side. "It's not the best place to

leave a mark, and it's gonna hurt like a bitch, but hey, actions have consequences and all."

"Hey, hey, I'm not that egotistical!" Giulio complains. "Let's be a little classier than that. How about a heart, and... 'GDS' inside. She belongs to all three of us, after all."

Which is probably why I can't shake off this anger, this sensation that's so foreign to me. How is it I'm so upset that she tried to avoid getting *pregnant*? Usually, I'd be pissed if one of the women I fucked *tried* to get knocked up.

Vanessa whimpers and wraps her arms around herself again. Her hair is dripping onto the rest of her body, and she must be freezing.

"Sure. I need a flat canvas for that, so let's move to the main event hall." I grab Vanessa's arm and drag her toward the far door. Giulio follows us.

As soon as I hit the light switch, Vanessa stops.

"N-no. Wh-what?" She shakes her head and digs her bare feet into the floor. Her gaze is glued to the far wall, where several sharp implements hang.

It'd be more effective if they were covered in blood, but that's unprofessional and dangerous. All of my tools are completely clean.

Giulio pats Vanessa's shoulder. "What's the hold-up? Get moving, I'm getting seriously blue-balled here."

"Please," Vanessa begs, new tears spilling down her cheeks as she stares at the wall, paralyzed with her fear—which is exactly what I want to see. Well. I want her to move eventually, but I'm enjoying the sheer terror that radiates off of her. It almost feels like I can lean in and taste it.

So I do. I lean in, and I flick my tongue against her cheek, tasting the salt of her tears. It makes me moan, and I kiss her hard, forcing her to taste herself.

But Giulio isn't the only one getting a serious case of blue balls.

I shove her forward, pushing her in the direction of the big table I use to break down and dress wild game—and bodies. I keep it clean, or as clean as it can be given I'm not out here that much. I can't leave traces of my extra-curricular activities, after all.

She stumbles, and I catch her arm to keep her from falling as I force-march her toward the table. I grab her by the waist before she can react and lift her up, setting her down. "Lie down," I order.

Vanessa looks past me at Giulio, pleading wordlessly with him, and I glance back at him to see his expression.

Giulio's entirely fixated on Vanessa, grinning wildly. There's something in his eyes that makes me hesitate—a lust that I don't usually see, even when we've been out here together with other toys. Just how angry is he? I know he's upset, but in the grand scheme of things, Vanessa's little trick only delayed the inevitable.

"Lie down," Giulio repeats, voice hard and unyielding.

Vanessa sobs and shakes her head. "Please. I'm sorry. I can't."

"Jules..." I start to say, and I don't recognize the turmoil inside of me. I have a gorgeous woman in front of me, terrified and just ripe for the picking, and I'm hesitating? Usually, I'm the one who's going full force, with Giulio encouraging me but never with that sort of single-minded focus. "Maybe we should just take her inside. She's probably learned her lesson."

Giulio's head whips toward me. "I don't think she has. But if you don't want to cut her up, hand me your fucking knife and I'll do it myself."

His voice is so fucking *strange*, and I don't get why this is such a huge deal that he'd insist on doing this no matter what I say. Usually, it's guys out here, though, and maybe I'm a little softer on women than I want to admit.

Maybe.

Just a little.

At least, with Vanessa...

I clench my jaw and shake my head. Giulio is good at a lot of things, but this is *my* specialty. If anyone is going to carve Vanessa up, it's going to be me. I know how hard to press, where to place the blade for the maximum impact, and what will scar and what won't.

Hell, maybe I'm a little worried about what Damien's going to think after all, and if he finds out Giulio did this himself...

Ugh.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I shove those thoughts out of my mind and press down on Vanessa's now-bare chest. "Lie down," I tell her steadily. "Or I will hand the knife over to Giulio, and it'll be much worse for you."

I never thought I'd be saying those words.

Vanessa's sobs get worse, thick tears rolling down her cheeks, and her entire torso shakes as she lies back onto the table. From how she's crying, it really seems like she thinks we're going to torture her to death.

I smooth a few strands of her hair away from her face. "It's not going to hurt as much as you think it will," I murmur to her. It feels awkward to try to... What am I even doing? Trying to *soothe* her?

It doesn't help anyway, and she keeps crying like I haven't said anything at all.

I sigh, casting one last glance at Giulio's icy expression before I open a nearby drawer.

There's a first aid kit in there, extensive and able to handle even large lacerations—because you never know what'll happen when you go hunting.

Then there's the brand-new x-acto knife, which is little more than a craft knife. Sharp as hell, and it'll cut skin like butter, but it's unlikely to leave scars. Normally, I'd reassure

Giulio of that fact, but for the moment, I think it's better to let him think the heart, at least, is going to remain.

It might, if I put enough pressure into it, but the side isn't a very good place for scarring, and it's going to hurt like hell.

Why the fuck do I care?

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I open the packaging of the knife, making sure Vanessa can see it, and she keeps crying like she thinks I'm going to cut one of her nipples off. I shake my head. Giulio wants to shake her up a bit, and I get it.

But I don't get why it's not as hot as usual.

My body doesn't seem to agree with my mind, though, as my cock is already hard in my pants, just like it would be if I was cutting anyone else up.

Giulio suddenly grips my shoulder, and I must've been really lost in thought to not even notice him creeping up on me.

"What's the hold up?" Giulio asks. He reaches around my front and massages my erection through my pants. "Need help getting warmed up there? Don't tell me you're not into chicks anymore."

I let him touch me, but his words make me scowl and bristle. "I don't need *you* to warm me up," I mutter. "I'm already hard, hotshot. I'm just taking my time. I like seeing her cry." That's not untrue, either. I do love the sight of the tears rolling down her cheeks, the way her body shakes with the force of her sobs.

I dismiss the part of me that keeps fucking hesitating, focusing instead on the way my cock is demanding I do more. Giulio's touch helps, even though there's always that confusion when my body reacts to anything he does to me. He's the only man I've ever allowed to touch me intimately, and usually only after a great deal of blood has been spilled. This early on in the game, I'm not sure what to do about his hand on me. The occasional kiss still throws me off kilter, and

his hand going straight for the gold? It's going to throw me off my game.

"Vanessa," I say firmly, wiping her cheek. "Look at me."

She gives a small shake of her head, and I slap her cheek lightly. Her eyes fly open, and I could drown in the fear I see. It's enough to kick the sympathetic thoughts right to the back of my mind, and I lean down to kiss away her tears so I can taste them again.

"There you go. I want you to watch me while I cut you," I tell her, my voice going hoarse as Giulio continues to massage me through my pants.

Vanessa blinks tears away—and her gaze lands on Giulio, even though I'm the one holding the knife.

Giulio laughs and mouths the side of my neck. "Looks like I'm still scarier than you, Slayer."

I growl at that, turning to push him away from me. "Get off me, you perv. You're distracting me."

Still laughing, he steps back away from me, but Vanessa still looks at him, still seeming more frightened of him than me.

I take the knife and press it to the side of her nipple. I might've dismissed that idea earlier, but I want her to be scared of *me*. Not Giulio. Even though I'd said it was better if I was the one holding the knife, and not Giulio, but...

Vanessa goes still, and her eyes immediately go back to me. I'm the more immediate threat, and that's how I like it. Giulio is just there to watch.

"There we go," I tell Vanessa with a savage grin. "Now you're paying attention. Remember Giulio isn't the one with the knife, my little broodmare." I push the knife just a little harder, making a slight cut. It's little more than a papercut, but I might as well have just cut the whole damn nipple off from the way she reacts.

"Hey, Jules?" I say casually, glancing at him. "Why don't you finger her while I cut her up a little? She'd probably

appreciate the distraction.”

I want to be the scary one, not Giulio, and I don't like that I'm not.

“Sure,” Giulio says casually. He pulls one of the stools over so he can sit next to the table. Vanessa whimpers when Giulio puts his hand on her thigh, drumming his fingers. “It'll be hot, watching her orgasm while you're making her bleed. Ooh, like that one guy, what's-his-face. He really didn't like me jacking him while you opened him up.”

I smirk at Giulio. “That's because he was straight,” I point out.

“So are you,” he mocks me.

My smirk turns into a glower. “Careful, or I'll turn this on you,” I threaten Giulio, even though we both know it's a fucking craft knife. It would only be a real threat if I had the karambit out... but Vanessa doesn't need to know that.

She still seems just as terrified, and really, for a craft knife, it's pretty fucking sharp. It splits skin with ease, though it won't scar as badly as the curved blade would.

Will.

She's not getting out of this without her blood soaking my favorite knife.

“Please don't,” Vanessa whispers, and I'm not sure if she's talking to me or to Giulio. If I had to guess, I'd probably say Giulio, because she hates it when we make her orgasm while doing shit like this.

Giulio's fingers go between her legs, and he looks almost bored while he starts massaging her clit. Vanessa tries to close her legs, but Giulio brings his other hand down on her thigh to keep her in place.

“What part turns you on more, the blood or the cutting?” Giulio asks me, completely ignoring Vanessa's pleas.

I don't pay them any more attention than he does. “The blood,” I say. “But the cutting is fun, too. Mm. It's a good thing she's clean.”

As my misgivings start to wear off, I'm getting more interested, more excited. My cock throbs in my pants, and I haven't even made the first real cut. I do it then, slicing into the skin just beneath her small breast, and I'm rewarded with a little cry of surprise.

The real pain won't set in for a few seconds at least, but the sharpness is something new for a spoiled, pampered thing like her.

It takes a moment to well up with blood, and I lean down to lick it as it forms little bubbles. It doesn't drip blood; it isn't deep enough for that.

The next one is. It takes a few seconds to fill with blood and start to slowly trickle down her ribs, and the third is even sharper, harsher. She's crying out, sobbing and begging me to stop, and I roll my eyes. "It's just an x-acto knife," I tell her. "Just be glad I'm not using something bigger."

"Do you even have anything bigger?" Giulio asks cheekily. "Don't worry, Vanessa, Damien's not around."

I glower at him, but my attention doesn't stray long from the pretty, writhing woman atop the counter I use to dress my kills. I want her blood there, to know it was there with all the rest, and the next few slices are a little deeper.

But they aren't enough.

I wasn't going to scar her, because I don't want Damien bitching at me, but this just is too little for me. Trickle of blood are nothing.

I toss the small knife onto the table near Vanessa's feet, yanking the karambit out of my back pocket and unsheathing it. As my fingers close around the hilt, I feel so much better. This is more familiar.

Usually, I don't give a fuck about leaving scars—the wounds will never heal anyway. I *can* use just enough pressure to break the skin without leaving permanent marks, more cat scratches than anything else like I had the last time, but no.

I swipe at her thigh in one swift motion, and this time, the wound immediately blossoms with blood. It rolls down her

thigh, and I groan as I watch the flow. “That’s more like it,” I say, gripping myself through my pants with my other hand as she cries out.

Giulio trails one finger through the blood and leaves a long smear on Vanessa’s thigh. “It’s always hot watching you do this.”

Vanessa’s sobs get louder. It always takes a second for the pain to kick in, especially when I’m using such a sharp blade, and this is the part I revel in—flowing blood, tears, begging...

“Make her come,” I say, my voice ragged. “Then fuck her, Jules. I want to watch you fuck her while she’s all bloody.”

“Keep cutting her,” Giulio orders, his own voice unsteady. He shoves one of her legs up, giving me a great view of her cunt, then he shoves his bloodied fingers inside her. He thrusts aggressively, as if he were fucking her with his cock, and Vanessa starts whimpering and shaking her head back and forth.

“Does that feel good?” I ask Vanessa, who looks at me with wide-eyed shock on her expression. For all we’ve done to her, I doubt it’s ever been this intense. I smile at her as I slide the blade across her other thigh, where it will leave a matching scar. She screams this time, as though it hurts so much more than the last time.

Maybe the mixture of the cutting and Giulio’s fingers inside of her makes it worse, but I don’t care. I fumble with my jeans with my left hand, freeing my cock from the confines of my pants with a sigh of relief.

“Please,” Vanessa sobs. “Please stop. I c-can’t—”

“Can’t what?” Giulio interrupts her coldly, his fingers still pumping in and out of her. “Can’t handle being pampered? Can’t handle getting fed the best foods? Can’t handle Damien’s affection? Can’t handle doing your one fucking job?”

Giulio’s rage is starting to make more sense to me. He’s always sensitive where Damien is concerned, and if he feels like she hurt Damien...

“Please, Giulio, I’ll do better. I won’t ever try to disobey you again. I’ll be so good for you. I will be. I promise. I... I was wrong. Things were so good. I want things to be good,” Vanessa pleads.

I swipe the blade slowly along her thigh, not aiming to leave a scar this time, but enjoying the sight of her blood.

“Yeah? What parts did you like?” Giulio asks. He removes his fingers from her cunt to lay them against her clit.

I let out a disgruntled sound. “You’re distracting her,” I complain. “She should be panicking because she’s getting cut up or about to have an orgasm while she’s all bloody. You can get her to get on her knees and kiss your feet when I’m finished with her.”

“Fine, fine.” Giulio gets up and undoes his belt. I’m almost surprised to see that he’s actually hard. He’s been acting weird this entire time, and I half expected him to complain about being bored.

Which would just have pissed *me* off, because he’s getting in the way of my own fun.

Giulio jacks himself a few times and glares at Vanessa. “Okay, spread ‘em nice and wide for me. Let’s get the baby-making juice inside you.”

Vanessa sobs again, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen, and she closes her eyes tightly as she spreads her legs for him.

“Baby-making juice?” I ask, sliding my hand all over Vanessa’s bloodied thighs then using that hand to stroke my own cock. “Is that supposed to be sexy? Because it really, really isn’t.”

“Nah. I was thinking more... dehumanizing.” Giulio grabs Vanessa’s thighs and lines his cock up against her pussy, rubbing over her folds just once before slamming inside her. “Who needs fun? Vanessa’s just a vessel. Barely worth treating like a person. Cut her some more, Slayer.”

I don’t let go of my own dick, squeezing it as I slice carefully along her thighs a few more times. Some of these will scar, and some of them won’t, but they’re going to look

nasty until they heal. They'll be a constant reminder of what she'd done—and of what the price for disobeying and trying to fool Giulio had been.

For pissing Damien off.

I wonder for the first time why he isn't here to witness this—or to hold Giulio back—but I shrug it off and go back to the knife on Vanessa's lovely, previously unmarred skin. Little cuts on her chest and stomach, little more than papercuts, but the knife is so sharp that it slips a few times while Giulio fucks her and moves her body more than I can account for.

Every time he slams into her, her legs jostle and the cuts widen a little more with each stretch of her skin, making more blood trickle out. She whimpers the entire time, tears flowing freely down her face.

The cuts are tame in comparison to what I've done to others. She's barely even bleeding.

But she's still the hottest thing I've ever seen, desperate to please us, in pain with blood smeared on her pale thighs. It's enough to make me forget about Giulio's strange mood, and I jack myself faster, admiring her beautiful face. Sweat is making her hair stick to her skin.

I lean down to lick more of her blood away.

"You're smoking hot," I tell her. "Red looks great on you."

I reluctantly let go of my cock, sliding my finger through one of the blood-slick cuts, then wipe it across her mouth. I kiss her, tasting her and her tears and her blood all at once, and I groan. Giulio keeps jostling her each time he thrusts into her, making it a little difficult, and I reluctantly draw back.

Setting the knife aside, I go back to jerking my dick with my bloodied hands, watching Vanessa's pale, tear- and blood-streaked face as Giulio fucks her hard.

"Make her come," I urge Giulio.

"Don't have to *make* her do anything," Giulio answers. "She always comes." He changes his angle though, and drags his cock out slowly only to slam back in.

Vanessa cries out and shakes her head again. “Please. I’m sorry. Please.”

“Blah blah blah,” I say. I get closer and closer to my own climax as I watch, just *waiting* for Giulio to make her come. I can’t wait for it, though. It isn’t long before I’m spilling all over my hand—and her face—as my orgasm washes over me.

Giulio starts laughing. “Fuck. That’s hot. Forget red, she looks good splashed in white.” Then his movements turn more erratic. I figure he’s going to come before Vanessa, only she suddenly gasps loudly and cries out. Her mouth parts, some of my cum dripping inside.

“Now that’s what I like to see,” I say breathlessly, smearing my cum over her mouth and forcing my fingers past her lips. “God, she’s so sexy. She’s gonna make beautiful babies for you, Giulio.”

I don’t know if that’ll kill the mood for him, and I sort of regret saying it. But that’s her purpose, and I want her to remember that while she’s coming, with blood and seed on her lips while Giulio pounds his own semen into her.

I don’t think I’ve ever found a woman this attractive before.

“She’s fucking trying to milk me,” Giulio mutters, but it’s not long before he stutters too, giving a low moan as he spills into her.

For a while, we’re all just breathing heavily. All the exercise—and Vanessa’s blood—have my own blood pumping, but I’m starting to notice just how cool it’s gotten.

Vanessa must be freezing.

Giulio pulls out of her and grabs a cloth from a nearby drawer, cleaning off his dick. “I’m gonna go take a nap. You can join me. Or not, I don’t care.”

I eye him warily. “What about Vanessa?”

She whimpers and tenses up, like she’s expecting even more torture.

“Whatever. You can leave her out here if you want.” He yawns and finishes putting his cock away. “Don’t wake me for at least an hour.”

Then he walks off, paying no more attention to either of us.

I look at her, and she grabs my wrist.

As terrified as she is, she whispers, “Please don’t leave me here alone.”

I blink at her, unsure of how to even react. I can’t remember a woman ever asking me *not* to leave her alone before. Well. Aside from the few dates I’d been on, but I hadn’t ever cut them up and come all over their faces before.

“Yeah,” I say after a pause. “I’ll clean you up.”

VANESSA

I don't know what I was thinking when I asked Slayer not to leave me alone.

I should've been happy to be left alone, but it's cold, and I'm bleeding, and I'm covered with cum, and I just want to curl up somewhere warm and cry.

There were moments where I'd thought he was going to be nice to me, but Giulio had always seemed to stoke that fire back up within Slayer and get him to keep going.

Is Giulio ever going to be finished punishing me?

"Give me a sec," Slayer adds after a pause, grabbing the curved blade he'd set aside. I shudder at the sight of it, still dripping with my blood. He flashes me a smirk, but he doesn't come closer to me with it.

I gingerly sit up on the table as he goes to clean it off, rubbing and polishing it clean like it's a precious jewel and not a savage weapon. Once he tucks it away, he returns to me, scrutinizing me.

"Yeah, you're going to drip blood all over the place if I let you walk inside," he says, making a face. "Let's avoid that. I don't want to bandage you out here because I don't want you to get an infection. I'll carry you, and you just... try not to bleed on anything."

Like I have any control of that.

I nod anyway, even though I don't want to be carried—but then, the idea of walking when I'm feeling so unsteady and

dizzy isn't appealing either.

Slayer scoops me up into his arms, grunting with the effort. "Christ, I always forget how tall you are."

"Sorry?" I mumble, not sure what he wants me to say.

He shrugs. "Just unwieldy, is all. I'll try not to slam your head into a doorway."

That's not comforting at all, and I cling a little harder to him, trying to curl up and make myself smaller in his arms.

Slayer manages to get me inside with only a little trouble with the doorknob, and he takes me immediately into the bathroom. He sets me down on the tiled shower floor, and blood trickles from the cuts he'd made. His eyes are glued to the trailing blood, and I fidget uncomfortably under the scrutiny.

"Yeah," he says a little hoarsely, like he's talking to himself instead of me for a moment. "Let's get this cleaned up."

He turns the shower on, and I cry out as cold water pounds down onto my shoulders. He eyes me, putting a finger over my lips to quiet me, then adjusts the water. Soon, it's warm, but it's not much of a reprieve. Blood is still flowing freely from a few of the cuts on my thighs, leaving a pinkish tinge to the water as it runs down the drain.

He grabs a washcloth and some soap, and with more care than I would've expected, he cleans my body. He's especially careful around the wounds, but they still sting when the soap hits them. He leaves my still-damp hair alone, though the ends get wet from me standing under the spray.

I don't say anything, even as he shuts the water off and grabs a towel. He's damp from leaning into the shower too, but he ignores that, focusing instead on drying me off. The black towel hides the blood, but it streaks against my leg.

"Those are going to need some glue and bandages to heal properly," Slayer says after a pause. "Come on. We'll go out into the living room, and I'll get you bandaged up."

He's acting so nonchalant, like he hadn't gone partially feral and tortured me while Giulio had looked on and encouraged him. I'm not sure what to make of it. Not that long ago, he'd killed a man in front of me, and he's just cut me up like it was nothing. But right now, he seems almost normal, like all of that is just something he does on the side and separates himself from.

No. He'd been too into it for that.

Slayer lays a towel across the couch, motioning for me to sit. I'm glad all the cuts are concentrated on my front, although bending still makes all the slices on my thighs open up. I wince as I get on the couch.

I also shiver. The shower helped warm me up, but I'm still naked, and there's no heating in the cabin.

Slayer sits down on the coffee table in front of me with a first aid kit. "Hold still while I bandage you up."

I don't know why he thinks I'd fight. I hadn't even fought while I was lying across the table with a knife on me.

I'd simply lain there and taken it. I'd cried. I'd begged. I'd orgasmed.

I'm pathetic.

I don't say anything while Slayer dabs alcohol over the wounds to clean them. "This might hurt a little," he warns, pulling out a small tube from the kit. He concentrates as he pushes the edges of the cuts together, using the substance on them and holding them closed until they seal. Glue.

He takes his time gluing together the bigger wounds, then covers them with bandages. They should hurt more than they do, but at this point I'm just numb.

The rest of my life is going to be like this. I'd thought it couldn't get worse, but Giulio keeps proving me wrong, over and over again.

"Okay, we're all done," Slayer says. "Here, you can wrap the blanket around yourself. I'll get a fire going."

He hands me a blanket, which I stare at for a little too long. Finally, I take it off his hands and spread it out over my lap. I don't have the energy to get it around my shoulders.

Slayer's already gone to the fireplace. He squats down, loading firewood into it along with a starter brick, and he lights it. He fusses with it for a moment, making sure it catches before he stands up. He glances back at me, frowning a little.

"Fuck," he mutters.

I flinch, shrinking back a little on the couch. Whatever's wrong, I don't want to deal with the consequences.

But instead of striding to me and hitting me, or even yelling at me, he goes to a cooler on the other side of the room and produces a bottle of orange-colored water and something wrapped in plastic.

He sits down next to me, holding the bottle out to me. "You're in shock," he says matter-of-factly. "Let's get you warmed up and settled, then you can take a nap and get some rest."

Shock? Of course I'm in shock.

I try to take the bottle, but my hand shakes so badly that I drop it. It rolls across the floor, and I stare at it. Even the thought of getting up is too exhausting.

Slayer goes to pick up the bottle without a word. When he returns, he unscrews the cap and holds the bottle up to my lips. "Here, drink."

I glance at him, but he tilts it a little, and I drink. Sugar explodes over my tongue, unexpected despite the unnatural color of the drink, and it tastes better than I thought it would. I drink more, and he patiently holds the bottle up until I've finished nearly half of it.

I push lightly at his hand, and he takes the hint, pulling it away and capping it again.

"Okay, good," he says, almost sounding like he's trying to be encouraging. "Now food. It'll make you feel better."

“I don’t think I can eat,” I mumble.

“C’mere,” he says, sitting down next to me, and I’m suddenly engulfed by his arm moving around me. He urges me closer, until I’m in his lap. He pulls the blanket back on me, carefully putting it back in place.

I’m not sure what I’m in the most shock from: running, the cutting, being fucked, or the fact that he’s treating me like this. I want to pull away, but his body is so warm. Even where his side is a little damp from where he’d helped me shower, it’s warm, and I can’t stop myself from pressing closer against him.

He unwraps the plastic around a sandwich, and I’m not sure if the smell of it makes me hungrier or want to throw up.

“It’s one of Giulio’s fancy things,” Slayer explains. “I don’t know. Turkey and... something. He had Italian ones, too, with pepperoni and salami and stuff, but I figured that might be a little too rough on your stomach.”

He’s probably right. The idea of the heavier meats makes me gag. I’m not even sure I can handle turkey, but when he presses the sandwich to my lips, I take a small bite. I’m suddenly *ravenous*, and I find myself having to fight against the urge to eat it as quickly as possible. I don’t want to make myself sick, but the food is just so good. Everything tastes amazing, and I wonder if it has something to do with the aftermath of what they just did to me.

Slayer patiently feeds me, and although the act of being hand fed makes shame flare up inside me, I don’t stop eating. I still can’t muster the strength to lift a single finger, but I’m desperately hungry.

As I get to the last bite, my eyes start to prickle with tears again.

“Hey. You want more?” Slayer asks gently. “You’ve had a rough day.”

I shake my head. I don’t want more food. I don’t know what I want. I should ask him to leave me alone, but once

again, the thought of being alone and cold makes my stomach freeze up with dread.

He kisses my forehead and strokes my head lazily. “Tell me what you need.”

“I don’t know,” I manage to choke out.

He nods, setting the plastic wrap down on the table in front of us. “More to drink?”

I shake my head again. It’s so hard to talk, and honestly, I find myself wanting to bury my face against his chest and just cry. But I don’t want to find comfort from the man who made me feel this way to begin with.

Well. That’s not entirely true.

Slayer may have wielded the knife, but Giulio had been the mastermind behind all of this, and I know it.

I doubt Slayer would appreciate being thought of as a puppet, so I very carefully leave that thought unspoken. Instead, I just give in to the inevitable. I rest my cheek against his warm chest, and his hand comes down to lightly run down my back.

“Here,” he says, turning me gently in his lap so my side is pressed against his front. It’s a little awkward; I’m not small, and while he’s a large guy, I’m still too tall for this to be a picturesque example of a man delicately holding a woman. He pulls the blanket up over me so it’s around my shoulders as well, and he closes his eyes. “Just get some rest.”

For a moment, everything is silent but for the crackling of the fire.

Then I can’t help it. “Why are you being so nice to me?” I blurt out, my words shaky, almost whiny.

Slayer lets out a quiet huff of laughter. “I don’t fucking know. Can’t you just enjoy it?”

I shake my head. “I’m in some sort of like... serial killer’s hunting place. You just... cut me up, while Giulio...” I shudder.

Slayer goes quiet, and I glance up at him to see that his face has gone serious. “Most of what I hunt is wild game,” he says after a moment. “I have a freezer of venison and rabbit and stuff.” He hesitates, like he’s weighing his words. “But you’re right, in a way. That’s not all I hunt.”

I wait for him to continue, shuddering, but he doesn’t. I don’t really want to prompt him, but at the same time, I’m desperately curious to know what this is—what this is to him and Giulio together.

He finally sighs. “I guess there’s no harm in telling you now.” He pauses. “Well. It’ll scare the fuck out of you, probably.”

It probably will, but can it really be worse than it is now?

“Giulio owns the place. I don’t know if he’s had it for a long time or what, but this was his first major present for me.” Slayer scratches his jaw, looking almost sheepish. “He’s an ass, but he knows how to give gifts.”

“He knew you wanted a murder cabin,” I say, deadpan.

“This is coming out wrong.” Slayer tightens his hold on me. “He knew I was into blood, so he got a place for us to have fun with it and make some of his enemies disappear at the same time. But trust me, those guys all had it coming. You think Giulio’s bad...”

I stare at him. “I don’t think it’s coming out *wrong*. It’s just coming out bad, because it is bad.”

He makes a face at me. “The guys I torture are worse than Giulio. They’d do worse than set you up on some field trip through the woods and a little bit of cutting at the end. You really think he’s doing the absolute worst he could do to you?”

My face drains of color, because I realize he’s absolutely right. He could make things much worse for me. As terrible as all of this is, I’m not a complete idiot. I saw what he did to Stef to get back at me for disobeying Damien and trying to help. Her gang rape had been brutal, right up to the point of her passing out and even beyond that.

“Just because... Just because they’re worse, doesn’t make torturing them right,” I answer, surprised at how steady my voice is. I think I’m still numb to it all. What’s Slayer going to do if he’s mad at me—cut me up all over again?

Slayer snorts and scratches my scalp lightly. “Yeah. No sugar-coating it. I get off on making people scream. But, for what it’s worth, I... I don’t really want to do any worse to *you*.”

I wish that didn’t reassure me the way it does. I want to be indifferent to Slayer, and Damien, and Giulio. I want to not care about their moods.

But I do. I can barely handle them when they’re in good moods.

“I... I won’t thank you for that,” I say anyway, even though I don’t feel that confident.

Thankfully Slayer doesn’t seem insulted. He kisses the top of my head again in a strangely intimate gesture.

Tears threaten to spill all over again, and I don’t understand why my own mood is swinging so wildly.

Neither of us says anything else for a while. He doesn’t comment on my tears, and I snuggle into his warmth, pretending he isn’t a monster.

Until a phone rings.

My eyes snap open and I sit upright, the blanket falling away from me.

Slayer looks toward the closed bedroom door. “Must be Giulio’s phone.”

“It hasn’t been an hour,” I say, my voice going high. “He said not to wake him.”

Slayer shrugs. “We’re not the ones who woke him up.” He seems entirely unconcerned, but then, he’s not the one Giulio’s been pissed off at.

“Wait,” I say, a little shakily. “Giulio said there was no cell phone reception up here.”

“Did he now?” Slayer asks, arching his brows at me. He pets the top of my head. “Well, it’s patchy in the woods, but the cabin’s pretty reliable.”

I feel a strange sense of betrayal. “He told me he couldn’t track the GPS. He made me feel like I had a chance.”

The phone stops ringing, and I hear movement in the other room. I tense, and Slayer cards his fingers through my hair, as though he’s really trying to comfort me.

“You never had a chance,” Slayer says matter-of-factly. I flinch away from the words, and he goes on, “But I didn’t need the GPS to find you. Like Jules said, you left a trail even he could follow, and that’s really saying something.”

The door opens, and Giulio walks out, his hair ruffled.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Slayer greets him brightly.

“Ugh.” Giulio walks past us toward the kitchen, staring at his phone the entire time. He stops in front of the cooler to tap on his phone for a few seconds, before finally opening it and pulling out a glass bottle of something. “You want a beer, Slayer?”

“Sure. The most normal one you brought along.”

I don’t know what that means, but my eyes are glued to Giulio. I can’t tell if he’s in a good or a bad mood.

Giulio grabs the beers and pulls another wrapped sandwich out. Then he wanders back to us, and casually takes the armchair across from us. He places the beers on the coffee table.

“Did you seriously leave me only the boring sandwiches?” Giulio mutters as he unwraps his food. “I shoulda bought only turkey and raisins.”

He looks annoyed—because of the food? Because of the phone call? I keep tensing up more and more. Whatever courage I’d found to talk back to Slayer earlier, it’s all gone now.

“Vanessa needed to eat,” Slayer says, and I almost ask him why he hates me again. He doesn’t have to throw me under the

bus like this.

“Good to know all the cutting didn’t rob her of her appetite.” Giulio starts chewing on his sandwich, watching both of us closely.

“She was in shock,” Slayer says calmly, and it surprises me that he’d defend me like that. “She needed food and drink. Good thing you brought the shit with the electrolytes.”

Giulio waves him off like he hasn’t even spoken. “I was thinking.”

I wish he wouldn’t.

“I’ve got one more punishment, and then I’ll be done.” Giulio starts swiping through his phone again. “You want to thank me now, or after?”

Dread pools in my gut, and I hesitate for a long moment. “I... It’ll be done after this?” I ask, though I hardly dare to hope. “Things will go back to... to how they were?”

“Yep. Just one more small thing. I won’t even touch you. Then you’ll have my usual cheerful self back.” Giulio grins at me. “So, do you want to thank me now, or wait until after I’ve punished you? You’ll have to say it either way.”

I have a feeling I won’t like what this last punishment is. It’ll probably be easier to thank him now, when there might even be a modicum of sincerity in my words. “Thank you,” I say carefully, though I’m still wary. I don’t know what I’m getting myself into, but I’m just so ready for things to go back to normal. I didn’t even realize before how good I’d had it. “I’ll do better now. I promise.”

Slayer squeezes me tight, kissing the top of my head, but he doesn’t chime in.

Giulio smiles at me. “Nice. I’ll even let you hang out with Damien after we’re done, then.”

Not that that’s really a reward.

Then he extends his phone to me. “Here, the last punishment.”

I don't know what I'm looking at, not at first. The photo is a little bit dark, but I can sort of make out a figure.

A woman in chains, I realize with dismay. She's gagged, too. Small, skinny, with blond hair and... and...

It's Stef.

Giulio swipes to the next photo, where somebody—his face is out of shot—is carrying Stef over his shoulder.

“What?” I look up at Giulio, my body going cold all over again.

“Yep. The sale just went through.” Giulio sits back again, removing the phone from my view. “Bye, Stef. Only lasted... what, four months? Her tears will be better served in private, anyway.”

Sale.

He said... *sale*.

My heart hammers in my chest, and I sit upright—or as much as I can with Slayer's arms around me. “No,” I say, my breathing uneven as I start to understand. “No, Giulio. No. She didn't do anything wrong! I didn't try to run. You told me I *had* to!”

“Oh, that. The sale was happening either way. But if you hadn't cooperated, we'd have gone to watch it in person. This way, Stef won't ever know it's your fault she's now in the hands of... well, I don't share client names.” Giulio opens the beer on the table and takes a long gulp. “Ah, this is a great brew! I'll have to buy from them more often.”

My eyes are locked on him, even as tears start to blur my vision. “Giulio,” I whisper. “Please, don't do this. I didn't try to run. You said that if I tried to run, you'd sell her. I didn't! You have to get her back!”

“What kind of business is that? There's no take-backsies in this world.” Giulio snorts in amusement. “And I sold Stef, Vanessa, because you tried to avoid pregnancy. But we're all over that now! Unless you want me to get mad at you all over again?”

Slayer is quiet behind me, and I don't dare risk glancing at his face. I'm sure he doesn't care about Stef. None of them do. Only me, only Elena, probably, and—

The thought hits me hard, all at once.

Elena.

I haven't let myself think about it before, how Giulio found out what I'd been doing, but now I realize it had to be her. She had to have guessed, and her offer to take the trash out... God, I was so fucking stupid!

A sob catches in my throat, and I shake my head. "Please, Giulio, I'm sorry," I beg, looking at him so desperately I hope it can sway him.

But it doesn't. He just keeps grinning at me.

"Hey, at least she doesn't know it was your fault," Slayer points out. "That would've been pretty bad, huh? Her going off knowing her bestie is the reason she got sold off to the highest bidder?"

"God, that would have been a riot. Stef's already a crybaby on the best of days. She would have been inconsolable if she'd known you were involved." Giulio laughs and drinks more of the beer. "Anyway, we're over it all now. In fact, why don't you come sit on my lap, Vanessa. We can play... What're you in the mood for, Slayer? You haven't gotten your dick wet yet today."

Slayer helps me to my feet, which is necessary because I'm shaking so hard my teeth are chattering. I feel ice cold despite his body warmth, despite the fire, and the knowledge that this is all my fault just makes it worse and worse.

Stupid. I'd been so stupid! I hadn't thought about how my actions would affect anyone else.

"Eh, I already had my fun and games. Wouldn't mind just a casual fuck while she cries a little," Slayer says, and he sounds a little... awkward. I don't understand it, but I don't really care enough to try to analyze it as he guides me toward Giulio. He nudges me into Giulio's lap and puts the blanket

back around my shoulders, getting up and heading toward the cooler again.

Giulio brushes some of my hair behind my ear. “This is nice, isn’t it, Mama? A fun, romantic little cabin getaway.”

He wants me to play along. He wants me to pretend that I like him.

But I hate him so much. I hate him more than ever, so much so that I want to shriek and pull away and run away screaming from him. I want to hit him and kick him and bite him and demand that he bring Stef back. That he tell me he was just lying to fuck with me, and that was my real punishment. That he’d only do it if I messed up again.

Instead, I just sob, unable to get any words out. I know I need to try, because he’ll get mad at me if I don’t play along, but I feel like my entire world has just fallen apart and I don’t know how to put it back together again.

I feel broken in a way I’ve never felt before, and from here... Once I get pregnant, there’s nothing I can do. I can’t fight against them. I can’t argue with them. I can’t do anything wrong, or they’ll take the child from me.

I’m so thoroughly trapped, and Giulio wants me to pretend we’re on some romantic getaway, and all I want to do is scream.

Giulio places his hand on my neck to force my head closer. Our lips meet. Although Giulio starts slowly, it’s soon clear he expects me to open my mouth for him.

“All you had to do was go along with it,” Giulio murmurs. “We’ve forgiven each other now. The past is in the past. But...” He nips at my bottom lip, “...we can drag it out, if you prefer.”

No. I don’t prefer that.

Before I can respond, Slayer grumbles “For fuck’s sake, Jules, did you get any normal shit? Even the Italian sandwich has this weird red pepper paste on it. And the beers are all... Ugh.”

I hear his footsteps as he returns, but my attention is on Giulio. I don't want to drag this out. I want it to be over with. I'm still crying, still trying to fight back my sobs, but I force myself to part my lips for Giulio so he can plunge his tongue into my mouth.

It's a violation, just as it is every time he touches me, but I'm dizzy from the thought of all the things he can do to me without actually laying a hand on me.

DAMIEN

As soon as I open the condo door, Giulio shoves Vanessa into my arms.

“Here, you take care of her today,” he says, immediately turning to leave.

I glance down at Vanessa, dressed as if she was going hiking, then I glance back out to the hallway.

“Wait,” I shout, leaning out to the hall. “Giulio, we have meetings today. You’re supposed to—”

“Yeah, I know, I know! I’m going to see what’s-his-face. I’ll take Larry along. Don’t worry. You’ve got the day off.” Giulio stops at his apartment door and grins at me. “You can trust me! Enjoy Vanessa. Poor girl’s had an exciting few days.”

Then he goes into his condo and closes the door behind him.

I tighten my hold on Vanessa. I should go after him. I *don’t* trust him. He’ll be late, and he’ll deliberately antagonize somebody, and even though Larry is good, is he going to be able to stop Giulio from doing something dangerous?

Vanessa whimpers in my arms, and I turn my attention to her. I don’t see any obvious bruising, but she’s fully dressed for once. There’s no telling what Giulio did to her underneath the clothing.

Her eyes are also rimmed in red, like she’s been crying.

Fuck. What did Giulio do?

I close the door with one hand, then run my fingers through her hair. “Vanessa? What happened?”

Vanessa looks up at me, her expression miserable and bleak, then closes her eyes. She doesn’t pull away from me, but she tenses in my arms like she wants to. “He sold Stef,” she whispers.

I know that’s not all of it, but that’s clearly the part that’s bothering her the most.

“I know,” I answer quietly. I start leading her toward the living room. The basic layout of my condo is the same as Giulio’s, although I’ve gone for much more “homey” decor. No modern art or ugly statues, simply warm carpets and warm couches.

I haven’t bothered hanging up any photos. I always wanted to have a wall of family pictures, showing children growing up. Putting anything else up felt like it would be giving up on the dream entirely.

“Here, sit down. Do you want something to drink?” I ask her, guiding her to sit on the large, comfortable couch.

Vanessa sits down, wincing visibly, and I look at her more closely. There are no injuries I can see, but I’m going to have to get those clothes off of her to see just what happened. I know Giulio was pissed, and he didn’t tell me what he was planning to do. He’d been vague, and that never bodes well. “Just some water,” she mumbles, playing with the hem of her sweater.

I go to fill a glass of water for her. I hand it to her before sitting down next to her on the couch.

I wait for her to drink, but she only takes a few sips before lowering the glass and holding it with both hands.

“Are you injured?” I ask, placing one hand on her wrist. She tenses immediately. “I can call a doctor if you need one.”

I really hope it didn’t go that far, but I have this uneasy feeling I’m going to be pissed when I find out what Giulio’s

been up to with her for the past few days. He seems cheerful enough, like he's gotten his fury out of his system, but something usually has to *happen* for that to be the case. He isn't the type to just let time pass and move on.

"I don't need a doctor," she says. But she offers nothing else, nothing that makes me feel better about the whole situation.

"For what it's worth..." I start, but I'm at a loss for what to say after that. I can't tell her that I'm sorry for what happened. I regret Stef being sold only because it hurts Vanessa. I shouldn't care at all—she's meant to bring beautiful children into the world, nothing else—but my heart hurts looking at her now.

"I know who bought Stef," I say, a little lamely. "I think he'll be better for Stef than the club was."

Vanessa stares at me, and something flickers in her eyes. "You think selling her like a cow is better for her? At least at the club, we could all pretend she had a chance of getting out one day. Now what happens when this guy gets tired of her? Someone worse gets her. And worse. And worse. That's not going to help, Damien," she says, her voice harsh.

I'm relieved she's able to argue with me, though. I like when she's being submissive and cooperative, but lately, I've found that I want to hear her opinions, too.

"But she won't have to put up with Giulio's whims." I push some of her long hair behind her ear. "And she'll only need to worry about one man, who probably doesn't care if she's pretending to enjoy it or not." I lean forward to kiss Vanessa's forehead. "But I'll keep an ear out. To see how she's being treated."

"Thanks," she mumbles unenthusiastically. She doesn't pull away, but she flinches when my lips brush her forehead.

I don't know what Giulio expects me to do with Vanessa right now. She's so soft and almost pliant in my arms, but my gut roils at the thought of fucking her when she's like this,

when she's been so beaten down. It's... different, somehow, from all the other times.

I let my hand rest on her stomach and rub absently. I want to believe there's a life growing inside her now, but my hopes are shattered after what she'd done. It'll take even longer to finally see her swelling up with Giulio's child.

She flinches when my hand lingers on one spot. I take a closer look at her, concern suddenly spiking. Giulio was in a very good mood earlier, which is such a sharp contrast from how he was raging the past few days that I know he must have done something drastic. More drastic than selling Stef.

Without asking for permission, I pull the hem of her sweater and shirt up.

Vanessa grabs for the hem, trying to pull it back down, but it's easy enough to pry her fingers off. She lets out a little sob as my eyes focus on the small bandages plastered across her skin.

"What did they do?" I ask, rubbing the skin beneath one of the bandages.

Vanessa averts her gaze. "Cut me."

Anger slams into me. "Are there more?" I demand, pulling the sweater off her entirely. "Show me."

She looks as terrified of me as if I was the one pulling the knife on her, and that's almost as agitating as the sight of the cuts. She takes her shirt off, and I see a few more bandages beneath her small breasts.

I know I shouldn't, but I peel away one of the bandages to get a closer look.

It's a thin cut, not enough to scar, but right now it's a stark red against her pale skin.

That was Slayer. That had to have been Slayer, because Giulio wouldn't have bothered with small cuts. Giulio wouldn't have been able to hold back.

This won't be all. I'd seen the way she walked earlier, sore and wincing.

I take her wrist and lift her hand to kiss it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to see you hurt.”

She shrugs a little and hesitates, like she wants to tell me something but doesn’t have the courage to do it. “I’m okay,” she says, her voice nearly inaudible. “None of them are bad.”

But she’s lying, and I can tell by the way her voice hitches on the words. My voice hardens. “Show me,” I demand again.

“Please, Damien...” she begs, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I need to know you’re all right,” I say, already going for the button on her jeans. “I need to know Giulio didn’t go too far.”

Vanessa freezes, like she wants to say something, and she tries. Her lips form words, but she can’t get the sound out.

I don’t wait, continuing to unzip her jeans, and I carefully pull them down as far as I can. The bandages are much larger on her thighs, and even through them, I can see pinpricks of blood.

Slayer could have stopped this. He didn’t have to do what Giulio asked—

No. He did. I understand that better than anyone. I don’t know what I’d do if Giulio asked me to cut her.

If he asked me to choke Vanessa, knowing it’s taken all I have to keep from doing it.

That must’ve been what she’d been trying to say, that Slayer had been the one to cut her.

But we both know he was just as much a tool as the knife itself.

“It’s not too bad,” she whispers. “Slayer cleaned them up and made sure to bandage them. Some of them...” She doesn’t look up at me, but she doesn’t look at the bandages, either. “He glued them together.”

I’m strangely grateful. I want to believe that Giulio would have bothered, but Giulio tends to leave his messes for

somebody else to clean up. At least Slayer wasn't so mad at Vanessa that he didn't care for her.

I stand, tugging on her arm. "Here. Why don't I run a bath for you?"

"No, it's okay," she says, wiping quickly at her eyes. "The cuts... they might open again."

Some of them probably have already, if the little points of blood in the bandages are any indication, but at least there aren't huge splotches of it.

"You'll feel better," I say. "I'll clean the wounds and bandage them up again."

She still hesitates, and I think I know why.

"I'll keep my clothes on," I promise her. "I simply want to take care of you."

Vanessa bites her bottom lip. "I don't want you to see them," she says, her words edged with a sob. "I don't want anyone to see me like that."

My heart squeezes in my chest, and I don't understand why I'm so bothered by this. I've wanted her since I first laid eyes on her, but I've never been moved by her tears before. I bend down to kiss her forehead. "Shh. I won't judge. Let me pamper you."

She shudders, and I choose to believe it's not because I'm touching her.

"Okay," she whispers, even though it couldn't be more obvious that she doesn't want me near her.

I help her pull her jeans up enough that she can easily walk, then lead her past the door I always keep closed, into my bedroom. She tenses when she sees the bed, but I keep walking toward the main bathroom.

It's almost identical to the one in Giulio's condo in terms of layout, although Giulio had done more redesigning. I'd left it as it had come, with white tile and soft green walls. A large, jacuzzi style tub sits in the corner.

I somewhat reluctantly let go of Vanessa's hand to start running the bath, setting it as hot as I can stand. By the time the tub is filled, some of the water will have cooled.

Then I turn around to face Vanessa. "Strip so I can see the full extent of the damage."

Her face is pale, but she looks resigned as she pulls off the boots and socks, then sheds the jeans and underwear. Both thighs have had the same treatment, with wide bandages covering the skin, and there are so many little bandages all over her stomach.

It's not the best idea to get her wounds wet, but this isn't the first time I've cleaned up after one of Giulio's messes. The little cuts won't be a problem, but I'll need to wrap the bigger ones—the ones she'd mentioned had been *glued* shut. I pull out the first aid kit from beneath the sink along with the box of gauze, tape, and special plastic wrap I'll need. It won't be perfect, but I can always re-treat her injuries if they do get a little wet. We just won't use the jacuzzi feature of the tub, that's all.

I glance at Vanessa, and her arms are crossed against her chest a little stiffly as she tries not to disturb the wounds.

"How long has it been?" I ask, and I feel myself holding my breath. If it's been more than 24 hours, it should be okay. I should've asked her earlier, but I'd just wanted so badly to take care of her that I hadn't thought of the logistics of basic wound care. Stupid.

She scrunches up her nose a little bit. "Um. Two or three days?" she guesses. "I'm not really sure."

I take a deep breath and remind myself that getting angry won't change anything. I'm not angry with Vanessa, and Giulio would find any display of emotion amusing. Slayer...

I'll deal with him the next time I see him.

"All right. Hold still while I cover the large ones. We'll rebandage the smaller ones after the bath."

Vanessa barely breathes as I kneel in front of her and begin removing the bloodied bandages and redress the larger cuts.

Her cunt is right there, tempting me, but I'd promised to keep my clothes on...

Giulio would have pointed out that fingering her doesn't mean I'm getting naked myself, but Vanessa is shivering enough.

Once I finish wrapping up the wounds on her thigh with the plastic wrap, I get up and slowly peel off the other bandages. I have to bite down a frustrated sound when I see all the little red lines blooming across her skin.

Vanessa squeezes her eyes shut.

I step away from her and back toward the tub. The water is almost to the top. "Here. You can warm up in the bath. Sit so I can wash your hair."

She looks warily at me, all doe-eyed and frightened, like she's expecting me to do something else to her. "Why are you being nice to me?" she whispers. "Giulio said..." She swallows hard. "He said I didn't... That you'd be mad. And that I didn't appreciate all the nice things the... the three of you have done for me so I didn't deserve them."

"It... it doesn't matter," I say, although I can't stop the hurt from coming through in my voice. "That you used contraception with me ...or Slayer." I need to pause to collect myself, because it *does* matter that she denied Giulio. It does matter that she isn't already shaping his child inside her. "Vanessa. I'm not... I'm not angry. Simply upset. Disappointed. I've been looking forward to this for so long. But I can wait another month. Another year."

I don't want to wait another year.

I know it would be simplest to replace Vanessa and find a woman much more eager to carry the child of a rich, handsome mafia don.

I help her into the tub, and as though sensing my thoughts, she looks up at me. "Is he actually... you know... bisexual? He always needs the role play thing, and really, he's had to have had some girlfriend who would do anything for his money," she rambles a little.

I unconsciously tighten my grip on Vanessa's arm, and she gasps before I remember to release her. She sits down, scooting away from me a little to put distance between us. With the tub as large as it is, that's quite a lot of space.

"He is," I say. "He's had sex with you without Slayer or me present, hasn't he? He does the roleplay thing with everybody. But he doesn't... He doesn't allow people to get close to him. He doesn't *trust* people."

"But he's had to have had girlfriends before," Vanessa presses. "I mean, I know how he looks at you, and I know he has some weird thing with Slayer, but..."

"Yes," I say curtly. "He did. But she wasn't any good, and now she's gone." I don't want to think about that woman who had hurt Giulio so badly.

I know relationships don't always last, but Giulio had been *trying*, and even if it sometimes hurt to see Giulio gushing about another person, I had tried to be supportive despite my misgivings.

"Don't worry about the past." I turn the water off and settle myself on the small step leading up to the tub, rolling up my sleeves, so I'll have an easier time washing Vanessa.

"What happened to her?" she asks anyway.

I cup my hands, fill them with water, and pour it over Vanessa's head. That small amount does nothing to soak her long hair, but at least it gives me something to do while I think about how much I want to share.

"She isn't dead." I pour more water on Vanessa. "I should have shot her. But the whole thing was a messy affair. She—" I break off and shake my head. "Leave it alone, Vanessa."

"I'm sorry," she says, but her voice is edged as she tries to pull away from me, wiping her face, "but if I get cut up like this because I tried not to get pregnant, I can't help but wonder what happens to someone who actually hurt Giulio. You and Slayer aren't exactly stable when it comes to him."

"Anybody who hurts Giulio..." I grip the edge of the tub. "He doesn't want you dead. If he did, we wouldn't be

speaking now. He still... Vanessa, if he didn't care at all, he would have offered you to Romano and his men. It wouldn't have been Stef. We would never have come this far."

"Giulio wanted to leave me outside, did you know that?" She's trembling, but I don't know if it's from the chill in the air—how can it be, when the water is so warm—or something else. "It was freezing, I was naked, he'd just fucked me, I was bleeding all over the place, and he told Slayer to just leave me outside. And you say he doesn't want me dead?" I can't tell if it's tears or water dripping down her cheeks.

I give in to the urge to embrace her, not caring that my shirt gets wet as I wrap my arms around her shoulders. She tenses but doesn't attempt to break free.

"But Slayer took you inside," I point out, breathing in her scent. "Giulio didn't take you out there alone. Giulio wasn't the one to cut you. Giulio... Giulio held back."

Vanessa shakes her head. "He wanted to be the one to cut me," she says, her voice a little harsher. "He doesn't *care*. He wasn't *in control*. I could see it. Maybe you're too blind—" She cuts herself off, fear suddenly replacing the passion, and shrinks back in on herself.

"How did Slayer react when Giulio suggested it?" I ask gently. Then I kiss the side of her head.

Vanessa hesitates, then says quietly, "Slayer tried to tell him not to do it. Then when Giulio said to give him the knife, Slayer said he'd do it instead. I mean, they were both... aroused... but Giulio's the one who scared me. I don't know. I'm sorry. I need to be more grateful. It could've been worse. Ignore me."

I wish I could make Vanessa see what I do in Giulio. Then she wouldn't have wanted to deny him. Then she'd be happy to have even a few minutes of his attention.

But I doubt she's in any place to truly appreciate him, not right now. I let go of her and grab a loofah and shower gel.

"Here. I'll wash you." I rub the loofah on her exposed shoulder, kissing it once I've rinsed the soap off.

She's quiet now, as though afraid that if she keeps talking, I'll get angry at her. She's like a limp doll as I start to bathe her, and it worries me a little. She'd been so fiery only moments before, but it's like she's deflated.

"How's the accounting going?" I ask, hoping to change the subject. "Have you noticed anything that Donny and I missed?"

It takes her a moment, but she blinks at me before answering slowly, "Something's wrong. Totals aren't adding up right. It's just a few numbers here and there, almost like someone's just dyslexic in places, then there's just... I can't be sure. I don't really have many receipts or things, obviously, so I'm just guessing."

That's not reassuring at all, but I am happy that Vanessa has been trying to figure it out. "I'll get you more information," I say. Then I push on her shoulders. "Lie back so we can soak your hair."

Vanessa nods and leans back a little, though she's tense, almost like she expects me to push her down into the water.

Part of me wants to do it. I want to see her struggle for air. I want to be the one to control her breath and have her thank me for the gift of air afterward.

But I simply direct her to tilt her head back and help soak all of her hair. There's so much of it, halfway down her back at least, and it's silky smooth to the touch.

"Did the shampoos and soaps I gave you help?" I ask while I pour shampoo into my palm.

"Yes," she murmurs. "Thank you. They smell really nice, and my hair feels soft again. I didn't realize how dried out everything was."

I should've given her nicer bath products before. She's too special to use the crap the Ntimacy girls get.

I start massaging the shampoo into her scalp, making sure to coat every last strand of hair. Vanessa shudders under my touch, but her eyes flutter closed too.

She deserves to be pampered sometimes. I'll get her more bath products, and maybe I can convince Giulio to move Vanessa away from the club. I don't trust her not to attempt to run, but she does have the GPS tracker inside her now, and maybe...

Maybe Giulio's little stunt has scared her enough that she won't try it again.

Vanessa lets out a soft sigh as I keep deftly massaging her scalp and running my fingers through her hair. I'm careful not to snag any tangles, wanting this to be enjoyable for her. She's so tense, and it's understandable, but I don't like it.

"Do you think you could behave if I arranged for you to have a full body massage?" I murmur as I help her sit up.

Her eyes dart towards mine, and she nods without even seeming to need to think about it. "I'm not going to misbehave again. I'm not going to do anything wrong. I'll be good. I promise."

"I'll arrange something then. Let's rinse your hair now, and I'll get the conditioner in." It would have to wait until she healed, but if she can behave, I can give her that gift.

Vanessa lies back again, eyes closed, and I rinse the shampoo out. Her chest is half above water, her nipples dipping in and out with her breaths.

I run my knuckles down her face and to her neck.

Just a small squeeze...

No.

I urge her upright again so I can continue washing her. She makes a contented sound while I massage the conditioner in, soft and pliant when I have her lean back to wash it all out.

She did need this. She needed... She deserves...

I smile to myself.

She deserves better than any of us, probably. But I'm too selfish not to keep her.

If I wanted what was best for her, I wouldn't have drawn Giulio's attention to her.

Now that I have, we can never let her go.

VANESSA

I've been so exhausted these past few days that I'm not surprised that I managed to nap. I'm more shocked that Damien allowed me to nap undisturbed, and that he fell asleep next to me, with his clothes on.

"Damien?" I whisper, testing to see if he's awake. He doesn't stir though, just like that night at Giulio's. Damien is a heavy sleeper.

I'm hesitant about getting out of bed without him, but my stomach is grumbling softly. Surely he won't get upset if I find something to eat? He seems the most reasonable of them in a lot of ways, even if it's his fault I'm in this predicament in the first place.

But the cuts on my chest and thighs remind me of just how *reasonable* the three of them really are—or aren't, rather.

I lie there for another long moment, but my stomach makes another displeased sound. I've barely eaten the past few days, and I'm absolutely starving. Maybe Damien has something I can fix for both of us, so it doesn't seem so bad when he wakes up and finds me out of bed.

I slowly slide out of the bed, relieved when he doesn't wake up, and glance around the room. The clothes I'd been wearing are still in the bathroom, but they're dirty, and I'm not eager to expose any of my injuries to dusty and dirty clothes. Instead, I go to his closet and pick out one of his shirts. I'm used to wearing them, after all, and this one is soft and casual.

It smells just like him, and that's something I don't really know how to feel about.

I shrug it on and head out to the kitchen. The layout is exactly like Giulio's condo, and my eyes flick to the closed door where the reptiles live in Giulio's. I shudder at the thought, but I can't help but wonder what's behind the door here. Will it be more snakes and things? What does Damien do for *fun*?

Giulio has his pets, Slayer apparently has trains, for all that I don't know what's going on with those still, and Damien has... What?

I hesitate, not wanting to get myself in trouble. But Damien's still sleeping soundly, and I just want to peek inside. I carefully open the door, intending to just get a glance and head to the kitchen, but instead, I pause as my eyes take in the sight of a nursery.

It's a beautiful room, all soft greens and yellows, furnished with a large crib, a rocking chair, a changing table, a dresser...

Perfectly ready for a child. My child.

I wrap my arms around my belly. My eyes prickle strangely, and I don't know why.

I'm not ready for this, but at the same time, there's something inside of me that yearns for it. I've always wanted a family, a real family. My sister had been the only one I'd had growing up. My father had been a horrible person, my mother is an alcoholic who'd practically pushed me into Damien's arms to guarantee her own freedom, and I've never had contact with many other family members. They've all been jerks.

Not that this family wouldn't be comprised of jerks, either.

I sigh and back up, carefully closing the door to the room. Staring into this room isn't going to help, and I don't want to be in there when Damien wakes up. I don't really want him to know I was snooping.

I go to the kitchen and open the fridge. It's not as well-stocked as Giulio's, although one entire shelf on the door is

filled with hot sauces. The half-empty jar of dip is labeled *extra hot*.

I spot a bag of tortillas and grab that along with the eggs, cheese, and tomatoes. I can make a quick breakfast burrito. The pantry reveals a can of beans, and that's everything I need.

I'm in the middle of frying up my burrito when Damien wanders out, bleary eyed. He'd removed his shirt before coming out here, showing off his hairy chest and belly.

"Does Giulio joke about shaving you?" I blurt out, and I immediately regret it. "Sorry. Um, I was hungry. I'll make you one too, if you want one?"

Damien sits down at the breakfast counter and nods. "Yes. Thank you. And Giulio did try to shave me once. The razor blade went blunt before he finished."

For some reason, that makes me smile. Just a little, and not for long, but it's a funny thought, too.

I put the burrito on a plate and start a second in the pan, bringing the first one over to Damien. "You can pick your own hot sauce," I say, unable to keep that little smile from coming back. "I wouldn't know where to start to pick one of yours."

There's a little mesh container with utensils in the middle of the breakfast counter, and he takes a fork and knife from it.

"I'm sure it's fine," he says. Two seconds after the first bite, he scrunches up his nose and goes to the fridge to fish out one of the hot sauces.

I finish cooking my own burrito and sit down at the counter as well—with one chair between our spots. I take a bite, and it tastes fine to me. The only cheese Damien had was one with jalapeños in it, so it has a bit of a kick just from that. "Do you ever eat anything that *isn't* ultra hot?"

Damien comes back and thankfully doesn't attempt to sit directly next to me. "Sometimes. Ice cream? Most places don't serve spicy ice cream. Not a lot of spicy desserts in general."

"I'm not that bad of a cook," I say as he practically covers the burrito in hot sauce, a little offended. I might not have

much experience, but I can make the basics, and there was nothing wrong with this.

“You aren’t a bad cook,” Damien agrees, eating some of the sauce-drenched burrito. “I just like it a lot hotter.” He looks at me with his usual stoic expression. “I’ve done worse to Giulio’s meals.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s the one who...” I start to say, but I can’t even finish. I can’t be grateful that Giulio’s the one who picks my meals. I can’t be grateful to Giulio for much of anything. I shake my head, going back to eating, but I nearly choke on my food. “Are you taking me back to Ntimacy?”

Damien doesn’t answer for a while, eating the rest of the burrito in silence. When he’s done, he turns in his chair to face me directly. “Do you want to go back to Ntimacy?”

“What else would I do?” I ask, realizing then how stupid my question had been to begin with. “I mean, I’d really like to at least be able to walk around again. It’s lonely in that room. But I get it. No one trusts me.”

“You’ve shown that you aren’t trustworthy,” Damien answers quietly.

I don’t know how he can keep his voice so steady all the time. It doesn’t matter if it’s me or Giulio or Slayer; it doesn’t matter if we’ve pissed him off or... or disappointed him. He says everything with such a straight face and an even voice that I have no idea what he’s actually thinking.

If it were Giulio or Slayer, I’d already be flinching, thinking of how to apologize. But I have no idea what Damien wants.

“I know,” I say in a small voice. “But I... I’ve learned my lesson.” I touch my leg, wincing a little at the memory of just how it had gotten there. “I’m grateful for what I have. I know it could be much worse, and that...” My eyes blur with tears. “And that my actions have consequences, sometimes for other people.”

Damien nods briefly. “Yes. I... I wish Giulio had not sold Stef so rashly. But there will be new girls. Other girls who

could use a friendly face and a bit of guidance.”

“Guidance?” The word surprises a laugh out of me, a bitter little sound that I don’t really recognize. “I don’t have advice for anyone. I’m just a broken little broodmare who gets everyone else in trouble because I’m too stupid to just spread my legs and behave.”

The vitriol in my own voice is strange, too. When did I start thinking that way?

“You aren’t broken,” Damien says. “You made a mistake. You’ve learned from it. And you can help the other girls avoid mistakes. They’ll find you less threatening than somebody they’re in direct competition with, and they won’t avoid you the way they avoid Elena.” He reaches out to put a hand on my knee, as if he’s trying to comfort me.

It doesn’t really work. It just reminds me of the injuries, and how I’m going to have to work to be extra aware of everything I’m doing around them. “They hate me, though,” I mumble. “They think I have it so much better off than they do...” I shake my head. “And I guess I do. So. They don’t think it’s fair.”

“If anybody bothers you, tell us,” Damien says, still rubbing my knee. “As for your request... I’ll talk to Giulio and Donny. Maybe we can find a job for you. And you might have more luck figuring out the accounting issue if you’re more involved, anyway.”

“No one’s bothering me,” I say quickly, which is mostly true, even if it’s only because Cat and Traci haven’t been around me. “And I’d like that, to have a job other than scrubbing the toilets.” I can’t help but make a face. “Doing more of the accounting would be preferable.”

Damien’s brows draw together. “Scrubbing toilets? Why are you scrubbing toilets?”

I hesitate. “It’s not that big of a deal,” I say, even though I hate it. Now that Stef is gone, I’ll be getting that duty even more often. “I just clean the bathrooms to help out.” More like, Paul makes me do it because he knows I hate it so much,

even though the men's room is disgusting, and I'm surprised I haven't contracted diseases from it.

"There's a rotation for bathroom duty," Damien says carefully, and the small frown deepens. "Nobody has to do it more than once a month. And you aren't on the rotation. There's no reason you should be doing this at all."

As much as I dislike Paul, I really don't want to be responsible for anyone else getting hurt because of me. "It's really fine," I insist, even though I hate it. "I just did it to help everyone else out so they could get their own cleaning done faster."

"When I talk to Donny, I'll make sure he knows that isn't your job." Damien sighs, and his expression loosens. "We won't tell Giulio about that part."

I nod in agreement, though it's only going to make the other girls despise me more. At least Paul can't take it out on Stef...

My heart aches. "There's really nothing you can do about Stef?" I ask quietly. "I really will do everything you want. I won't misbehave anymore. I promise."

"The deal is done. With the kind of money involved, it would put us in a very bad position to ask to undo the transaction—we'd potentially have to exchange Stef for two girls instead." Damien lets go of me and gets up, picking up both our plates. "It's easier if you simply forget about her."

I stare at him, incredulous. "You think I can just forget about her? She was my friend, Damien. She was the only person at Ntimacy who didn't hate me."

"There will be others. You're so... kind, Vanessa. I love that about you. That's how I knew you were perfect for... for Giulio. But the world isn't a kind place." He looks away from me and starts washing the plates. "The world will always disappoint you."

For the first time, I wonder if he's lost a child of his own, and that's why he's so adamant about Giulio having one.

“Whose nursery was that?” I can’t help but ask, for all that my voice is quiet. Tentative.

The dishes clatter to the sink. For a few seconds, all Damien does is cling to the faucet while the water runs, and an apology is on the tip of my tongue.

Then Damien turns off the water and turns around to face me. “You looked?”

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly, standing up. Panic starts to surge within me, and I don’t know what to say or do to make this better. “I just got curious. I shouldn’t have looked. I shouldn’t have said anything. You’re just always so... mysterious with things, and I... I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Damien answers. He walks around the breakfast bar and extends a hand to me. “It isn’t a secret.”

If it’s not a secret, why is he always so weird about this pregnancy thing? “I still shouldn’t have asked,” I mumble, feeling more awkward than ever. I take his hand, though, not wanting to do anything else to make the situation worse.

Damien leads me back to that closed door, and after only a few seconds of hesitation, he pushes it open and flips the light switch. I don’t want to go in, but he urges me past the door and into the nursery proper.

The room feels hopeful and sad at the same time. The mobile above the crib, waiting for a child to look up into it before it will start moving. The stuffed animals on the shelves, staring eerily into the empty room. The wall on the far side that has clouds and flowers painted onto it.

Damien wraps his arms around me from behind and kisses the nape of my neck.

“The nursery is for... It’s for your child. Yours and Giulio’s.” His voice breaks a little in the middle, rough with more emotion than I’ve heard from him before.

“Why not yours?” I ask quietly, wanting to know. He’s never been open like this with me, almost fragile, and while I don’t want to take advantage of it, I’ve wondered this so many times. “Why Giulio’s? You want this more than he does.”

You're... You're an attractive man, and you have money. There must have been women in your past."

Damien's embrace tightens. "There were. But we never had children. Because... Because I can't father children, Vanessa. I'm completely sterile."

The realization is a shock to my system, and for a moment, I can't help but think how unfair it is that someone who wants a child so badly can't have one. But then I remember I'm here against my will, taken by three men who want me to be the mother of their child, and some of my empathy fades. Not all. But some. "Why not adopt, then?" I ask, biting my bottom lip. "That would be easier for you than... you know... keeping someone like me."

He huffs a small laugh against my ear. "For some reason, the respectable adoption agencies don't think consigliere to Emilio—or Giulio—Pavone is an acceptable job for a prospective parent. And I'm not going to... I'm not going to *buy* a child." He bites that last sentence out like it insults him.

I doubt he'd tell the adoption agencies that he's a part of the mafia anyway, but I can see his point. That means surrogacy is off the table, because he definitely wouldn't want to pay someone... but it still doesn't make any sense to me.

I'm out of arguments. I'm sure I could come up with more, but I'm not stupid enough to think he won't have a retort for each and every one of them. He'd rather force a woman to bear Giulio Pavone's child than do anything legal, which is probably why he can't do the legal things to begin with. His lack of remorse, his willingness to *take* what he wants...

I look around the nursery again, trembling a little. One day, there will be a baby in that crib. A toddler playing with the stuffed animals. A small child who will grow up in the mafia life I wish I could've gotten out of.

"What if the baby doesn't want this lifestyle?" I whisper. "What if the child wants to get away? Will you force a boy to join at ten? A girl to become alliance fodder?"

“I’m going to protect him or her no matter what,” Damien says, just as quietly. “I’d even... if I had to choose between Giulio and our child, I’d choose our child. But I don’t think Giulio would force me to make that choice.”

The words surprise me. I think of Damien as an extension of Giulio, not as his own person. The idea that he might go rogue is a strange one.

Then again, I highly doubt Giulio would’ve risen to power if Damien had been loyal to Emilio Pavone.

“Why’d you do it?” I can’t help but blurt out. “Why did you just leave his dad behind? You were supposed to protect him, but you chose to go with Giulio instead even though you could’ve saved Emilio.”

Not that I’m *really* complaining, because Lucia would’ve been stuck with the horrible man, but things would’ve been so different. Maybe better. Maybe worse.

“Emilio... Emilio was a powerful man. People were loyal to him because they were afraid of the consequences. I was loyal to him because, for a while, he gave me what I wanted. But... Giulio...”

“You love him,” I say, more sure of those words than any I’ve ever spoken. I want to hurt Damien, in a way. I want to ask him why he loves someone who obviously doesn’t love him back. But I can’t bring myself to say the words.

Damien doesn’t answer for a while. “It’s... complicated. Giulio is complicated. Taking care of Giulio is difficult. Taking care of you is easier. Softer. Nicer.” He runs his nose along my cheek, breathing in softly. “It would be simpler if I could have just you. I wouldn’t need to share you with Slayer. But I can’t... I can’t ever leave Giulio.”

“Why does he do that to you?” I ask, trembling in his arms as he actually answers the questions that have been haunting me for so long. “If you asked him not to include Slayer... Why doesn’t he listen? He has to see it’s hurting you.”

And it hurts me, too.

“I never asked him not to include Slayer.” Damien sighs a little and straightens. He’s the tallest of the three of them, tall enough that he can slot his chin over my head. “It would hurt Giulio not to include Slayer. He’s generous. He shares. And as much as I dislike Slayer, Giulio considers Slayer one of his closest friends. There aren’t a lot of people Giulio allows close to him.”

I nod, even though I don’t understand this dynamic. I don’t understand how the three of them work together, how I’m supposed to be a part of their life. And a child? How is a child supposed to fit into this?

I don’t know what to say. So I lean back against him a little, wishing for all the world that I’d chosen my future instead of having it chosen for me.

We stand there, staring at this strange, hopeful tomb, the silence and his arms around me strangely comforting.

“I’ve redone this room so often,” Damien mentions after a while. “I tried blue at first. But I don’t care if it’s a boy or a girl. Once, Giulio painted the room in an eye-searing neon green. That was before I’d gotten the furniture. He didn’t know what the room was for. I... I didn’t let him look at it after I filled it with furniture.”

In some ways, his words feel like a little bit of death inside of me. Something is ending, a door closing... another chapter opening. I’m not getting out of this. The last week has solidified that in my mind and heart.

Elena’s words ring in my ears, reminding me that the best future I have is one where I cooperate.

I turn my head, kissing the side of Damien’s lips.

He groans and leans in to turn it into a proper kiss. I turn around and, tentatively, wrap my own arms around his neck.

I think there are tears building behind my closed eyes.

But I keep kissing him, and I try to convince myself that I don’t feel sorry for Damien. I’m only doing this for my own survival.

I pretend that I don't want to see this room being used as it's meant to.

I pretend, and I kiss him, and I lose myself in his arms.

SLAYER

Vanessa's still lingering on my mind when Detective Tiago and I head to The Web. It's a club run by the Mancinis, and if I remember my mob connections correctly, that means they're tight with the Romanos.

Tiago points toward the sign that says *cash only*. "That's new. Are the punters trying to pay by credit these days?"

I snort, imagining anybody attempting to swipe a card at Ntimacy. Maybe there's a dusty, unused card reader over by the bar. "Guess The Web is attracting fancier clientele than they want to put up with. I bet the girls at Club Ruby's have the card reader in their pussies."

Tiago snickers in amusement, although my joke wasn't that funny. Giulio probably would have laughed, although I can already see Vanessa's quiet anger at the disrespect.

Fuck, I need to stop thinking about her while I'm on the job.

I walk up to the big, beefy man at the front entrance. "Good evening," I say, holding up my badge. "Think your boss can spare a few minutes to talk to us?"

The guy grimaces and folds his arms over his chest. "He's not in. If you want something, come back with a search warrant."

Yeah, yeah. Like I'd submit paperwork to search the premises of a strip joint on the off chance they might know

something about some missing undercover cop that I'd murdered.

"Nah, we don't want anything official like that," Tiago says, equally unwilling to beg a judge for the warrant. "We're just in the market for a party venue. Our captain's retiring soon, and we want to let him go out with a big bang. Or a little bang, if what I've heard about his cock is true."

I almost tell him to fuck off on instinct, until I realize the cock joke isn't about me. Fucking Giulio's got me too used to it.

The bouncer gives us a once over. "Yeah? How big a party?"

"How many guys in the precinct would come?" Tiago asks me.

I pretend to think for a second. "There's us, of course. And the captain. The three rookies. At least ten of the beat cops aren't married, and another handful are married and give no fucks. I think Detective Clarke is a dyke, or if she's not a dyke, she's not a stuck-up bitch and might even want to come along."

Tiago nods along. "At least thirty of us. And we'd be super disappointed if we couldn't host the party here. The captain loves this place. He might get petty if he doesn't get to do the party here after all. Who knows, we might get ordered to sweep the entire premises. All thirty to fifty of us. There'd be cops swarming in and out for days. Weeks."

The bouncer rolls his eyes. "Right, and our business would be really harmed, and we wouldn't want that, now would we. Is that what you were going to say?"

I grin at him. "You're getting it! So. Is your boss in? Just so we can discuss party logistics."

"Fine, fine." He opens the door and yells to somebody inside. "Sophie! Come show these upstanding officers of the law to a private room."

A pretty redhead with a fake tan approaches us with an equally fake smile. "Right this way, gentlemen!" she says

cheerfully. Tiago and I follow her deeper into the club, the pounding of the music making me feel more at home even though this isn't one of Giulio's places, where I'd get the VIP treatment.

Of course, I'd never go to Ntimacy with Tiago. He's not a threat, not really, but he doesn't need to know my private business or where I like to go to get off.

He doesn't need to know about Vanessa.

A fierce possessive wave sweeps over me. No, he doesn't need to know about Vanessa. That would probably be too much for him, and I can't have anyone trying to take her away from Giulio.

From us.

My shoes stick to the floor as I walk through the club, and I glance in the direction of the dancers. Skinny, big tits, just the way I usually like them, but I don't have time to stop and stare. Besides, why would I want to pay for it when I can get it and more for free whenever I want?

Tiago elbows me in the ribs. "What do you think about her?" he asks quietly, gesturing to Sophie.

I make a 'so-so' gesture with my hand, and he snorts.

She opens the door to a private room, and I smile at her. "Thanks, doll. Tell your bosses thanks for seeing us last minute. We really appreciate not having to wait."

Her smile gets even more strained. "Sure. I'll bring you some drinks."

"Send a blonde to bring 'em," Tiago says. "With a proper ass."

"I'll see who's available," Sophie says before disappearing. With the door shut, we've got no way of looking out into the club anymore.

I look around the room, hoping to find the telltale sign of a camera somewhere, but wherever they hid their surveillance equipment, it's very well concealed. I don't for a second

believe this room isn't bugged, not if this is where they casually host cops.

"You're an ass-man, Tiago?" I say casually as I sit down on the couch. "I'm more into tits. A nice, plush chest you can really sink your teeth into."

Although lately I haven't really been paying as much attention to large tits. There's something about small, flat, being able to cover them completely with just a hand...

"Yeah. I see their asses more than I see their tits, the way I fuck 'em," Tiago laughs. "Think they'll actually send a dancer in?"

"Hope so," I say, smirking. "Not like management is gonna bring the drinks themselves. We'll see how pissy they are about having to make time for us based on who they send to take care of us, eh? Pretty, busty blonde with a nice ass? We're all golden. Scrawny little addict with nothing on her? Nope, they're pissed."

"Ugh, don't even joke about the drugs. I don't want to actually have to bust the place for anything. Although if I see anything, I guess I'll do the paperwork." He says that last bit for the sake of any recording equipment.

We both know it'd take a lot more than a coked-up hooker for us to bother doing a real investigation.

No, it'd probably take an on-site murder for us to want to shut down a strip joint.

The door opens again, a pretty blonde carrying two bottles of beer on a tray. She's wearing a pleated skirt and a blouse tied in the front, and it's very, very clear there's no bra underneath. Unlike Vanessa, she's got ample cleavage, enough to need the bra.

She smiles at us and bends over to place the beer on the table in front of us.

"Thanks," I say. We shouldn't be drinking on the job, even a beer, but who's going to really fault us for seeming like we want to fit in? They know if we go in with guns blazing, it'll be harder to get actual intel out of anyone. It'll be difficult

even with the party front, especially since I know they don't know a goddamn thing.

I'll be so glad when this blows over and the heat's off.

"Mr. Mancini is going to be here soon. He's just on a call right now. But he doesn't want you to feel neglected, so he told me to give you whatever you need in the meantime." She bites her lip seductively and makes even standing up into a performance, straightening her body like she's a ballet dancer or something.

It should be hot. Judging by Tiago's reaction, he's definitely into it.

I'm trying not to think of scared brown eyes, and a too-tall body huddling against me for comfort.

Fuck. How has Vanessa gotten into my head like this? It makes me think about grabbing her the next time and just squeezing my hands around her neck until she can't breathe to punish her for it. Hell, even Damien wouldn't be able to argue. He's into that, even though he'd die before admitting it to me. But I'm not stupid. I haven't gotten this far in my career by being unobservant, and I see the way he touches her throat.

I take a big swallow of my beer, watching absently as Tiago "accidentally" brushes his hand against her ass. She giggles and presses back a little, encouraging the touch.

I don't want giggling bimbos anymore, and that's a fucking problem.

I settle back into the couch, staring at the chick's tits, and even that hint of nipple peeking out from her blouse isn't doing anything for me.

"Why are you glaring?" Tiago suddenly asks. "I'm not letting you have her first."

"I'm not fucking glaring," I snap at him. My mood tanked the minute I realized I want someone else, which is just unfucking-believable. I'm never this way. "And have at it. Just make sure I get a good look at her tits."

The girl giggles and pushes at Tiago's chest. "You know the rules, big boy. No touching." After a pause, she adds, "After all, I wouldn't want to get in trouble with the law."

Jesus, could she lay it on any thicker? But Tiago sits down on the armchair and obediently puts his hands on the arm rests.

"Yeah. You'd better demonstrate how you usually do this. Just so I know the club is on the up-and-up."

All I can think about is Vanessa's pathetic attempts at giving me and Giulio lap dances. It had been hot even if I'd laughed at her, because she'd genuinely been trying. This, though? As I watch, the blonde stands in front of Tiago and wiggles her ass. If we hadn't been there as cops, his hands would've been all over her.

"Yeah. I think we should make sure the girls here know how to conduct themselves for a proper, *legal* dance," I say almost primly. I should be enjoying this. I stare at her chest, watching her breasts bounce as she moves in what's actually a pretty good lap dance for a hole in the wall like this one.

Nothing.

It's almost a relief when the door opens a few minutes later, interrupting the dance. The chick probably would have kept going, but the man who enters says, "Thanks, Chantal. You can work the floor again."

She nods and gets up—retying the blouse that she'd loosened during the dance. "Come by any time you want a repeat," she says to Tiago, blowing a kiss at him before she's out the door.

It takes me a second to realize *two* men entered the room, not just one. The older one has to be the boss around here, Mancini. But I have no idea who his companion is. He's young, kind of baby-faced, and wearing a suit that's just a little bit too big for him. He looks like a teenager trying on his father's clothes in an attempt to appear adult.

"Who's the kid?" I ask Mancini, not bothering to get up.

Tiago adjusts his pants—yep, he's sporting a boner—but his expression has turned wary, too. He doesn't like this new

unknown component.

Mancini's eyebrows go up. "Isn't it customary to introduce yourselves first? All I've been told is that two members of New Bristol's finest have turned up, demanding to speak with me. I don't even know what this is about."

"Fine, fine. Detective Ryan Graham," I say, pulling out my badge to show him.

Tiago does the same, and after Mancini has thoroughly inspected both our badges, he nods. Not that I can fault Mancini for double-checking, because impersonating an officer isn't that hard to do. They sell everything on the internet these days, including authentic-looking badges.

"Welcome, detectives." Mancini doesn't, actually, introduce himself further, which Tiago and I both notice. I guess he figures we know who he is, but...

"We really only need to speak with you," I point out. "Lose the kid. Is he even old enough to be here?"

"I'm not a kid," the kid snaps. "I'm Nilo Romano, and I'm the assistant manager here. So yes, I'm old enough to be here."

Romano. Yeah, I know a few things about the Romano family, some of which Tiago knows, and more that he doesn't. I've heard shit from both ends of the spectrum. The most entertaining things I know come from Giulio, of course, and I rack my brain to try to place this Nilo. Lauro Romano's son, the one Giulio had threatened when he'd thrown a fucking grenade at a meeting with that family. I was pretty sure he was the one who'd caused a ruckus that had ended up with them getting some prime-time action at Ntimacy, but I'm sketchy with those details.

It would probably help if Giulio's stories didn't usually start with "what's-his-face," like anybody but him knows who he's talking about.

"Chill, Romano," I tell him. "I'm not asking to see your ID. I'm assuming Mr. Mancini here runs a nice, clean establishment."

“Very clean,” Mancini assures me in a clipped tone. “Which makes me wonder why you’re here at all.”

I guess there’s no getting around it. I don’t really want to ask if they’ve heard anything about the missing cop, but with Tiago here, I don’t have much choice.

I’m still trying to figure out how to word it when Tiago pulls a photo out of his pocket and places it on the table. It’s Officer Baca, before he took a lethal dose of heroin.

“You two fine gentlemen ever see this man?” Tiago asks.

Mancini picks up the photo to get a closer look, then shakes his head. “No. I don’t keep track of every man who walks through these doors. Who is he?”

He hands the photo to Nilo, who frowns at it.

“Just a person of interest. In that, we’re interested where he’s gone. His family really misses him, and we just need to know if we can tell them to hold on to hope, or if we need to arrange a funeral. A funeral that a lot of cops will attend.” Tiago watches Mancini closely, but, imagine that, Mancini really has no fucking clue.

“I’d like to think I’m well connected, but in this, I really can’t help you,” Mancini says. “What makes you think he’d be here?”

“We just heard he likes coming to these kinds of places,” I say. I don’t want Tiago to notice I’m being awfully quiet.

I almost snort, imagining how hot Giulio would get seeing me act now. Here’s some damn roleplay.

“Suppose I did find out he’d been here,” Mancini hedges. “What’s in it for me if I tell you? I don’t think advertising that a missing... *person*... was last seen around here is particularly good business.”

“Forget here,” Nilo suddenly interrupts. “You should check out Giulio Pavone’s places. Ntimacy, Club Ruby’s. Bare Essence.”

The interruption catches both me and Tiago off guard, thankfully, so I’m not the only one who’s left staring at the

runt. It gives me a second to gather myself, though I have to fight not to swear under my breath. I've been doing a damn good job of keeping Giulio's places out of the line of fire, but it looks like the Romanos have taken offense to something Giulio's done.

Imagine that.

Mancini looks like he wants to slap Nilo, though. "Shut up," he hisses. Then he turns to us with a strained smile. "Nilo only means that he hopes you're being thorough in your investigation. We aren't the only club in the area, and if your missing friend enjoyed the company of women, there are plenty of places to go for that."

I shrug. "We're looking into every lead. I don't suppose you'd know where to tell someone to go if they were looking for the company of men, would you?" The sergeant had told me they thought Baca might've had a thing for guys, and I use that now to try to redirect Tiago's attention away from Giulio's—straight—clubs.

Nilo's sneer turns uglier. "Then you really should ask Giulio Pavone. He's a fucking fag, you know."

I look at Nilo, and for a moment, I imagine what *he* would look like at my cabin in the woods, displayed on the table like I'd done with Vanessa. I wouldn't have to hold myself back with him. I could tie him down and cut off fingers and toes, one at a time, until I moved on to wrists and ankles...

"Yeah?" I ask, my voice as casual as my thoughts are murderous. "He doesn't run that kind of club, as far as I know."

Nilo glares at me. "So? He's disgusting. And anyway, this guy you're looking for—" he waves the photo around, "I'm pretty sure he was at one of Pavone's places. Somebody told me about a cop disappearing from there."

If looks could kill, I wouldn't even have to murder Nilo myself. Mancini looks ready to do it for me.

Mancini grabs the photo from Nilo's hands and gives it back to Tiago.

“There you have it,” Mancini says in clipped tones. “Of course, if you *do* go visit Giulio Pavone, you don’t have to mention... any of this.”

Unlike Nilo, Mancini doesn’t want to piss Giulio off. He’s a lot smarter than the little brat.

“Of course not.” I smile at Mancini. “But I would like to know a little more. If you know someone who could tell us more about our disappearing friend, we’d be negligent not to speak to them, of course.” My gaze goes to Nilo. Who’s the fucking rat?

Nilo seems to realize he fucked up, because he pales. “Just... somebody I know. You don’t have to worry about him.”

Him. Not one of the girls, at least. Unless one of the girls told “him,” and “he” told Nilo... ugh, fuck. There are too many people who walk in and out of Ntimacy every night. “Yeah? If he has information about a missing police officer, I’m sure *he* would be happy to cooperate with us.”

I am going to find who’s responsible for this leak and make sure they pay for it in blood.

With any luck, it’s Paul, and I’ll finally get to deal with him properly.

“I’d have to... I’d have to ask him.” Nilo mumbles, and he’s way less confident now than when he was calling Giulio a fag.

“Sure.” I get up and hand Nilo one of my business cards. “Tell him to give me a call. You can call me too, if you ever have more information you want to share.” I smirk at him. “This could be a very mutually beneficial relationship, kid.”

Very mutually beneficial, if Nilo gets the reputation of being somebody who snitches to the cops.

Nilo shrinks back from me and mumbles a weird “thank you,” like he doesn’t know how to react.

Mancini coughs into his hand. “If that’s all, detectives? I do hope we can keep this entire meeting... discreet.”

Tiago gets up and shakes out his shoulders. “No worries. The only reason we came here was for that sweet lap dance. I might have to come back for Chantal sometime.”

“Of course,” Mancini says, sliding back into his smooth salesman voice. “I’ll make sure they know that Chantal is always available for you. Now, I do have a few more things to take care of. I’ll have one of the girls escort you out.”

It doesn’t escape my attention that it’s not a suggestion, but I’m just as glad to get out of there as he is to be rid of us.

Once we’re outside, Tiago lets out a long, annoyed groan.

“Fuck me. I don’t want to deal with Pavone,” Tiago complains. “I dunno if he is a fag or what, but I do know he’s fucking crazy.”

I’m a bit taken aback. “You’ve met him?”

“Yeah, like five years ago or something. He got called in for questioning because of... eh, I don’t fucking know anymore. Most frustrating interview of my life. It’s the first time I actually wanted the suspect to lawyer up, because then it’d actually have made more sense.”

I’m too pissed off to be amused. That sounds like Giulio, all right. I rub at my temples, pausing for a moment. “I think it’d be a bad idea to bring him in. We just have the word of a fucking mobster kid that Pavone is involved. Sounds like big talk to me, and I don’t want to get in the middle of that war.”

“I can’t believe he just fucking blabbed like that,” Tiago agrees as we head toward the car. “You think Mancini is going to murder him?”

“Definitely wanted to.” I laugh, although it sounds fake to my ears. “We’ll know which door to start knocking on if we find baby Romano’s body in a ditch somewhere.”

“Yeah right. If anything, we’ll discover baby Romano sealed into concrete, like ten years down the line. I know how these mobsters work.” Tiago shakes his head. “If that kid’s a Romano, Mancini can’t just have him killed. Sounds like there’s big trouble brewing, though. I think if we ask around a few more places, we can tell the 52nd precinct we tried, we

really did, but we're more worried about a gang war breaking out on the streets than their runaway cop. Because, let's face it... We still don't have proof Baca is even dead. Until they find a body, I'd say this is low priority."

It's pretty high priority for me, and I'll have to play this carefully. If one of his guys is talking to the Romanos about shit like that... Yeah, I'm not liking where that could go at all. I need to find out who it is before they cause any more damage.

"Agreed. I've already been by Ntimacy and Ruby's and all, so there's really no need to go back. I have the names of the gay clubs anyway, and we've checked those out too." I shrug. "I guess I can double back anyway and ask some questions, but I'm not getting us involved in a war."

I need to figure this problem out, but I can't tell Giulio. He's been a loose cannon as it is. Fuck.

"Anyway, let's get back. I'm fucking hungry."

Damien, then. I'll get in touch with Damien and see if we can hash this out before we bring Giulio's crazy ass into this mess.

This is going to be a long, long night.

DAMIEN

“Coffee?” I ask Slayer, motioning to the pot on the counter. There’s an empty mug sitting next to it already, waiting for him.

Out of everybody who could visit me late at night, Slayer is at the bottom of the list for me. But I couldn’t leave the apartment, not with...

...Not with Vanessa sleeping peacefully on the couch. She’s been here for almost a week, recovering from the cuts that Slayer had given her. Part of me still wants to punch Slayer for that, but I’ve managed to calm down since I first saw the injuries.

Giulio’s random visits had helped defuse my ire, too. He’s still in a strange mood, but he’s no longer taking it out on Vanessa, at least.

“Yeah, please,” Slayer says with more manners than I’d have given him credit for. He heads straight to the coffee pot and pours some into the mug I’d left for him. “Thanks for letting me drop by. This is probably something I should talk to Giulio about, but...” He trails off as he takes a gulp of the hot coffee.

The fact that Slayer is calling him *Giulio* and not *Jules* speaks volumes.

“Yes. I know.” I take a sip from my own mug and sit by the breakfast bar, angling myself so I can watch Vanessa. “It really couldn’t wait until morning?”

“It looks like there’s a mole in one of Giulio’s clubs. Someone who knows about a certain missing person,” Slayer says bluntly. “Someone who told Nilo Romano about it.”

I wish I could be more shocked about it, but in this line of business, there’s always somebody who thinks they can get rich by selling out the organization, or at least use it as a get-out-of-jail-free card. But that *missing person*... There aren’t a lot of people who know about him. The ones who’d helped dispose of the body had no clue who the guy was.

“Why are you talking with Nilo Romano anyway?” I ask. “He’s the... Which one was he? Not the oldest Romano son. We just had dinner with him this week.”

“The one who looks like a kid,” Slayer says with a grimace.

Right, the one Giulio had taunted so often in the past few weeks. I’d almost forgotten about him because of how insignificant he is in the grand scheme of things, but Giulio must have left an impression on Nilo. He tends to do that.

“We had to stop by The Web to chat with the manager, and Mancini shows up with Nilo Romano in tow. Romano was pretty happy to try to throw ‘the fag,’” Slayer made quotes with his fingers, “under the bus. Says he has a contact.” He pauses, then his eyes meet mine. “Worst part? My fucking partner was with me.”

My hands tighten around my coffee mug. More witnesses. “Is your partner the type to follow up on this?”

Slayer hesitates, then slowly shakes his head. “I don’t *think* so. He thinks Giulio Pavone is insane, and he wants nothing to do with it. I told him I’d double check, but we’ve already gone through his clubs. He shouldn’t be writing paperwork on it since he had a lap dance when we were there, but I just don’t know. I don’t like it.”

I don’t like it either. I put my coffee down so I can rub at my brow. “What was Nilo Romano doing there anyway? The Romanos don’t deal in sex.”

He shakes his head. “He’s the fucking assistant manager. Or at least, he was. Mancini probably fired him. He was fuming when Nilo kept talking.”

“I’ll talk with Mancini,” I say. “He’s usually reasonable. But he owes a lot to the Romanos, so he probably can’t simply fire Nilo.”

Slayer grimaces. “If you talk to Mancini, you’ll have to be careful. He asked us to keep it on the downlow, what Nilo said, and I don’t want him realizing you’ve got either me or Tiago on payroll.”

I meet his eyes, keeping my expression blank. “Rest assured, I know how to be discreet. I am not Giulio.”

“Which is part of the reason I’m here and not with him,” Slayer says with a curt nod. “Usually, I could trust him to just absorb the situation then have you deal with it, but...” He trails off, glancing in the direction of the living room, where Vanessa is so peacefully resting.

I don’t respond. Slayer isn’t wrong about Giulio, and I can already imagine him going after Nilo in a very public manner. Not to mention what he’ll do to find out who snitched in the first place.

“You shouldn’t have cut her as badly as you did. The wounds are only just starting to heal,” I say with some reproach.

He looks at me steadily as he takes another sip of his coffee. “Giulio threatened to take over if I didn’t do a good enough job. I didn’t trust him. I at least know where to cut to prevent permanent damage. He doesn’t.”

I’d tried to downplay some of Giulio’s rage to Vanessa, but I don’t doubt Slayer.

“He’d have been less upset if he didn’t care as much,” I say, as if that’s any excuse. “It’s good that he likes her.”

“Try telling her that,” Slayer says with a shake of his head. “You know it, I know it, but he fucked with her head pretty bad.” He runs a hand through his hair, pausing, as though trying to think of what to say to me. We aren’t close, but it

seems like he's about to tell me something personal. "Look, I'm not saying I'm perfect, or I didn't get off on it, but expecting me to do aftercare? He's not usually that..." He pauses, waving a hand like he can't think of the right word.

"You didn't see him after Emilio disfigured Elena. She meant—means—a lot to him. I had my hands full preventing him from doing something that would get him killed." I still remember the way Giulio had raged, how badly he'd wanted to disfigure his own father.

That might have been when my loyalty had started to shift. Emilio had paid me well, and he could be charming when he wanted to be, but he didn't *care* the way Giulio did.

I'm trying to think of what else to say when I notice Vanessa's hands are curled tightly around the blanket.

I tap Slayer on the shoulder and point, and it only takes a few seconds for him to realize it too.

Vanessa is awake.

"Fuck," he mutters, low enough to where only I can hear it. "I doubt she wants to see me." To my surprise, there's a little bit of wistfulness there. "Should I go?"

Is it possible he's starting to care about her, too? She does have that way of getting beneath someone's skin.

Part of me wants to send him away. Vanessa isn't for him. She's for Giulio.

But, with how Giulio is right now... it would be helpful to have somebody else around to rein him in.

"Do whatever you want," I answer, getting up and walking over to the couch. I see Vanessa flinch and attempt to smooth out her expression, but despite all the practice she's been getting lately, she's still not a great actress.

"How long have you been awake?" I ask her.

Her eyes dart past me to Slayer, and there's wariness there—not fear, exactly, but she's bracing herself, and it's clear. She shrugs a little. "Not long. I wasn't... I wasn't trying to listen to your conversation," she says.

Slayer follows me over to the couch. “Want some coffee?” he offers.

She shakes her head. “Thanks, but no.” She sits up on the couch, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand. She looks again between the two of us, then asks in a small voice, “Where’s Giulio?”

“Asleep, I hope. He has a 10 a.m. meeting.” I sigh loudly. “A meeting he assures me he’ll be on time for, and that I should enjoy my well-deserved days off.”

They aren’t really days off, since I’m still making calls and following up on business, but I haven’t actually left my condo for more than an hour at a time since Giulio dropped Vanessa off here. My main job right now is playing nursemaid to her.

It’s not a job I resent, but I can’t help worrying about what Giulio is getting up to without me. Thankfully, the men he takes along on business are eager to report back to me.

Vanessa relaxes a little, something I can’t help but notice. It makes me frown. I want her to look forward to her visits with Giulio, not dread them. I especially don’t want her more comfortable with Slayer than Giulio.

“Riiiiight,” Slayer drawls. “I’m sure he’ll be on time for a ten o’clock meeting.” He knows as well as I do that that’s not likely to happen. “Did you tell him it was for nine?”

“Yes,” I answer, sitting down next to Vanessa. “It doesn’t matter what time of day the meeting is for; he’ll find a way to be late for it. The only reason he wasn’t late for Emilio’s wedding to Lucia is because I promised him a reward afterward.”

“A reward, huh?” Slayer smirks at me.

Vanessa looks between the two of us, and there’s a little bit of confusion in her expression. She says nothing of it, though, instead pulling the blanket a little bit higher against her chest. She’s wearing a t-shirt and panties underneath the blanket, but she still looks uncomfortable.

“I was right,” I point out. “He was very happy not to have missed it. He got to see his father utterly humiliated, and we

got Vanessa out of it.” I brush my knuckles against her cheek.

She flinches, but she doesn’t pull away. She obviously doesn’t have the same pleasant memories Giulio and I do about the wedding, though. “I’m glad you two are happy,” she mutters.

Slayer barks out a laugh. “Yeah, glad to see you’ve still got some spirit in you,” he tells Vanessa.

“Would you have been happier if the wedding had gone off without a hitch?” I ask calmly. “Maybe your sister would have convinced Emilio to keep you... pure.”

She doesn’t look at me, staring instead at her lap. “At least she wouldn’t have been with *three* mafia men. She could’ve handled Emilio.”

Slayer sits down on the armchair and stretches his legs out on the ottoman. “You Bellini chicks have the best luck, huh. But honestly, Emilio was bad fucking news. You’ve seen Elena. The crime scene photos from Clarissa’s murder were... Jesus, they turned *my* stomach.”

“But *they* changed her,” Vanessa says quietly. “She wasn’t the same person anymore when she got back.”

If only she knew how much Lucia Bellini has changed in the time she’s spent with Victor Corvi and his men. None of us have told her the rumors we’ve heard from Benton City about her sister, but Lucia is definitely better off than she would’ve been marrying Emilio. Both of them are.

“Well, no one would be,” Slayer says almost reasonably. “You aren’t the same person you were a few months ago either.”

“Even Giulio isn’t the same as he was.” I wrap my arm around Vanessa’s shoulder and urge her to rest against me. “This is a good thing for you, Vanessa. You’re with people who value you now. Your father looked down on you. Your mother resented you. Your sister thought you were weak and needed protecting. Your old boyfriend...” I just barely manage to conceal a sneer. “Giulio said he called you ugly and boring.”

Slayer watches us, but he doesn't interject until the last bit. "And you aren't either of those things. You're gorgeous, and you're fascinating, even if you're too damn tall. You're never allowed to wear heels."

Vanessa makes a face, looking between us like she doesn't know how to react to the words. "My sister didn't think I was weak," she says, though she falters over the words. "She was just being a good big sister, is all. Don't worry, I'll only wear heels if I ever want to break my neck. But why are you all so obsessed with Brad? It was over ages ago."

I can't explain why I'm happy to share Vanessa with Giulio—and, reluctantly, with Slayer—but the thought of some immature college kid touching her makes something boil inside me. It certainly doesn't help knowing how terrible this Brad had been to her.

"He didn't deserve to touch you," I say flatly.

Vanessa sighs. "But it was like... a year ago. More than that. Seriously, Damien, it's not a big deal."

"Of course it's a big deal," Slayer says, sitting up a little. "It fucked with your head and made you feel like shit."

"And you think you've never made me feel like shit, or fucked with my head?" Vanessa asks, her voice suddenly sharp. She pulls away from me. "Why do you hate someone you've never met for it, but you don't seem to have a problem doing it yourself?"

I glance at Slayer, then back to Vanessa. "We make you feel good," I point out. "Every time. Did your college boyfriend make sure you were satisfied?"

Vanessa blushes. "Well, no, but—"

"See?" Slayer interrupts. "We're not that bad to you, Vanessa."

Vanessa stares at him, blinking a few times, then lets out a choked-sounding laugh. "Right," she says, not looking for an instant like she believes him. There's obviously more she wants to say, but she stays quiet instead.

Slayer and I share a glance, and for once, we seem to be on the same page. Slayer slowly gets up and takes a seat on Vanessa's other side. He leans in, nuzzling her neck, and she freezes.

"Hey," he says softly, almost soothingly. "It's okay. Just let us remind you how good we can be for you, yeah?"

I gently take hold of her chin and lean in to kiss her. "You're doing well, Vanessa. Being perfect for us."

"You're trying to distract me," Vanessa says, her breath against my lips.

I trail my hand down to her neck and rest it there, feeling her little inhalations. Slayer snorts, but his hand is under the blanket now, rubbing along Vanessa's thigh.

Over the budding scars.

"Let yourself be distracted a little bit," Slayer coaxes her, sliding his hand up higher. "You know we can make you feel amazing."

I kiss Vanessa again to keep her from protesting, and she lets out a muffled sound. I ignore it, kissing her more deeply as she starts to squirm.

I take her hand and place it over my clothed cock, which is already growing hard. "Look at what you do to me, Vanessa," I murmur. "Since the first day I laid eyes on you." I move to nibble on her jaw. "Take me out. Get me fully hard."

She squirms as Slayer continues to touch her beneath the blanket, but she obeys me, unfastening my pants. She slides her hand into my boxer briefs, taking my cock into her hand. It feels amazing, as always, her warm, slender hand starting to stroke me. I know she doesn't want to right now, but pretty soon, she'll be glad she gave in.

Slayer pulls the blanket off her lap and urges her to lift her hips so he can pull the underwear off of her and toss them onto the ottoman. Then he parts her legs a bit more, fingers delving between her thighs again. She squirms, but she doesn't stop touching me.

Slayer holds his fingers up to show me that Vanessa is already glistening, because despite what she says, we *do* show her a very good time.

Never mind Giulio's mood these past two weeks and how it's impacted her.

I kiss her again, reaching under her shirt so I can massage her breasts. She gasps and her touch on my cock falters, but even just the warmth of her fingers on me makes the desire inside me grow.

"You wanna be completely pleased, right?" Slayer murmurs as he fingers her. "Damien and I are gonna take you at the same time. Do you want him in your ass while I take your cunt, or...?" From the corner of my eyes, I can see him smirking a little. He knows what she's going to pick as much as I do.

Vanessa's eyes grow wide. "N-no, I don't..."

Still playing with a nipple, I kiss the side of her mouth. "You'll feel so good. Stuffed completely full. Just tell us which way you prefer it."

I don't mention how much I want Slayer in her ass, not her cunt. She knows she won't get pregnant from me, and I'm still holding out hope that it's Giulio's child she'll bear. But I want to see her swell up with a child even more, and if it ends up being Slayer that gets her glowing beautifully... Well, there are worse candidates.

I half wonder if I should call Giulio over, but I suspect he'd ruin the mood. I don't want to give him any excuses to be late to his morning meeting, either.

Vanessa shakes her head, helpless, but she knows she doesn't get a say in this. It's a pity we still have to steamroll her to get her to go along with it when she knows it'll end up feeling amazing for her, but she'll learn.

"Well?" Slayer prompts.

She gasps, and I'm pretty sure he's just shoved at least one finger inside of her.

“You’re so wet,” he groans. “Man. I’ll be happy to take your cunt, but that means Damien’s got your ass, and, well...”

Vanessa quickly shakes her head again. “N-no. I’ll take you... there.”

I reluctantly let go of her and fumble with the side table. There’s a small drawer, and of course there’s lube stashed inside, courtesy of Giulio. I hand the tube to Slayer, then tug on Vanessa’s arm.

“Straddle my lap,” I tell her, brushing some of her hair behind her ear. “I’ll fill you first, and Slayer can get your ass ready while you warm my cock.”

Slayer pulls his fingers out of her then works to shed his jeans and his faded boxers. You’d think he could afford nicer boxers with his double payroll, but those look like they’ve seen better days. He tosses them all on the floor, his cock already hard.

I have to arrange myself a bit awkwardly on the couch so Vanessa’s ass will be accessible to Slayer once she’s on top of me.

Vanessa shifts to straddle my lap, trying to keep herself up and shaking from the effort. I’m proud of her when she takes my cock in hand to guide me to her cunt, slowly taking just a little inside of her.

“How does it feel?” I ask, rubbing little circles on her hips. “Tell us how good it is for you.”

“It...” She looks a little bleak, but her cheeks are flushed from her arousal. “It’s good,” she says. She drops down a bit lower, taking more of my dick inside of her, and bites her lip.

Slayer stands behind her, pulling her hair to one side so he can kiss and nibble on her neck while he waits to be able to touch her. He’s surprisingly patient, even though I can see him jacking himself, too.

If it were Giulio, I might have leaned up to kiss him. But although Slayer and I have a small understanding right now, I find no desire to be more intimate with him. He’s here to help me make Vanessa feel good, nothing else.

Vanessa slides lower still, and I stifle a groan. She's so warm and tight around me, fitting me perfectly. Every slow inch sends another shot of pleasure up my spine. I want to force her down faster, but she looks adorable biting her lip as she adjusts to my size.

Slayer nips her neck, making her yelp and slide down a little more than she'd been ready for. I can't even be annoyed; it's what I want, after all. She squirms atop me, and Slayer nuzzles her throat. I can see him take her earlobe into his mouth, and she lets out a sound that has nothing to do with pain as he teases her with his tongue and fingers.

Vanessa braces herself against my shoulders, but the slow glide down is having a toll on her legs. They're strong, but hovering there can't be easy for her. She ends up taking more and more, until she's finally seated all the way down on my cock.

I groan, leaning in to kiss her again, peppering her entire face with soft kisses in praise of what she's just done.

Slayer doesn't waste a moment. He uncaps the lube, and I can feel it as he pushes a finger insistently into her ass, almost feeling like he's touching my cock from the other side. It'd be hotter if it was Giulio, but this is still Vanessa on my lap, and she's about to be utterly filled with cock, so it at least isn't a turnoff.

"How does it feel?" I ask Vanessa. "You're so hot for me. Gripping me tightly. Your cunt doesn't want to let me go."

"It's... uncomfortable," Vanessa whimpers. "Both of you. It's so much."

"But you can take it," Slayer says against her neck. "You've taken it before."

It was Giulio and Slayer last time, and I'm larger than both of them, but I know she can take it. Her body was made for this, made for us.

"It's only a finger," I tell her. "I can feel it through you. It's going to be amazing when there's another cock in there,

rubbing at you from all directions. You like that thought? You're already so red."

I finally unbutton the shirt she's wearing so I can reach her chest. I lean up and suck gently on one nipple, earning a sharp gasp from her as a reward.

Slayer presses a second finger inside of her, slowly starting to thrust them in and out as he begins to stretch her. His look is one of utter concentration as he stands there, and he's obviously taking this duty seriously.

Giulio might fuck with him about his cock size, but Slayer could still hurt Vanessa if she's not prepped properly.

Vanessa lets out a strangled-sounding moan, squirming more and only serving to push herself back against Slayer's fingers—and rising and falling, just a little, on my cock and making me groan in the process.

I release her nipple and kiss her small breast. "Tell us," I demand. "Tell us how good it feels."

"It feels..." Vanessa starts, though her words almost immediately catch in her throat. "It feels good. But so much. Please, just one at a time."

"Nuh-uh," Slayer says, nibbling on the side of her neck. "You'll love it just as much as you did last time. I bet you're gonna come so hard on Damien's cock, squeeze him into you so you can get knocked up with his babies."

Vanessa's hands on my shoulders clench, and our eyes meet. For a split second, she looks almost sad. I give a miniscule shake of my head, hoping she gets the message.

Slayer doesn't need to know. And even if he did, he doesn't need to know *now*.

"Giulio's babies," I growl. "No matter who knocks her up. Giulio's babies." I slide my hand over her stomach, imagining how she'll look with a swollen stomach. Regardless of who gets her pregnant, she'll be radiant and so, so hot.

"Giulio's babies," Slayer agrees easily enough, and I can feel it when he shoves a third finger inside of Vanessa.

“Almost ready,” he announces. “Sorry to make you wait, Damien, but, well... She’s already stretched out pretty good. Damn, man.”

“She’s eager for you,” I say. “I can feel her flutter around my cock. Desperate. Are you desperate, Vanessa?”

Her expression looks bleak, though she’s still flushed and her lips are slightly parted. She gives a slight nod but doesn’t offer any words to go with it. That’s okay. She’ll be making plenty of noise soon enough, when Slayer slides inside of her and I finally begin to thrust.

As though reading my mind, Slayer pulls back. I hear the slap of skin on slick skin, and next thing I know, he’s pushing into her ass.

Vanessa cries out, and Slayer leans down to kiss her upper shoulder. “Shh,” he tells her almost... gently. “It’s okay. It’ll feel so good in just a minute.”

It already feels good to me. His cock slides against mine, only a thin wall between us, and Vanessa *clenches*, sending pleasure rolling through me. I exhale loudly and bury my mouth against her neck, sucking hard on her skin.

“It’s too much,” she whimpers, shaking her head a little. “P-please, I can’t...”

“You can,” Slayer answers, rolling his hips. He has one hand on the couch and the other on her stomach to brace himself, and I can feel every single one of his movements.

It’s almost too much, but I don’t want to spend so early. I keep myself perfectly still and try to breathe through the pleasure, focusing instead on making Vanessa feel good.

Slayer takes a moment to force himself deeper inside of her.

“You ready, Vanessa?” I ask when Slayer finally fills her completely. “We’re going to move inside you now. Slowly, at first. All right?”

It doesn’t really matter if she says she’s ready or not. When she starts to shake her head, I just give her a kiss.

Slayer takes the hint, starting to thrust inside of her. It jars us both, forcing her to rise a little on my cock and settle back down, clenching the whole time. Slayer groans and picks up the pace almost immediately, though he still seems to at least be cognizant of not hurting her. “Play with... her clit,” he tells me through stifled groans. “I want to feel her come around both of us.”

“Don’t!” Vanessa hisses, but I ignore her and let my hand drop between us.

She cries out as I begin to massage her clit, and I feel her tighten up in response.

“Why not?” I ask, making sure to continue my movements. “Why shouldn’t we make you feel good?”

“B-because,” Vanessa whimpers. “I don’t want it to feel good!”

Slayer lets out a soft chuckle. “But we’re not like that, Vanessa. We want you to feel amazing. And doesn’t this feel great? I can feel the way you keep going tight around us.” He keeps thrusting into her, moving her slightly. He’s being patient, but I know that won’t last long.

Vanessa blinks rapidly, and her eyes glisten.

“Shh, no crying,” I say, using my other hand to wipe the corner of her eye. “It’s okay to feel good. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.” I give a small, abortive thrust of my own. I don’t have the leverage to do much, but Vanessa gasps anyway, and behind her, Slayer groans loudly.

She clearly doesn’t agree, but she doesn’t argue with me. Instead, she closes her eyes. Tears trickle down her cheeks, but she’s starting to tremble, her cunt tightening around me as she gets nearer to orgasm. Once she climaxes, Slayer can come, then I can flip her over and take her properly.

Slayer fucks her a little harder, making her twitch and shift around me, and it’s my turn to groan.

I kiss her again. I almost bump against Slayer’s head when he leans down to kiss her neck, and that should be irritating but it’s just another layer to all the sensations, now.

“We should...” Slayer mumbles. “Pics. For Jules.”

I snort, but he’s right. Giulio would love to see this. I reluctantly release Vanessa’s hip so I can fumble for my phone one-handed. It almost slips from my hands, but I manage to get the camera app open.

The first photo I take is of Vanessa’s face, flushed red with tears in her eyes.

“Don’t... Don’t send those,” she begs. “Please.”

“Giulio will love them,” I promise her, angling the camera to get a shot of her where her cunt welcomes my cock.

It’s harder to get a photo where Slayer is also in the shot, and in the end, half of them are probably blurred messes—especially once Slayer picks up the pace even further.

“Fuck, he’s gonna think they’re so hot,” Slayer groans. Of course, Slayer doesn’t know how poorly the photos are turning out, but even so, Giulio will get the idea. If he’s home and awake, he’ll probably be right over, though, so I’ll wait to send them until the morning.

After his meeting.

Slayer speeds up, and it isn’t long until he’s swearing against Vanessa’s throat, sucking a hickey into existence there. He fucks her harder, jarring her over and over again so she feels like she’s squeezing me and moving atop me every time.

“Get her to come,” Slayer manages to get out. “I wanna feel it before... ungh.”

My fingers are starting to get clumsy, but I try to stimulate her clit more. It doesn’t end up mattering—one more brush against her, and she’s crying out, clenching and rippling around my cock.

There’s no way I can hold back now, especially not with how Slayer is still sliding against me. I let go, letting the pleasure wash over me. To keep myself from crying out, I suck a bruise onto her breast during my orgasm.

Slayer moans, and I can practically feel him spilling into Vanessa. The three of us are coming hard, and if we’d

promised Vanessa pleasure, well... We're delivering in droves.

Slayer is the first to pull out, and some of his cum trickles down her leg. She whimpers, and her head comes forward to rest on my shoulder. I don't think for a moment that she means to, but it's still a nice gesture. Breathing heavily, I pet her hair, stroking my fingers through the silky strands.

Slayer collapses on the couch next to us and wipes the sweat from his brow. "Fuck. Damn. Glad... Glad I came over."

That reminds me of the circumstances of why he visited in the first place, but that's a problem for tomorrow.

"It... wasn't bad," I agree. "Vanessa enjoyed herself too."

Vanessa doesn't look up at me, but she doesn't have to. I can practically feel the heat of her cheeks against my shoulder as she stays there, still impaled on my cock.

"Now, aren't we good to you?" Slayer prompts, touching her shoulder.

She nods.

Slayer rolls his eyes. "Well, you'd think she'd be more grateful, but she's probably had a long day." Another moment, then he gets up, grabbing his boxers. "Ugh. I need to be at work early in the morning."

The sex was good, but now that it's over, I don't particularly want Slayer to stay around for longer. I'm glad he agrees.

"You take care of things there. I'll handle Giulio and the Romano situation," I tell him.

"Sure." Slayer wipes his dick off on the blanket, then puts his boxers and pants back on. "I'll see you around. Send me a few of the pics too."

I stay on the couch, arms wrapped around Vanessa, as Slayer sees himself out.

"We'll do it with Giulio next time," I murmur to her.

She only trembles in response.

We stay like that until my cock fully softens and finally slips out of her.

VANESSA

The math isn't working out in my head.

Not the accounting—that's also not working out, and I'm so close to putting the pieces together—but the other math.

My period.

It's hard to keep track of the days, especially when Damien, Giulio, and Slayer visit me at odd hours. I don't know if I'm glad that I'm back at Ntimacy instead of at Damien's apartment. My stay there had been a little bit less boring than here, but it had also meant Damien and Giulio fucking me a lot more regularly.

It's been more than four weeks though, I think. Last time I'd been late. Maybe I'm just extremely late again. I've been under so much stress, it's understandable my body doesn't know what to do with itself.

I startle when I hear the knock on the door. Whoever it is, I don't want to see them.

Except I do, because I haven't spoken to anybody in days. Stef is gone, and none of the remaining girls want to talk with me. I can't get myself to look Elena in the eye. Donny and Paul aren't even making me do any chores anymore.

"Miss me?" Giulio says as he strolls in, carrying a bag of takeout food. "I brought dinner."

"I always miss you," I say automatically, the words almost sounding genuine. I've had a lot of practice, and I've had a lot

of reasons to play along. Ever since the night at Slayer's cabin... I try not to shudder at the thought. I'm going to have scars from that forever, both mentally and physically. Over the past few weeks, I've learned it's just easier to play along.

Giulio smiles at me, like he knows I'm only pretending, but he doesn't call me out on it. He settles onto the mattress by my thighs and pats my side. "Yeah? Then it's a good thing I'm here. Can't have you pining away for me."

He's making fun of me. But Damien is right—if you show you're annoyed, Giulio only goes in harder. So I take his hand and sit up, not reacting at all when he kisses my cheek, and peer at the food.

"What did you bring? I'm really hungry." It's true, too. I've been eating everything Donny and Paul send my way, dutifully taking all my vitamins, but the boredom is really getting to me. I keep craving food.

Whatever Giulio brought, it smells good too.

"Hope you're in the mood for Peruvian. There's rotisserie chicken and yucas, but I grabbed the ceviche too if you're feeling adventurous." Giulio takes the containers out of the bag and sets them on the floor in front of us.

"I've never had Peruvian," I say. Something in there smells *really* good, actually. "I think my dad ordered ceviche at a Mexican restaurant once. It looked kind of gross."

If I'm remembering correctly, it's some raw fish dish, with lemons and onions. Not much better than sushi.

Giulio shrugs and hands me a set of utensils. "Yep. I know you're like Slayer. Only the familiar food for you."

He's got the ceviche uncovered—it smells so strongly of lemon—when his phone buzzes. He sighs loudly and puts the container down again. "Fucking business. You'd think people would be able to handle their own shit at 10 p.m. on a Saturday."

Anything that distracts him is good for me, though.

Only once Giulio looks at his phone, he grins, and that sets off alarm bells inside me. Giulio taps the phone, and I hear it come through loud and clear. Giulio taps his finger to his lips, signaling me to stay quiet.

“Yo, Doctor Savage! What’s up?” he asks.

Doctor Savage? Who’s that? I tense, not liking the sound of this. What kind of doctor is calling Giulio this late at night?

“See, I knew you’d be awake. I was told you wouldn’t want to hear from me at this late hour.” There’s a strange quality to his voice that makes it sound like *he’s* on speaker too.

“You know me. I’m a night owl.” Giulio strokes my shoulder. “But how can I help?”

“I’ve been having problems with my recent acquisition,” Savage says, sounding almost bored. “First the detox—I had to tie her down for part of it—and then getting her to even eat right.”

Recent... It doesn’t take me long to put the pieces together. Doctor Savage had to be the one who bought Stef. I can’t even be relieved that she’s gone through detox, because being tied down for part of it sounded miserable and cruel. I don’t want her to still be on drugs, but this man doesn’t sound even remotely sympathetic.

I don’t say anything, but I desperately want to. I want to ask how Stef is. I want to talk to her. I want to do... something. Anything.

I look pleadingly at Giulio. Maybe if he’s displeased with Stef, he’ll want to return her. Then she can come back here, and it won’t be my fault she got sent to a worse fate anymore.

“Damn, that sucks. There’s no refunds though, you know,” Giulio says, smirking at me. “Unless you want to trade her in for a different model.”

“I might,” Savage answers just as coldly.

Suddenly, I hear Stef crying, “No! Please, please don’t! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it!”

I sit up straighter, looking pleadingly at Giulio. I don't dare say anything. I've already caused enough pain for Stef, and speaking out of turn would only make it worse. I have to bite my tongue to keep myself from begging on her behalf, and tears glisten in my eyes. "Please," I mouth to Giulio, trying to get him to pay attention to me. I've done better. I'm doing better. Can't we fix some of the problems I created?

"Hey, Stef!" Giulio says loudly. "You enjoying yourself with Doctor Savage?" He puts an arm around me and kisses my cheek, clearly mocking me, and I shudder.

On the other end, Stef sobs loudly. "Yes. Don't send me back, please, Master."

Giulio bursts out laughing, even as horror stabs through my heart.

Master. He has her calling him *Master*? That's horrible, and I don't know why Giulio thinks it's funny. I cover my mouth with my hand to stop myself from saying anything.

"Then next time, don't make me regret my purchase," Doctor Savage says. "My patience is running thin."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." More sobbing, but it breaks off.

What is he doing to her? What kind of monster is he?

"Should I be asking for a video call?" Giulio asks with an amused chuckle. "I'm always up for more porn. Hey, speaking of, do you want to see the pics of—"

The call suddenly ends.

Giulio looks at his phone, caught off guard. "He hung up on me?"

It's a wildly inappropriate time to remember Damien's response to the last time someone had hung up on Giulio in my presence. I'd been terrified, but the words had sunk in because Damien had been so dry, so matter of fact, when he'd said, *it's a wonder more people don't hang up on you.*

I'd never say that to Giulio, though.

“Can you... Can you call him back?” I ask, brushing at my tears. “Please, Giulio. Please take her back. I’ve been good, haven’t I? You can stop punishing her now.”

Giulio shakes his head and puts his phone away. “You heard her. She’d rather be with him than here. Shouldn’t you be glad, anyway? Sounds like he got her to detox. No more easy, drugged up life for her.” He grabs for his container of ceviche again and lifts it up to sniff at the food.

“Well, yes, I mean...” Flustered, I find it hard to get the words out. I catch scent of the ceviche, which smells especially strong to me. It doesn’t look or smell as gross as when my father had gotten it. “Can I try that?” I ask abruptly, trying to get my mind off of Stef and the doctor she calls *Master*.

Giulio shrugs and hands me the entire container. “Sure.” He grabs the rotisserie chicken and “yucas”—what appear to just be fat french fries—for himself.

I’m surprised he’s willing to go for the *boring* meal, but the ceviche smells more appetizing to me than the chicken. Something about the lemon, maybe.

It tastes really good too, I realize. Is this what I was missing out on when I’d skipped the sushi Giulio had brought? The tanginess, the texture, the onions and... everything.

I’ve eaten half of it before I even realize what I’m doing.

“So you *do* have an adventurous palate in there somewhere!” Giulio says, smiling. “Do I get the rest of that?”

“No,” I mumble, a little embarrassed, but I don’t want to eat the other stuff either. The smell of the chicken is actually off-putting, and I have no desire to touch it. The yuca, maybe, but definitely not the chicken. “Are you sure there’s nothing off about the chicken?” I go back to eating the ceviche, marveling at the way the flavors dance across my tongue.

Giulio looks at me strangely. “There’d better not be. It’s my favorite Peruvian place.” He cuts off some of the chicken breast, swirls it around in the yellow sauce it came with, and

eats it. “Nope, still good. And basic enough that even Slayer likes it.”

I shudder and go back to the ceviche. “No thanks,” I say, shaking my head. “What’s the yuca taste like?” It’s easier to talk to Giulio about food. It’s like he’s a different person—a bit of a snob, maybe, but he relaxes in a way he usually doesn’t.

“There’s plenty for you, too,” Giulio says. “They look like fries but are way more interesting.”

The yucas are deep fried, fat sticks that definitely resemble potatoes, but I tentatively take one and dip it into the sauce. One bite, and I realize he’s right—they don’t actually taste like fries. There’s a hint of sweetness, and the mildly spicy sauce blends perfectly with the natural flavor of the yuca.

“This is good,” I say. I eat a few more, surprised by how much I like the sauce. Usually, spicy things are a no-go, but tonight is different. Weird.

A little disturbing, too, and it makes me wonder...

No. It’s just a strange thing. It has nothing to do with *cravings* or anything. Just being around Giulio and his weird food has made me more open. That’s all.

We talk about the food a little more, and I’m almost relaxed by the time I’m full. He clears the takeout containers, putting them on the floor by the mattress in the bag he’d carried them in. Then we’re left in silence with nothing to distract us, and the almost easy, casual mood turns into something a bit awkward—for me, anyway.

Giulio smiles at me, and I think, not for the first time, that it’s a waste how handsome he is. If he were just *normal*. If he could be the casual man who shared his mother’s clothes with me, who made me waffles for breakfast, who cares about his pets, all the time... without all the rest of it... he wouldn’t be so bad.

“Donny says you’ve been complaining about being bored,” Giulio mentions, leaning back against the wall. “I’d be going crazy too, locked up in a room all the time.”

“I wasn’t complaining,” I say quickly. “I just... always appreciate it when Donny visits. And when *you* visit.”

The smirk Giulio gives me speaks volumes. “Yeah? How *appreciative* are we talking?”

I know what he wants now, what he always wants when he comes to see me. I didn’t really need the prompt, but at the same time... It’s a way to segue into something else.

It’s a way to justify doing what I know he wants me to do.

“Very appreciative,” I say softly, and even though I’m trembling, I get up, then stand above him for a moment before carefully lowering myself to sit in his lap. I’m terrified he’s going to reject me, and I go still, looking at him with wide eyes.

Giulio places his hands on my hips, underneath the large shirt I’m wearing. He rubs his thumbs in slow circles, pressing in on one side. “What game are you playing, Mama?” Giulio asks, eyes keen with interest.

“You’ve been so miserable,” I murmur, cupping his cheek with my hand. “With your wife. She doesn’t take care of you.” I hesitate, trying to think of what to say, what to do. I want him to be happy with me. I want more freedom around Ntimacy. I want some semblance of how things were before I fucked it all up.

Giulio’s eyebrows go up, but he nods. “Yeah. My bitch of a wife keeps nagging at me. And doesn’t want to touch me. Is it a wonder my eyes started wandering?” He turns his head to kiss the palm of my hand. “And there you were, this sweet young thing...”

“I know I shouldn’t want you like I do,” I say, trembling a little as my other hand goes to his shoulder. “But someone like you... You need to be touched, don’t you? You deserve it, after all you’ve gone through.” I pull a little from reality, because really, I’m not half as creative as he is.

He pulls on my hips, forcing me closer. My cunt ends up pressed over his clothed cock—not hard yet, but I’m sure it won’t take long to get him there.

“How did we meet?” Giulio asks as he starts to unbutton my shirt.

I rack my brain, trying to think. I shouldn't be thrown by simple questions, but it's hard to come up with these things on the spot. “You kept coming into the restaurant I work at. Sitting at the bar, drinking, telling me how miserable you are. And I just couldn't help it. I slipped you my phone number. I was so afraid you'd be offended and that I'd get fired...”

Giulio laughs and nips my breast lightly. “Offended? That a pretty girl like you wanted to get to know me better? But I know I wasn't going to that restaurant for the quality of their drinks. It was nice to have somebody actually listen to me. To find somebody who cared about me.”

There's something strange about his voice, and I wonder how much of this is actually roleplay.

No, I can't let myself get swayed by him. He's great at pretending.

I sort of wish this was the truth, though, that I was simply a waitress who'd been seduced by a man who wants to sweet talk her and spoil her. That could be him, too. He could find someone like that easily, ensnare them, sway them...

But it's me he wants, and the best thing I can do is keep his attention on me.

Keep him happy.

“Of course I cared. You were always kind and sweet to me,” I say, projecting what I want to happen instead of letting him choose a rougher narrative. “I never thought it was fair that you had to marry her when all she did was make you miserable.” I lean in, still trembling, and kiss him lightly. “You deserve better.”

Giulio huffs, and I panic for a second that I've screwed up the game somehow, but then he pulls me in for another, deeper kiss. He holds me in place with a gentle hand on the back of my head, but there really isn't any force in the gesture at all.

Suddenly, my eyes start to prickle. Even with his tongue invading my mouth, something about how he's kissing me is

different from the other times. His hand isn't rough. He isn't trying to humiliate me. It's gentle, sweet.

Romantic.

I want this story to be true, so badly.

He pulls away, panting against my lips. "I shouldn't," he says, suddenly. "I'm still married. What kind of man cheats on his wife?"

I wasn't expecting this. But if he's playing the role of someone who cares about a waitress, it makes sense that he'd care about cheating.

I'm quiet for a long time, because really, I don't like the type of men who cheat on their wives. My sister had been adamantly against it, too, which was one of the many reasons she'd loathed Emilio so much. It shakes the fantasy for me a little even though I'm the one who'd set it. I should've cast him as a lonely bachelor instead. "But you're separated," I say out of the blue. It doesn't necessarily make sense, but does anything about this really need to? It's just some sort of game, and for once, I'm setting the rules. "And she's already cheated on you."

"Of course," Giulio answers smoothly. "Now she's trying to take all my money in the divorce. I won't let her get in the way of this—of us." He kisses along my jaw. "You're so much better for me than she ever was. You're not a gold digger. You're just a pure, gentle person."

I let my hands slide down to the bottom hem of his shirt and tug, urging him to let me pull it over his head. He indulges me, and I look at him through the lens of a young waitress who's being swept off her feet by the man of her dreams. If only he was that, because he really is so handsome...

Getting off his lap, I take his hand and pull him down with me as I lie down on my back on the mattress. "I just want you. I don't care about material things." And that's true, even, which makes it easier for the words to roll off my tongue.

Giulio gives me a smoldering look before unbuttoning his jeans and stripping the rest of the way. He's half-hard now, and

it's strange how his cock isn't intimidating me the way it would have several months ago. I can feel my face redden as I stare at him.

I'm used to all of this.

I want him.

I don't, I try to tell myself, but if I have to pretend for him anyway... I open my arms for him, and he settles in next to me on the mattress, kissing me again.

"You're the best thing that happened to me," Giulio says between kisses. "Gives me hope that I'll survive this divorce."

"You can survive anything," I say, and that feels a bit too honest. "And if you want, I'll be there for you every step of the way. I know I'm young, but I'm completely, utterly devoted to you." I take his hand and put it on the top hem of my underwear, urging him to remove them. He obliges, and I lift my ass to make it easier.

Is this what he wants from me? Usually he'd be hard by now, if he was hurting me or just using me. It doesn't take much for him to get aroused when he stops by just to fuck me.

"Utterly devoted," Giulio repeats, snorting. "That's a nice line."

I blush, but I don't comment. I thought it might be what he wanted to hear.

He tosses the panties aside and shifts to kneel between my legs. "What do you like, sweet girl? I want to make sure I treat you right."

"I want..." I'm still utterly humiliated at the way my body wants him so badly, and I don't know what to ask for. What'll keep his attention? "I want you to be gentle with me, like you always are. I want to come around you while you come in me."

Where are those words coming from?

Giulio suddenly closes his eyes and breathes deeply. "Fuck."

Did I say the wrong thing? I tense up, afraid that I screwed it up and he's going to go back to playing the monster, *being* the monster.

But when he opens his eyes again, Giulio smiles at me so gently, I almost don't recognize him. Then he leans down to kiss my stomach, his hands pushing my thighs up. "I'll show you a real good time, sweetheart."

"You always do," I say, the words more truthful than I care to admit. I hesitate then slowly unbutton my shirt the rest of the way, letting it fall completely open.

He takes a moment to look me over, and I tense a little. I'm afraid he'll leer at me, or make some fucked-up comment, but instead, he just kisses a little lower on my stomach. It takes me a moment to realize what he's about to do, and... *oh*.

I'm not sure I'm prepared for this.

Giulio always jokes about needing something to keep his mouth occupied, but so far all I've seen him do is suck off Slayer once, and not even for very long. Damien has done this for me occasionally, and even Slayer did it once. Never Giulio though.

Somehow, I don't expect Giulio to actually be *good* at this. Part of me has still been wondering if he isn't maybe more gay than bi, but with how enthusiastically he's putting his tongue to use now, my doubts flee.

He's had a lot of practice.

I moan, burying my fingers in his hair. I'm torn between wanting to pull him closer and push him away, not sure I can stand the intense feelings he's evoking in me. The game doesn't even matter anymore. I don't care who I am, who he is. I care only that he's incredibly deft with his tongue, and each stroke of it brings me closer to climax.

The sounds I make get more and more strangled as he licks and sucks my over-sensitive clit. Then he pushes a finger into me, and my body spasms, on the very edge of coming. It happened so quickly that I don't even have time to be bothered

by it. All I know is that I'm about to be sent flying, and I let out a choked cry as pleasure spills over me.

He's quick to move atop me, burying himself inside of me with one quick thrust as my cunt tightens and flexes around him. It's his turn to moan, and he leans in to kiss me. It's so fierce, and I'm so dazed, that I barely even notice the taste of myself on his lips and tongue.

I don't *care*.

His cock hits the perfect spot each time, and my nails dig into his back as I hold him against me. Between his kisses and his strokes, the way his warm skin feels against me... I can't help it. I come again, and this time, he chases me over the edge.

For several long moments, the only sound is that of us trying to catch our breath. I don't want to break the relative silence, afraid I might say something to ruin this perfect bubble I've somehow brought us into. I just lie back, still clutching him.

He kisses my shoulder a few times before pulling out of me, but I still don't let go. I don't want him to leave. I don't want to be alone.

Giulio flops down next to me after several moments, pulling me tight, and fumbles for the blanket. I press myself against his chest, hating that it makes me feel safe even when I know he's the biggest danger to me.

After another few minutes of us lying on the mattress, Giulio finally says, "This is fucking uncomfortable. You should get a real bed in here."

I can't help it. I snort. "Yeah. I'll tell the management to get on that right away," I say before I can stop myself from speaking.

He laughs too, and kisses the top of my head. "I'll put in a formal complaint. And I can't believe they leave you here without a proper blanket."

I don't know what to say about that. How much is he joking, and how much is he really being serious? It's not like

he's ever stayed the night with me at Ntimacy, to realize just how cold and uncomfortable it gets, especially when you're alone. "I make do," I finally say. "You can... you can go," I say reluctantly. "I know it's not comfortable."

Giulio yawns loudly. "Nah. Too tired to move." He briefly tightens his hold on me, but he doesn't say anything more beyond that.

I still don't know if I've done well, if this is what he wanted from me. I wish he'd offer some sort of reassurance, and I'm too nervous to ask for it. Instead, I cuddle up to him, wondering when the hell I'd started to feel so conflicted about him.

GIULIO

I really was exhausted, because I'd managed to sleep on the hard mattress with just the one blanket to cover me. Vanessa's warmth helped, but it's also the lack of her warmth that wakes me.

I grumble and reach for her—there isn't exactly anywhere for her to go on this tiny mattress—but she's not there.

Annoyed, I open my eyes, ready to call her out on abandoning me. Except she isn't cowering in a corner somewhere.

She's kneeling in front of the toilet, heaving hard, her entire body trembling.

"Vanessa?" I sit up and check my phone. Six in the morning. Great. At least I'd gotten a few hours of sleep, but I'd rather be sleeping more. "You all right?"

She gags, her chest heaving, and she doesn't turn to look at me. "I thought you shopped at the high-end places," she manages to get out before retching again. "That ceviche... I should've known better than to eat it."

"It's never made me sick," I tell her. "And I really did buy that for myself. You're the one who stole it all from me." Not that I cared either way, but it's kind of funny to see her blaming the food she'd devoured last night.

"Lucky for you," she says, coughing several times. "You should be grateful I did, or you—" Another unflattering

retching sound. “Or you’d be the one over here on your knees.”

I chuckle and tap on my phone. “Yeah? That sounds almost kinky.”

When was Vanessa’s last period, I type.

“It’s not,” Vanessa says, her voice muffled but miserable. “There’s nothing even remotely kinky about this.”

If Damien’s smart, he’s still sleeping, but I’m not surprised when I get a response almost immediately.

Six weeks ago.

Hmm. I glance back at Vanessa, who is still heaving.

“You know what this could be?” I say, grinning. “You know why else you might be puking, this early in the morning?”

“Bad food,” Vanessa says instantly. “The chicken was off, so the ceviche was probably off too. Oh, god...” she whines. “I knew I shouldn’t have had seafood.”

I laugh, getting up to draw her hair back and kiss the top of her head. “Sure. You keep vomiting. I have to go check on something. But I’ll be right back. You want anything? Tea? Bread? Ginger ale?”

She shudders. “Water,” she croaks out. “Just water.”

I pat her again, then let go so I can get dressed. As fun as it would be to watch her suffer like this, I’d rather confirm my theory.

My phone buzzes again. *Why?*

Like he doesn’t know. He’s been getting his hopes up again too, but it’s more muted than last month. Maybe he doesn’t want his heart to break all over again like when Vanessa fucking played us—

But that’s all in the past.

I head next door to Elena, knocking quietly enough that it won’t wake her if she’s still sleeping. Like Damien, though,

Elena is up at this ungodly hour and opens the door for me.

“Giulio? Is something wrong?” she asks.

I know a lot of people think Elena isn’t expressive. That the scars on her face have robbed her of that. They’re wrong, though, and the worry is still clear in her eyes.

I smile at her to reassure her. “Nah, nothing wrong. Just wondering where the club keeps the pregnancy tests. ‘Cause, man, Vanessa is puking up her guts right now and I know it wasn’t because of the ceviche.”

Elena’s eyes widen a little. “So soon?” I know she’s thinking about how recently Vanessa was using the sponges, but a) they’re not foolproof, and b) it’s been long enough to get her knocked up since then.

I shrug. “She was being weird about food last night, and this morning she’s throwing up at the ass crack of dawn. It’s worth checking, at least.”

My phone buzzes again. *Giulio?*

“I suppose. But it could be the fish,” Elena mumbles. “They’re with the medical supplies. I’ll go grab the pregnancy tests, but... I’ve been thinking about it, Giulio. Are you sure Vanessa is the one you want children with? She’s pretty, but I think you can probably do better. And if you find another woman, you wouldn’t have to share her with—”

“Elena,” I interrupt, still smiling. “You know I really respect your opinion. But, kindly, shut the fuck up.”

Elena’s eyes widen, and she takes a step back. “Ah. Sorry. Of course. I’ll go grab the...”

“Nah, it’s fine. I’ll do it. Sorry to wake you this early in the morning.” I put an arm around her shoulders and kiss her scarred cheek. “It’s cool. I know you’re looking out for me.”

I swallow the simmering anger. I do know that Elena’s looking out for me. She’s one of the few people who does. But she doesn’t get to decide who I fuck, who I share with, who I...

I let go of her and head downstairs, not caring if I wake anybody else in the club. Most of the girls are locked in anyway, and Donny and Paul won't show up for at least another few hours.

The supply closet's a fucking mess, but I find the pregnancy tests. I stand there reading the instructions for a few moments. It really is as straightforward as on TV. Pee on the stick. Wait. Celebrate the stick color.

My phone buzzes yet again as I grab some bottles of water for Vanessa, but I don't bother to check. It's kind of fun torturing Damien like this too.

When I return to Vanessa's room, she's stopped heaving, but she's still sitting next to the toilet.

"Hey, Mama," I say. I hand her one of the water bottles. "Feeling better?"

"A little bit," she says wearily, taking the bottle from me. She eyes it for a moment before opening the cap, taking a very small sip and closing her eyes. "Remind me never to eat from that place again, Giulio. I don't think I've ever had food poisoning before, and I'd rather never have it again."

Either she's that naive, or she's trying very hard to fool herself.

I squat down to her level and ruffle her hair. "Sure. No more Don Pablo's. But before we blame poor Pablo for his atrocious food safety standards, why don't you pee on this? I'd hate to slander his cooking for no reason."

I hold up the pregnancy test for her.

Vanessa stares at it, then blanches. She edges away from me, shaking her head. "No. I mean, I'm a little late, but things have been... stressful. There's no way I could be pregnant."

"Denial isn't just a river in Egypt," I sing-song, but I'm unrelenting. "Pee on the stick, Vanessa."

With trembling hands, she takes the pregnancy test from me. She stares at the box, not seeming to really absorb anything she's reading. "Let me brush my teeth first," she says

quickly, grabbing onto the sink to help pull herself up. “My mouth tastes horrible. Fish does not taste good coming up.”

“It really doesn’t,” I agree. I get up too, leaning against the wall to watch her. It’s strange how even something as simple as brushing her teeth looks sexy when she does it.

Well, it helps that she’s still naked. I grin, giving in to temptation and wrapping my arms around her from behind. Vanessa flinches, but she doesn’t stop brushing her teeth.

“I know what you’re hoping for,” I murmur against her ear. “But imagine just how happy we’d all be if it goes my way. A tiny life inside you. Showing off your fertility for Damien. Showing us just how perfect you are.” I rub her belly gently.

Damien’s pregnancy kink really is rubbing off on me.

She gargles with the mouthwash, and I wait as patiently as I can. This is a big moment for her, after all, and I’m willing to give her a few minutes—especially since I can drive Damien absolutely nuts in the meantime while he waits for me to text back.

Finally, she can’t stop stalling anymore. She spits out the mouthwash, and I grin at her. “Ready, Mama?”

From the look in her eyes, she’s not ready at all, but she nods. She opens the cardboard packaging, pulling out the plastic-wrapped test with shaking hands, and sits down on the toilet. “Can you... not watch?” she asks, her voice as tremulous as her hands.

I raise an eyebrow at her. “And risk you peeing to the side? Nah. Also, you are very, very cute when you’re all red with humiliation.”

“Giulio...” she says with a bit of a whine in her voice. It’s cute, how she thinks she’s going to sway me, and I grin at her. Her shoulders slump in resignation, and she unwraps the test and stares at it. She swallows hard then slowly positions it between her legs.

Nothing happens.

“I can’t pee with you watching me,” she says after a pause, even though this wouldn’t be the first time. “I have a shy bladder.”

“Want me to go over there and push down on it? Force everything out the door?” I suggest, wagging my eyebrows. “Damien’s got me on board with the pregnancy thing, and I really will get into watersports if that’s actually your thing.”

“It’s not!” she says quickly, her cheeks going red. “Just... give me a minute.” She closes her eyes, like she’s trying to pretend I’m not there. But from the way she just keeps blushing harder and harder, she’s well aware of my presence.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity, she starts to pee. I make sure she doesn’t angle the stick away, and I’m more eager than expected to see what the result is going to be. I don’t want to get my hopes up, but...

She finishes, and she sets the test on the sink.

“Now we wait,” I say cheerfully. “Wanna ride me while it does its thing?”

Vanessa glares at me, tears sparkling again in the corners of her eyes. “You know I don’t,” she snaps.

“You sure?” I grab her wrist and pull her into an embrace, settling my arms around her waist. Since we’re the same height, I can easily bring our lips together.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket, again.

“That’s Damien,” I tell her, nibbling at her lip. “He’s been pestering me ever since I asked him when your last period was. Think he suspects?”

“Probably,” she mutters. To my surprise, she doesn’t pull away from me, even though she’s tense in my arms. “If you don’t answer him, he’ll probably just show up. He’s insane about this stuff.”

“He just really wants a baby.” I squeeze her ass gently. “Did he tell you, he used to have a huge family? I met his sister once. She’s a fucking bitch.”

Vanessa shakes her head, looking a little queasy. “I don’t want a huge family,” she says quickly, but she pauses, then asks, “What happened? He *used to*?”

Yeah, Vanessa pretends she hates us, but she always wants to know more about us too. I can always see how eager she is for the scraps of information we drop.

“I don’t know all the details. But Damien’s mom was raising four kids on her own. Damien’s the oldest. And I guess they needed money, so Damien found a great way to make some money.” I kiss her again, running my tongue along the seam of her lip.

She stubbornly keeps her mouth shut.

“How does a sixteen-year-old make enough money to help support five people, Vanessa?” I prod.

She hesitates. “Probably... not things that are too great, morally,” she says reluctantly after a pause. Her eyes flick toward the pregnancy test, and she shifts restlessly in my arms before looking back at me. “But wouldn’t they be grateful?”

“I don’t know, man.” I shrug. “Sometimes you house and feed somebody, make sure they get all the comforts they need, and they still end up using contraceptive sponges.”

Vanessa glowers at me again. “That’s not a fair comparison, and you know it.”

I laugh and kiss her on the nose. “Sure it is. Anyway, Damien’s family decided, after years of taking his money, that he was a violent, no-good loser and they didn’t want him around. Fucking hypocrites. If Damien didn’t still care about them, you know I would have... Well, I wouldn’t want to scare you.” I reach out with one arm for the pregnancy test. “Time’s up. Let’s see if we won the lottery.”

Yeah, she can figure out what I’m getting at, as long as she’s not still delusional about the sort of shit her old man was up to. But more importantly, I want to know if I’m going to see double lines or just one.

Her shoulders slump, but she nods. She doesn’t look as I grab the test, though, like seeing it will somehow delay the

inevitable.

Despite all my joking, I'm still a little shocked when I see the two lines.

"Oh," I say quietly.

It's real. She really is pregnant.

I don't know how to react. A strange whirl of emotions bubble inside me, and I want to kiss her and shove her away. Call Damien and Slayer, or ignore them for a week.

I want to hurt somebody, and I don't know why.

But not Vanessa.

"Here," I say, handing it to her.

She takes it, but she doesn't look, not at first. She's trying to read my expression, but I'm too confused for her to be able to tell what I'm thinking. Hell, I don't know what I'm thinking.

Finally, she looks down, and her blush from earlier completely fades as she blanches. Tears start to quickly slide down her cheeks, and the test falls from her hand and clatters to the floor as she shakes her head. "It's wrong," she says hoarsely. "Get another one. This one can't be right."

Her tears finally shake something loose in me. I grip her chin and kiss her hard, on her lips first, then her cheeks, up to her eyes to kiss away some of the tears.

"We'll get you a doctor's appointment," I say. "To make sure." I let go of her to pick up the pregnancy test. "Hold it up in front of you, Mama. I want to take a picture. Slayer and Damien will want to know, too."

Vanessa shakes her head and curls her hands into fists. "No. They don't have to know. It isn't right." The tears keep falling, etching lines into her face.

I try to push the pregnancy test at her anyway, but she ends up sliding to the floor. Finally, I drop the test on her lap and tap her chin.

"Look up at me, Mama," I say, with a bit too much bite.

She flinches at my tone, but with tears running down her face, she looks up at me so I can take the picture. She looks miserable, and that's not the photo I want our kid to see one day.

“Smile for me. Those are tears of joy, right? We don't want our baby thinking they aren't wanted.”

Vanessa swallows hard, but she puts on a pretty decent smile.

I snap the photo and send it to both Damien and Slayer. It might take them a while to notice the pregnancy test on her lap, but I'll let them figure it out for themselves.

That done, I put my phone away and go sit next to Vanessa. I take her hand in mine, just holding it, trying to figure out what to say. What to do.

“Y'know,” I finally say, after some minutes of silence. “It doesn't feel real.”

“No,” she says, her voice almost inaudible. “It doesn't.” She glances at me, trying to wipe at her tears. “What... What do we do now?”

“Dunno. Damien will probably have a full plan in place.” I snort in amusement. “Not probably. Definitely.”

All sorts of scenarios are running through my head, followed by more flashes of anger. I tense up, trying to figure out why I'm suddenly so fucking mad, until Vanessa whimpers.

“Giulio. You're hurting me,” she says, tugging at her hand.

I stare at our hands, and even then, it doesn't feel like it's *my* hand that's squeezing so tight.

But I let go, and Vanessa immediately pulls her arm close to her chest.

“Hey,” I say, my voice flat. “Just so you know. If I find out you've done anything to compromise this... If you try to end this pregnancy on purpose...”

Vanessa stares at me like she can't believe what I just said. "What? No! Never!" she says immediately. "I mean... I know I tried to prevent it, but..." She shakes her head. "No. I'd never." She touches her stomach, resting her palm on it.

I don't feel like myself when I reach for her, push her down to the floor. I cover her almost completely with my body. Her eyes are wide with fear, but I simply lean down to kiss her.

I keep kissing her, on her mouth, her cheeks, her neck, back to her mouth. I don't do anything else, simply keeping her in place with my body while I try to get rid of whatever this emotion rising inside me is.

Vanessa shudders beneath me, but shaking, she wraps her arms around me and tentatively kisses back. She relaxes into my touch despite the discomfort of our position, and she seems just as desperate for answers as I am.

VANESSA

Giulio's phone buzzes again on the nightstand.

I'd like to blame the sound for why I can't sleep, even in his huge, comfortable bed and warm duvet, but the truth is that I wouldn't be able to sleep either way. The truth is just too much, too immediate, and I can't wrap my head around it.

I'm pregnant.

I always thought I'd have a family, but it had never included a mafia boss and his consigliere and his pet detective. It had been normal, in my mind, with someone else who worked an eight to five job and had the weekends off so we could spend time with our beautiful children.

There will be no peaceful life for this child. It will be a lonely one, and the only people around will be those with cruel streaks a mile wide.

And me.

It's more important than ever that I play along with this farce, because I can't risk them taking this baby away from me. They'd made it perfectly clear that they're willing to lock me up until I give birth, then take the child away, and even though I'm not ready to have a baby... I'm ready to lose one even less.

The thought makes me feel cold inside. Giulio had insinuated that I might try to sabotage the pregnancy, and I'd been horrified by the thought. I've always staunchly defended

any woman's right to an abortion. I know it isn't a baby yet, just a few cells growing into one, but...

It's mine. I can't do that to my own child.

But things go wrong all the time. What if something does happen? Will I feel relieved or devastated? I just don't know.

Giulio is out cold next to me, oblivious to the world, and I want to elbow him just so I'm not the only one awake. At the same time, I feel like I need to be alone.

Buzz.

It has to be Damien. I don't know what Giulio sent the first time, but it's had his phone going off nonstop since—sometimes small buzzes from texts, sometimes longer ones indicating a phone call.

I'd feel bad for Damien if it wasn't, well, *Damien*. He deserves to sweat it out a little. His fantasy is coming to life, and...

All right, so I do feel a little bad for him, but it's not like I'm going to grab Giulio's phone and try to unlock it to send a message to him.

The phone finally goes quiet, but that doesn't give me any relief. The sun peeks through the curtain windows, and one sliver of light crosses over Giulio's jaw. Asleep like this, he almost could be the handsome man I picked up at a bar.

I half-sob, half-laugh, at the thought. As if I'd ever gone to a bar on my own, as if I'd ever been bold enough to exchange numbers with a stranger. I remember my eighteenth birthday, when my sister had insisted we go out to celebrate in style.

In the end, she'd been the one to find some fun for the evening, and I'd had to take a cab home on my own.

Great. Now my eyes are tearing up at thoughts of Lucia. Is she going to get to meet her future niece or nephew? Will I have to explain to my child why they have no close relatives?

The doorbell startles me out of my thoughts.

I hold my breath, hoping whoever it is will go away, but it's followed by loud knocking.

"Fuck," Giulio mutters, pulling me closer. His eyes stay closed. "I'm still sleeping, Damien."

"It's not..." I start, but who else would it be?

The knocking stops, and a few seconds later, I hear Damien call out, "Giulio? I know you're here."

"I'm not!" Giulio shouts back. "Don't you have meetings? With... what's-his-face?"

"He's not going to go away," I point out. "You've been ghosting him all morning." But I don't call out to let Damien know we're in here. I'm not ready for him to find out yet.

I'm not ready to see the look in his eyes when he realizes his dreams are coming true. It's going to be as thrilling for him as it is traumatic for me. I squeeze my eyes tightly closed, trying to ignore the racing of my heart.

Damien appears in the bedroom doorway, and even in the dark, he looks disheveled. He holds up his phone. Although I can't see what's on the screen, I can take an educated guess.

"Is this real?" he asks Giulio.

He isn't asking me, of course.

Giulio shrugs, although I'm not sure Damien can see the gesture. "Dunno. How accurate are those tests?"

That's a question I don't know the answer to, honestly. I let them continue to talk about me like I'm not there, and it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth as I'm reminded yet again of just what role I play in their lives.

I'm just here to make babies for them. Any times they've been nice to me have just been a means to an end. Now that I might be pregnant, it's like I don't even exist anymore.

"False positives are rare," Damien says, his voice uneven. "Only in cases of... recent miscarriages, or fertility medications..."

Giulio sighs and buries his head against my shoulder. “Well, Mama? Did you miscarry recently? You been taking any meds we don’t know about?”

Even the idea of a miscarriage frightens me. If Giulio sent me on a wild chase through the woods and let Slayer cut me up for using contraceptive sponges, I can only imagine... Scratch that, I can’t even imagine what he’d do to me. His creativity knows no bounds, and I’m realizing that it can always get worse.

I shake my head. “N-no,” I stammer. “Just the prenatal vitamins every day.”

Damien makes his way over to us and sits down on the bed beside me. His gaze is so intense, it feels like he wants to devour me whole.

He settles for running his knuckles down the side of my face, so gentle I could almost confuse it for a loving gesture.

“We... We can’t get our hopes up,” Damien says. “The first few weeks are the most volatile. Things happen.”

I still don’t even want to think about what would happen if I had a miscarriage. Giulio would probably blame me, and the aftermath would be horrible. “I’ll do everything right,” I swear fervently, hoping desperately that they’ll believe me. “I won’t do anything to risk the child.” I glance at Giulio, my throat dry as I whisper, “I promise.”

His lips twitch into a semblance of a smile, but he’s been acting strange all morning. He’s even more unreadable than usual.

“Okay, so. Set up all the doctor appointments.” Giulio yawns and kisses my neck. “And answer my phone for me, would you? I bet Slayer’s been texting a bunch too.”

Damien doesn’t quite roll his eyes, but he does reach for Giulio’s phone.

Then he snorts. “Slayer says the picture of Vanessa is hot. I don’t think he noticed.”

That somehow doesn't surprise me at all, but I don't make that comment aloud. Instead, I ask in a small voice, "Are you going to tell him?" Will he come over, too? Will they all make me feel like some animal that's been successfully bred?

"Yeah, tell him. We should celebrate. Ugh, what time is it? I don't actually have any meetings today, do I?" Giulio's hand is suddenly underneath my shirt, stroking my belly. "Got my queen all knocked up. My two loyal generals deserve a reward for protecting her so well... or something, we'll workshop it."

I don't want to play his games. In a way, it stings to know that he still has to play pretend. Isn't he excited, like Damien? Didn't he say he wanted this? He's still acting so oddly, and I don't know what to make of it.

But at least they're not talking about putting me on a breeding bench and fucking me senseless, so there's that. At least if I'm his beloved queen, they'll be gentle with me. They won't risk hurting the baby.

The baby.

My baby.

Damien taps on the phone to send the text, then lies down next to me. His hand joins Giulio's on my belly.

"You're so beautiful," Damien says to me, stroking slowly. "You're going to make such a good mother, Vanessa. I know you are. Not like..."

But he trails off.

Giulio snorts, then kisses my shoulder. "Not like all those other shallow bitches out there, right? Careful, Damien. Someone might think you're a misogynist." He finally opens his eyes properly, grinning at me. "Hey, remember, I asked you once? Where we all fall on the creep scale? Did you reconsider your rankings?"

I don't actually remember what rankings I gave them. "Your dad's still the ten," I say, a little darkly. "Then the rest of you are tied for nine."

“I don’t know if I got upgraded or downgraded.” Giulio sits up abruptly. “Okay. I’m gonna shower before Slayer gets here. And make breakfast, I guess. Fuck, do we have to hire a cook now? I hate having people in my space.”

“The townhouse is still vacant,” Damien suggests. “It’s not that far from everything, and it would give us plenty of space.”

“But my pets are all here,” Giulio whines. “And you set up the super awesome nursery at your place.”

Damien’s eyes widen in surprise. “What? You know?”

“You really think I never once peeked inside?” Giulio laughs and claps Damien on the shoulder. “Okay, you can keep cuddling our expectant mama. And think about our celebratory fuck; it is way too early for me to get creative.”

He goes to the bathroom and closes the door. The sound of the shower soon follows.

I look up at Damien, unsure of what to say to him all of a sudden. This is what he’s wanted since he first laid eyes on me, apparently, and now that he has it...

“What’s going to happen now?” I ask, hating how small and trembling my voice is.

“We’ll take care of you,” Damien says, running his hand along my side. “Watch as you grow and swell. You won’t have to worry about anything.”

“But I don’t want to just...” I bite my lip, trying to figure out what to say. “Are you still going to let me help at Ntimacy? I’m dying being cooped up all day, Damien,” I admit. “The accounting puzzle is the only thing that keeps my mind occupied.”

Damien stares me in the eyes for a long, uncomfortable moment, before leaning in to kiss me.

At first, I freeze, then I remember I need to go along with this as much as I can. I kiss him back tentatively, wanting him to agree to let me do something of use so I’m not just sitting around all day.

When he pulls away, he nods. “You can’t stay at Ntimacy. That’s not a good environment for an expectant mother. But I’ll get you a personal protection detail, and we can work out a schedule for you so you get the exercise—and mental stimulation—you need.”

Exercise sounds wonderful. I’ve gotten soft in my time in isolation, and while I know I’ll need to be careful, expectant mothers still exercise until the very end of their pregnancy. Having something to think about, something to do... It’s so simple, but it sounds like bliss. I don’t know how I’ll feel about having a protection detail, and I imagine it’ll be just as stifling as it sounds, but I don’t want to argue. I’ll take it if it means I get to go out and *do* a few things.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice rough with sheer gratitude. “I don’t mind being at Ntimacy to do the books...” The girls there might hate me, but the inconsistency in the books is driving me crazy. I wish I’d gotten to do the forensic accounting class. “Do you think...” I hesitate then shake my head, not daring to ask.

“What is it?” Damien prods. “I’ll do what I can, within reason.”

I’m still trying to figure out how to word my request when the door buzzer goes off. Damien sighs loudly and gets out of bed, leaving me alone as he answers the intercom to let Slayer up.

I can only barely make out the words, but I do recognize Slayer’s voice. The call cuts off, but Damien doesn’t return immediately. He waits in the living room, and before long, there’s a quiet knock on the door. I can hear it open, and the two of them talk for a moment before Damien leads Slayer into the bedroom.

“Hey, Mama,” Slayer greets me, just like Giulio always does. It sounds different from him, though. Rough, a little apprehensive, but... excited, maybe? I can’t tell. “How’re you feeling?”

I sit up in the bed, pulling the blankets up over my breasts. “Tired,” I admit. “I’ve been up since around six. Giulio went

back to bed, but I couldn't sleep." I eye Damien, trying to decide if I can poke at him or not. I decide to give it a shot. "And someone wouldn't stop texting and calling."

Damien, in his usual deadpan voice, says, "Giulio wasn't responding."

"Giulio was sleeping," I say. "Guess he was too tired to hear it."

"Where's he at?" Slayer asks, coming to sit at the edge of the bed.

I point to the bathroom, where the water has cut off. "Showering."

A few seconds later, Giulio walks out, toweling his hair, completely naked.

"Yo," Giulio says, waving to Slayer. "Some detective you are. Didn't even notice the big fucking clue I sent."

"Can't say I was expecting it to happen so soon," Slayer admits. "I thought it would at least be another few months or so. I just thought you were sharing the goods for an early morning treat. You're lucky it didn't wake me up on my day off."

"I bet you were already at the gym, getting all hot and sweaty." Giulio walks over and wraps his arms around Slayer's shoulders from behind, stopping just shy of kissing his cheek.

Slayer rolls his eyes, but he doesn't argue or even move away.

"Which of us is gonna show Vanessa a good time first? I think she needs to know just how much we appreciate her," Giulio says.

Damien's already unbuttoning his shirt. "I..." he trails off, looks at me, then says, "Who would you like first, Vanessa?"

None of them. I really want to curl up and cry, to get these strange feelings out of me. I want to be left alone for a little while to process, but they're not going to give that to me. "But the baby..." I trail off. "Shouldn't I... not?"

Giulio chuckles and bites at Slayer's shoulder through his shirt. "That's cute. Damien, weren't you saying how so many women love being fucked while pregnant?"

Slayer shifts uncomfortably, and I'm surprised to see that he's still not pulling away. His attention is all on me, though, even though Giulio is all over Slayer. He finally shrugs Giulio off to move a little closer to me.

"Yes," Damien answers, pulling his shirt off. "There's no reason not to have sex. It poses no risk to the baby and can even help with pain sometimes."

I stare at his hairy chest. I know what Damien wants. He wants to be first. He wants me to choose him, probably so he can pretend it's his baby. He's harder to take, but the other two will be easier after him... I'd usually pick Slayer first just so I could get used to taking them, but I have so many strange feelings right now.

"Damien," I say quietly, knowing Giulio will be happy with the decision too—he's always happy when Damien's happy. "I'll take Damien first."

A very small smile crosses Damien's lips, the only hint that he's happy with this.

"Good choice," Giulio says as he crawls across the bed toward me. He pulls at the blanket until I'm forced to relinquish it, then settles in next to me. "You always gotta start with the best, right? Damien's nice, thick cock, ramming into you, filling you up. Do you think he's got more cum, too?" Then he laughs. "Doesn't matter, between the three of us, we'll get you completely filled up."

"Just in case she isn't really preggers," Slayer says. Damien gives him a look, but Slayer only shrugs. "Hey, gotta make sure it really took. You haven't taken her to the doctor yet, have you?" Without waiting for an answer, he gets up and moves to my other side. He touches my chin, tilting my head up so he can kiss me.

I don't know what to make of all of this. They're being strange, all of them, oddly gentle and affectionate. I don't

expect it to last, but I intend to take advantage of it while I can. I just need to learn more about them, about their tells, if I want to get through this more easily.

“Here, Mama, sit between my legs,” Giulio says, pulling me closer and kissing my neck. “I’ll hold your thighs open for Damien.”

“Lose the shirt first,” Slayer says, tugging at the shirt I’m wearing. “We don’t want to neglect her nipples.”

I obediently lift my arms so Slayer can pull the long pajama shirt off, and even though I’m used to being naked in front of them, I still feel exposed now. They’re all looking at my *pregnant* body.

Damien makes a strange sound and reaches out to touch my breast. “These will swell, soon. Fill up with milk. They’ll get tender and soft and…” He groans loudly and pulls me in for a kiss, so I’m bent awkwardly, with Giulio’s arms wrapping around my stomach to keep me from going too far.

Slayer’s hand gets between them, going straight for my other breast so he can tweak my nipple.

It’s overwhelming, feeling all three of them paying attention to me like this. Usually, they simply use me and leave me there—sometimes falling asleep with me, sometimes cuddling me, but usually without this precious softness.

I can’t help but wonder if being pregnant is really going to be so terrible if they’re going to treat me like this.

I return Damien’s kiss with a little more vigor than I thought I would, surprising even myself. He only pulls away to shed his pants and briefs, then he climbs onto the bed. He cups my cheek in his hand and kisses me again, and I kiss back, squirming as all three of them touch me.

Giulio kisses my jaw, neck, and shoulders, wherever he can get his mouth on. I can feel his hand rubbing slow circles over my belly.

I can also feel how hard his cock is against my ass, although he isn’t doing anything with it.

“Lean back,” Giulio mumbles, mouth against my ear. “Spread your legs wide. I’ll hold you while Damien takes you.”

There’s no mention of any roleplay now, and I don’t bring it up. I don’t think I need it, not at this point. If they start getting rough, maybe I’ll prompt them, but for now, it simply feels good in a way I’d have never expected.

I squirm down a little and spread my legs, feeling awkward. This angle isn’t going to be good for Damien to thrust into me, but they’ll reposition me like a doll if it doesn’t work.

Slayer’s hand slides between my legs, dutifully reporting, “She’s soaked. Should be able to take even your monster, Damien. Guess she likes being treated this way as much as she likes us just fucking her.”

My face heats up with embarrassment. Just once, I’d like to be bone dry and not feed into their egos. I don’t remember my body being like this before I met the three of them—not that I’d been having so much sex to begin with.

I end up with my legs spread out over Giulio’s thighs, his legs bent at the knee to keep me open. Damien gets between my legs, running his own hands over my pussy for a few seconds.

He isn’t stoic now, but I almost wish he were. The open wonder in his eyes feels worse.

Giulio kisses the side of my jaw again. “Well, Damien? You gonna take your turn, or are Slayer and I gonna get blue balls waiting for you? Poor Vanessa’s already desperate too.”

I want to protest that I’m not desperate, but the way Damien expertly runs his fingers up and down my slit makes me want more, and I let out a soft moan.

Slayer is playing with my breasts again, though it’s hard for him to do much with all three of them lavishing affection on me. “You gonna drink it?” he asks. “When she gets milk?”

Damien groans loudly again. “Yes. Not too much. It’s for the baby. But…” He pulls his hand away and brings his fingers

to Giulio's lips.

Giulio sucks on them eagerly, licking my fluids away.

That shouldn't be hot, either, but my breath hitches watching Giulio run his tongue over Damien's fingers.

Slayer considers for a moment, squeezing one of my nipples. "It'll be fun seeing milk spill out over my fingers when I touch her like this," he comments in a low tone that leaves me feeling oddly breathless. It's... strange. Strange in a good way? I don't know.

I tilt my hips up, trying to signal to Damien that I'm ready without embarrassing myself by asking, by begging. But I want to feel him inside of me, filling me completely. He's safest, since he can't make me pregnant...

But I realize all over again that it's too late, and I really have no idea what to think about that. Sex, then. I'll think about sex. I turn my head, and it's Slayer's turn to take my lips in a rough, demanding kiss.

With Slayer distracting me, I don't pay attention to Damien, until suddenly I feel his cock rubbing against my cunt. It's so hot and hard, and my body shudders in anticipation.

Giulio's fingers curl into my side, pressing down a little harder than necessary. "Go on," he says. "Do it, Damien. I want to feel her slide against me when you thrust."

I shudder. I want to feel it, too. I want to feel Giulio's cock against my back, I want to know Slayer's hard for me, I want to feel Damien slide into me until he's completely buried inside of me. I want him to thrust and get my g-spot in a way that he's the best at, and I want... I want to come, and to forget all the rest.

Don't I deserve that much?

Damien lines up, his gaze fixed on me, and slides in. He uses Giulio's knees to steady himself, and somehow pushes both mine and Giulio's legs wider in the process.

I really am completely open for Damien.

He's so large, and that first penetration burns a little, but soon I get even wetter and all that's left is that feeling of absolute, intense fullness. I accidentally clench, and that draws out a moan from both me and Damien.

I'm unable to keep from squirming, and I fumble until my hand finds Giulio's, where it's still resting on my stomach. It startles me, briefly bringing me back to reality, before I dismiss it again and let myself be lost in the pleasure Damien's cock is bringing me. All three of them are touching me, kissing me, so quiet but for our moans and deep breathing.

For the first time, I really feel... special.

"How's it feel?" Giulio asks, and I'm not sure if he's talking to me or Damien. "Our child, growing inside you. You've made Damien the happiest man on earth right now. Slayer's ecstatic too, yeah?"

My cheeks are flushed, and I only blush harder at Giulio's words. I don't even know why. They're not even particularly erotic, or even humiliating, but they strike a chord inside of me. "It feels good," I whisper. This whole experience feels divine, and I can't even think of any other words to describe it.

"I am, yeah," Slayer says. He sounds a little puzzled. He shrugs, though, as if going along with it, and keeps playing with my breasts. Each little pinch and tug makes me writhe, my body clutching Damien's cock even harder.

I'm so close to coming that I can barely stand it. "Please," I plead, not even knowing who I'm begging to. I just need more.

Damien pulls out almost completely, then slides in again at an excruciatingly slow pace. Teasing me, making me feel the emptiness and fullness in equal measure, so that I'm left keening for something that is just out of reach.

"How many times do you think we can make her come?" Giulio's finger dips into my belly button. "One orgasm for each of us? Or should we keep her on the edge until we're all finished?"

“No!” I whimper. “Please don’t make me wait!” I’m so close. I just need a little more. If Damien will just keep it up for a little longer... I wrap my arms around him, trying to pull him closer so I can kiss him, so I can try to tempt him to keep going until I find my release.

Giulio huffs a small laugh against my shoulder, but Damien bends down further to meet my lips, and that has his cock sliding deeper inside of me. His next few thrusts are shallow thanks to the awkward angle, but they’re faster, and I can feel the pleasure rising inside me.

I’m so close.

“Damien,” I whisper against his lips, clutching him close. “I’m... Please, I’m almost there.”

He chuckles softly. “Three orgasms is a lot to handle, Vanessa. Are you sure you want it?”

“Yes,” I say instantly, before I can second guess myself.

Damien kisses me one more time, then pulls away to sit upright. I want to complain, except he slams into me, fast and deep, and I cry out at the intensity of the sensation. My hands clutch at Giulio, and I turn my head so I can kiss Slayer again, all while Damien brutally fucks me and makes my entire body pulse with need.

It doesn’t take much more than that. Damien knows how to use his cock, and I cry out against Slayer’s mouth. Slayer only kisses me harder as I shudder, as my orgasm sweeps over me and drags me under, leaving me spasming and clutching at Damien’s cock. It’s enough to make him spill into me, and for once, it just feels good.

There’s nothing to worry about anymore, after all.

Without waiting for me or Damien to settle, Slayer says, “C’mon, move. My turn.”

Damien growls but pulls out, moving to sit next to me and Giulio. Slayer takes the vacated spot. I expect him to simply shove it in, but instead, he starts fingering my hole.

“Fuck, she’s all red and puffy now. And sloppy. You look so hot like this, Vanessa.” He keeps touching me, and I’m still so sensitive that I’m not sure if I want him to make me come again or to stop.

I grab hold of his wrist, but he only smirks at me as he sees the indecision in my gaze.

“Just enjoy it,” he murmurs. “Let us take care of you.”

Before long, I’m on the edge, writhing and pleading, but he doesn’t let me come. Instead, he carefully gets on top of me and slowly slides inside of me. I wail, hating that I’ve been denied, but his cock feels good inside me, too. It’s easy for him to fuck me, with Damien having stretched me and left me full of his come, and he takes his time at first before picking up his own pace.

I gasp and writhe, and my second orgasm hits me almost all at once. The pleasure comes in waves, again and again as he keeps fucking me. I feel like I can hardly stand it, but he’s not ready to stop. Warmth, tightness, it doesn’t matter—he’s fucking me hard, but he’s not ready to let loose, and I don’t know how long I can handle it.

I turn my head and blindly kiss whoever I can reach. Giulio, at first, but Damien gets in there too. At one point all of our noses bump against each other, a strange three-person kiss, all while Slayer keeps driving into me, torturing my oversensitive flesh.

“Fuck,” Giulio gasps. “Hurry up, Slayer, I’m gonna blow before I get inside her at this rate.”

Slayer laughs, a low sound that’s somehow sexy and rich all at the same time, but he does pick up his pace even more. When he comes, it’s even more intense than before, like I can feel every sensation inside of me. Damien had felt good, and this felt good too, but I’m so aware of everything. Every drop of cum, every twitch and thrust...

I don’t know if I can stand another round.

Slayer pulls out slowly and drags his messy cock over my cunt once he’s out. I whimper, all of me so sensitive now that

even that sensation feels a little too much.

And there's still Giulio.

His cock is still digging into my back, leaving wet smears behind. His arms tighten around me for a second, and he bites my neck. I don't have any leverage in this position, but I prepare myself for him to slide me up so he can impale me from behind.

But he surprises me by lowering his legs and maneuvering me onto the bed. He gets between my legs, looming over me, and there's still that strange expression in his face.

I reach up to brush some of the sweat-soaked hair off his forehead.

His lips twitch with an abortive smile. "Hi, Mama."

"Hi," I say softly, suddenly feeling shy. I don't know why. It doesn't make any sense. After being thoroughly debauched by Damien and Slayer, there should be no room left for *shyness*, but there it is anyway. "I'd call you Daddy, but that's just a little too weird for me," I can't help but joke, trying to take some of the strangeness out of the moment.

Giulio laughs, his smile making him look so handsome and *young*. He's always playing the joker, but there's a hardness to him that is gone now. I could almost think he's happy.

"You can call Damien *Daddy*. I bet he'd love that." Giulio winks at me, then grips my thighs under the knees. "Okay, I want a kiss from everybody, then I'm going to make Vanessa come all over again."

Damien snorts and leans in to give Giulio that kiss he wants. It isn't a long kiss, but Giulio opens his mouth for Damien and groans in protest when Damien pulls away. Slayer looks a little uncomfortable, but he leans in, too, grabbing Giulio by the hair and kissing him fiercely.

"Don't get used to it," Slayer growls. Then he turns to me and kisses me, too, and I'm unable to stop myself from kissing him back.

Next, it's my turn, and I kiss Giulio sweetly before admitting, "I don't think I can handle another climax, Giulio."

He grins against my lips. "I don't think you'll be able to stop yourself from coming, the way I'm going to fuck you."

I shudder, the anticipation both intoxicating and terrifying all at once. I look up at him, and for a moment, it's like only the two of us exist. I know Damien and Slayer are nearby, but they aren't reaching out, aren't touching. They're just watching, and though their gazes are hard to ignore, I focus on Giulio anyway.

Giulio kisses me one more time before sitting up and lining himself up. "One of you, play with her clit. And I want to see the other one sucking on her tits."

That's about the only warning I get before Giulio slides in, smooth and easy. Damien and Slayer have left me so loose and open that I couldn't resist Giulio even if I tried. They obey him, just like they always do, and I'm a little disappointed to have the bubble I've been in with Giulio popped like this.

Giulio has that charisma about him that makes people want to do his bidding, and even Damien and Slayer aren't exempt from it. If anything, it's even stronger with them.

Damien leans down, taking one of my nipples into his mouth, and I let out a startled little cry as Slayer's fingers delve back between my thighs. I feel so full, and so overwhelmed, and there's no way I'm going to be able to resist coming again. But I'm also so oversensitive that it feels like it's going to be painful.

"No," I beg, for entirely different reasons than usual. "It's... It's too much, Giulio!"

"Enjoy it," Giulio answers, smiling playfully. "Fuck, you feel amazing, Mama." He thrusts a few times, then pulls out completely to rub his cock along my cunt... and over Slayer's fingers on my clit.

Slayer rolls his eyes and lets go to give Giulio's cock a brief squeeze. "Thought you were going to fuck her 'til she comes?"

“Yep,” Giulio answers, moving back into place. I’m not sure if the small reprieve was good, or if it was just an added layer of torture, letting up only to drive back in deeper than before.

Damien switches to my other breast, though his hand cups the one he’d just abandoned, like he just can’t stop touching me. He nips and licks and blows on my nipple, making me shudder. I can’t handle the sensations, between his touches and Slayer’s fingers finding my clit again, and Giulio’s cock filling me so perfectly like I’m fucking Goldilocks and have finally found the perfect cock for my body.

I clutch desperately at the sheets, trying to meet Giulio’s thrusts, clenching around him. I want to feel him come inside me just as much as I need it all to be over. My head is fuzzy with pleasure, and I can’t stop myself from making incoherent noises.

“Fuck,” Giulio says, stopping completely, fully seated inside me. “Tell me you’re close, Mama.”

I choke back a sob, though I’m unable to stop squirming and writhing beneath him. “I’m... I’m close. But it’s so much, Giulio, it’s too much.”

My words only make Damien and Slayer double down on their efforts, bringing such blinding pleasure that I’m almost not sure if I need Giulio to keep fucking me to come.

Giulio starts up again anyway, this time with slow, rolling movements that are tortuous in how they drag his cock against my inner walls. “Clench up for me. I want to feel you ripple around me. Just *let go*,” Giulio orders, words hoarse.

I shudder, my breaths coming fast and hard, and I bite my bottom lip. It’s so much. It’s too much. But his words reach something inside of me that’s primal and needy, and it’s more than I can bear. With all of them touching me, I can’t help it: I come, and I come hard, tightening around Giulio’s cock as he continues those terrible, perfect movements.

Giulio lets out a strangled cry of his own, speeding up his thrusts until I feel his heat flood me.

He doesn't stop thrusting though, not until my heaving breaths slow down and his cock begins to soften.

Giulio slips out and slowly lowers my legs to the bed. Then he wraps his arms around Slayer's shoulders and kisses him, shockingly brutal. Slayer groans, and through my dazed, half-lidded eyes, I can see him bite down on Giulio's lip. He doesn't pull away, though, again burying his hand in Giulio's hair and forcing him to stay close.

Damien's nearby, and when I turn my head, he's there to brush hair from my face, to pepper kisses all over my lips and cheeks. "You're perfect... Mama," he says softly.

Giulio finally breaks his kiss with Slayer. "She is perfect." He crawls over to us and kisses Damien on the cheek, running his hand all over Damien's hairy chest.

After a brief kiss from Damien, Giulio stretches out next to me and pulls me close. "Our perfect woman."

"Yeah, I guess she's not bad," Slayer echoes, smirking at me. He flops down onto the bed next to me, putting me between him and Giulio and leaving Damien out of the equation entirely.

Damien rolls his eyes and takes the spot on Giulio's other side. He stretches his hand over Giulio's body to place it on my belly. "I can't wait to see you get bigger," Damien says. "You're going to look so good with your belly all stretched out..."

"She gonna stay barefoot in the kitchen, popping out Jules's babies?" Slayer asks lazily, closing his eyes.

Some of my satisfied mood melts away, and I'm suddenly aware of how sore I am, and that I'm lying in a very wet spot.

"We'll figure out the logistics later," Giulio answers. His fingers twine with Damien's on my belly. "Our condos are fine for now."

I don't know how I forgot for just a little while what kind of monsters they are. But even now, I can't help the way my body feels, wrung out in the best of ways. Even if I do have a baby growing inside of me, I can't bring myself to care.

If I have to be here, if I have to be the mother of Giulio's children, I just want them to treat me like this.

Is that really too much to ask?

SLAYER

I'm restless, but it's my day off so I can't burn off all that energy with work. I end up at my workbench at home instead, assembling a new train layout that I've been neglecting for the past few weeks. There were just more important things to worry about.

I open the drawer to grab some of the craft glue when my eye catches on something.

A phone, forgotten among all the other shit I threw in there.

Vanessa's phone.

Giulio had given it to me for safekeeping after he'd first brought Vanessa to Ntimacy, and since there wasn't any purpose for it, I'd just left it there. Out of sight, out of mind.

Except now my curiosity gets the better of me. A phone has a lot of information about a person. I could get to know Vanessa a lot more intimately, all the things she isn't telling us.

This is the first time I've ever cared to know more about somebody like this, and I'm kind of annoyed by that feeling, but it doesn't stop me from lifting the phone out and examining it under the lamp.

I haven't turned it on at all since Giulio had given it to me, and I'm not dumb enough to just turn it on as is. I pry the back off and remove the sim card, then turn it on. There's a swiping password, but holding the phone under the light shows me smears in roughly the patterns Vanessa has swiped. It takes

only two tries to get the order right. Once the phone's unlocked, I check what apps are on it.

Nothing suspicious. I disable the GPS, uninstall all map apps, and turn the phone on airplane mode before replacing the sim card. It's unlikely anybody is actually tracking the phone—and I check to make sure there aren't any weird programs running in the background—but better safe than sorry.

There aren't actually a lot of contacts in the address book. Mom, Dad, Lucia—the sister, if I remember correctly—and a handful of other names that, judging from the text history, are just college friends.

But I do notice *Brad*.

That was her old boyfriend, the one who'd given Vanessa all sorts of weird ideas about her body. I bite down on my annoyance and start going through their entire texting history. Good thing Vanessa wasn't deleting old texts automatically.

It goes back almost two years, and tells a strange, almost sweet tale at first. They started as partners in some group projects, and they just hung out more and more. Until suddenly there are lots of heart emojis, and it takes all my self-control not to destroy the phone immediately.

But there's something else, too.

Brad's texts waver between sickly sweet to subtly insulting. Sometimes there's a stretch where he doesn't text back at all, then Vanessa's asking, *Are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong?*

Fucker was playing her.

I've seen it all before, guys playing women and stringing them along. The bastard must've at least had the decency to break up with her in person, which is somewhat surprising given the history between the two. But I can see where it all changes, where he starts reminding her they're still friends—then asks if she wants to come over the next day.

Of course she says yes, because she's Vanessa, and I can only imagine what happened after that. My jaw tightens with the thought of someone fucking with her—someone who isn't

us—and I keep scrolling through. It keeps happening again and again, though, with him ghosting her then reaching out to invite her over. Eventually, she starts refusing him, but by then, I can see the damage has been done.

I read to the end of the text chain, recognizing the date as that of her sister's wedding. His casual *hey* is anything but; it had been about two weeks since the last text. Obviously, Vanessa never had a chance to reply.

My curiosity gets the better of me, and I turn the data on to see if there are any new texts. Several pop up, and the most recent is only three days ago.

I scroll back up, amazed to see the sheer number of messages since then. There are a few nice texts from Brad, some more sweet ones, then they gradually get more hostile. He accuses her of ghosting him, like he hadn't done the same thing over and over.

It's the sight of the dick pic that gets me really pissed, especially with the accompanying, *don't you miss this dick?*

He just can't take a hint, can he?

I flip through a few of her more recent texts, seeing friends who are worried about her, but I ignore those after a precursory check. My attention is focused on Brad and his dick pic and insults to Vanessa.

I'd planned on going through some of her social media, but I'm just too agitated to focus. I can always do it later... after I take care of this.

I power the phone down and grab my own, calling Giulio.

He answers almost immediately. "Yo, what's up?"

"You free now?" My voice comes out as a growl. "Because I've got a surprise for you."

"Um... Give me half an hour? What kind of surprise?"

"The kind that includes a day trip. Trust me. You'll love it."

There's a small pause, then Giulio says, "Sure. Vanessa's all cozy with Damien right now, and I'd mostly planned on catching up on reading. Did you know how many fucking finances are involved with running a huge organization?"

"Don't care," I say. "I'll pick you up."

"Ooh, can you bring tacos? From that place, you know the one, by the deli—"

"Jesus, Jules, do you ever think about anything but food?" I grumble, but it's not a short trip. "Fine, but if you get lettuce in my seat again, you're cleaning it up with your mouth." And if he gets sour cream on the dashboard again... I'll just shove his face into it.

I end the call, do some quick research on where Brad lives, then go to pick up the food and Giulio. He's already waiting out front, talking to some tough looking bruiser with the most obvious "bodyguard" shades.

Giulio spots my car and pats his bodyguard on the shoulder before opening the door to the passenger seat. "Thanks, Larry! Tell Damien not to worry, and if he gets mad, blame me."

Then he slides into the seat and pulls the door shut.

"Man, I hate having security. I'm fucking tired of being stalked, and it just keeps getting worse," Giulio complains. "Where's the food?"

"You should've had better security before this," I comment, then gesture to the bag in the backseat. "And technically, we should probably bring him with us..." But I don't want anyone else to kill this moment for us. I pull away from the curb. "Hand me one of the tacos in the white wrappers," I tell him as I get on the road.

Predictably, Giulio checks what it is first. "Ah, classic. Pulled pork. Hope you told them to hold the flavor. Wouldn't want you to expand your palate." He grins as he passes the taco to me.

"Yeah, I told them to hold the flavor on all of them. No salt, too," I snark before grabbing it from him.

Giulio laughs and checks his own raw tuna whatever taco. “Nice. You know, Vanessa ate raw fish with me the night before we realized she was preggo. She blamed her morning sickness on the fish.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t both?” I ask, making a face. I put my blinker on and get into the lane leading toward the interstate in Benton City’s direction. “That shit would make anyone sick.”

“I’ve never gotten sick from it.” Giulio chows down in silence for a while.

It’s kind of rare getting to enjoy peace and quiet with Giulio.

Of course, it doesn’t last long. “What’s this romantic vacation you’re taking me on? I didn’t think there was anything good in Benton.”

“Oh, there’s definitely something good in Benton.” I pause, taking a bite of my taco. “Well. Not *good*, but *fun*. You’ll definitely have fun, even if it takes you away from your baby mama.”

Giulio doesn’t answer for a while, gazing out at the road.

Maybe I shouldn’t have brought up Vanessa again, even though the entire trip is about Vanessa.

“You ready to be a dad?” Giulio asks, drumming his fingers on the dashboard. “If the whole baby thing sticks. Did you know like fifteen percent of all pregnancies end in miscarriage? Damien told me this all solemnly, like *don’t get your hopes up, Giulio*, as if he wasn’t talking about himself.”

It’s a good thing I’ve finished eating, because I probably would’ve choked on my food if I hadn’t. Sure, I know Vanessa’s pregnant, but that hadn’t actually connected in my mind to *being a dad*. “Now, wait,” I say, with a nervous little laugh that sounds ridiculous coming from me. “You’re the dad here. I’m just the uncle. Or whatever.” Even if it’s my seed, the child is still Giulio’s, which...

I have mixed feelings about.

“You think my kid can’t have three dads?” Giulio laughs. “He or she will have spare parents. Which, given our line of work, is probably a good thing. Me all lax with security the way I am, who knows how long I’ll survive?”

“Don’t talk like that,” I growl, the words affecting me more than I want to admit. “You’re going to survive longer than your old man did, because you’re reckless, but you’re not stupid. And you’ll be less reckless once you realize you have a kid waiting on you at home—”

I shut up, gritting my teeth instead of continuing. Fuck. I don’t want to deal with these memories, these emotions. It’s so stupid to get carried away like this.

“Damien’s getting paranoid. Because of that whole thing with Nilo Romano. Reedy little fuck should just have taken up my offer to show him around town. He’d actually be getting laid, then.” Giulio rolls down the window a bit, letting cold air blast in.

I hit the button to roll the window back up in annoyance and lock all the windows too. “Stop acting like you’re five,” I mutter. “You aren’t careful enough about yourself. That’s why the rest of us have to step up. He’s not being paranoid. He’s being practical.” I can’t believe I’m defending Damien.

Hell must be freezing over as we speak.

“I don’t go out on my own,” Giulio protests. “Larry was there, right? And you and Damien have been playing bodyguards. Just, no point in putting up with what’s-his-face or what’s-*his*-face if the two of you are there. Fuck, you know the last time I’ve gone anywhere completely on my own? It might have been that time we met for breakfast after my old man’s wedding, before anyone really knew I was the boss. A few visits here and there to Ntimacy, but those don’t really count since there’s security inside the place itself.”

“And that’s a good thing, Giulio,” I say. I can’t help but feel a little impatient with him. “The city would be fucked if something happened to you. It’s already screwy enough and on the verge of war as it is, and that’s with you having a strong presence. You gotta remember you aren’t just Giulio anymore.

You're the boss." I sigh. "But I'm sure you've heard this lecture from Damien before and tuned it out then too."

"You're acting like I don't know this shit." Giulio looks at me, although I keep my eyes on the road. "Damien got my old man killed, sure. But you think I wasn't planning for all this?"

"I think you weren't planning for all of this *and* having a kid," I say quietly.

"Well, that just means I gotta step up my game. To make sure my kid's got a nice, cushy inheritance when I do finally kick it." Giulio grins widely. "Y'know, if we're going to Benton anyway, want to stop by the new club? Well, it's not open yet, but we've got the lease and I've hired a manager. I'll probably transfer a few girls from Bare Essence and Ntimacy over once the reno is complete. The manager says we can have it up and running in two months."

"Nah," I say. "We have other plans." And Damien would kill me if he knew I was not only taking Giulio to Benton City by myself, but also letting Giulio wander around while we were there. It's not like he's completely unrecognizable, and he has plenty of enemies in Benton—even more than he does in New Bristol, and that's saying something.

"You never answered me," Giulio says abruptly, making me blink at him.

"What?"

"You ready to be a dad?" he repeats. "The whole, the kid can have three dads thing. Don't think I didn't notice you changed the subject."

"Me? I'm pretty sure you changed the subject," I retort, but he's not wrong. The memories it evokes makes it hard for me to really think about. I didn't exactly have the best father figure to look up to, but then, neither had Giulio. "Damien knows what a good dad's like, doesn't he?"

Giulio snorts. "Nope. He didn't have a dad. Or, he did, then he didn't? Ended up with him, three siblings, and a mom all on their own. But I guess that's a better dad than my old man ever was."

“This kid is fucked,” I lament, only half-joking. “Maybe Vanessa will have enough maternal instincts to make up for the rest of us train wrecks.”

“Yeah.” Giulio laughs to himself for a few seconds. “You wanna know something funny? The first time Damien and I met Vanessa wasn’t for my old man’s wedding.”

“Yeah?” I ask, curious. I’d thought they’d only met because of the sister. “When did you meet her?”

“There was some fucking party in Benton, like a year ago. It was summer; all the chicks were in bikinis, Bellini really wanted to introduce me to his older daughter... Fucking Clarissa was there too. Anyway, I noticed Damien chatting with Vanessa. It was the first time in ever that I’d seen him like that. Y’know how Damien gets, all weirdly obsessive and intense about shit? But he’s not usually like that about chicks. So I decided to play wingman.” Giulio mimes pushing something in front of him. “Tossed them both into the pool, fully dressed. Damien did not waste an opportunity to paw all over her, man. Fucking shame Damien didn’t follow through though. We could have been having fun with her a year ago!”

I shake my head. “Bet she wasn’t enjoying being pawed all over. Poor thing didn’t understand how good it could feel to be touched by a *real* man.” I scowl at the thought of Brad, but I’m mostly settled because I know where I’m headed, and what I’m headed to do. I’m giving Giulio a real gift.

“I think I did end up getting laid at that party. Can’t remember who I fucked, though. A guy? Because my old man was there, and y’know how I love tempting fate.” Giulio starts tapping the dashboard again. “Vanessa’s old man ended up selling his oldest daughter to my old man, and her mom was a drunk, stone-cold bitch. So I guess none of us have good role models. And I don’t believe in therapy for myself, so I’m not gonna let my kid have some shrink tell them they could totally escape this cycle of abuse and violence.” Giulio burst out laughing. “That sounds good, right? Like I’ve read all the literature. You’d almost think I was a normal person.”

“You?” I snort. “Normal? Not even close, Jules. So how do *you* feel about the dad thing? Is it still just Damien’s dream, or are you starting to get into it too?”

I secretly hope he is as well, because it’s been tugging at my heartstrings—something I didn’t even know I had anymore. I’m terrified but also excited to be a part of a brand-new life, even if all I can offer is, well... a cycle of abuse and violence.

“I *feel*—” and Giulio’s voice is harsh before he stops and corrects his tone into something uncharacteristically bland. “I like the idea. Kid better not want to raise dogs or cats though. I’m a reptiles-only kind of household. Well, and amphibians. Nothing wrong with a toad or a frog.”

“And what if Vanessa wanted a dog or a cat?” I needle him, just to see what he’ll say.

“Yeah, I’m sure Vanessa wants to give us more leverage over her. *Please don’t hurt the cat!* she’ll cry when I’m in a really fucking bad mood.” He makes a noncommittal sound. “Not that I’d hurt an animal. Where’s the fun if they can’t beg and scream?”

“How noble of you,” I say with a snort.

“Yeah. Noble.” Giulio pulls out his phone then and starts scrolling through it. “She’ll probably figure out I don’t hurt animals, so who knows. Maybe she will beg for a cat. Then we can care for a little fuzzball and a tiny, screaming baby.” He taps a little more aggressively on his phone. “Why is there no fucking reception out here? I just wanted to check the reptile cams.”

“Poor you, not being able to stalk your little monsters,” I mock him. “You’ll live.”

Thankfully the conversation after that is slow and mostly inconsequential, with Giulio blathering about some stupid things he read online. It does make the three-hour drive to Benton go by faster.

Once we’re in the city, Giulio perks up a little. “Where are we? This isn’t anywhere near Bellini’s residence. And it’s not

where Corvi lives either, although if you brought me here for a surprise assassination attempt on him, I'd be delighted but would have to decline, because even if we survived, Damien would kill us."

I smirk. "Nah, something far lower stake, but just as much fun. I promise you'll enjoy it. You want a sneak peek?" Of course he does. I don't wait for an answer before fishing Vanessa's phone out of the console. I'd put the phone back into airplane mode, but the message chain with Brad is up and open for Giulio to look at.

He only scrolls up a few messages before his eyebrows go up. "Jesus, that's not even a good picture. Come on, man, if you're gonna send a dick pic, make it more flattering. Although if that's what he's got, no wonder he wasn't able to satisfy Vanessa."

"Right? He's not packing much." I shrug. "I thought I might get you an early congratulations present." I'm not sure how he's feeling, though, and I'm honestly wondering if I should've brought Damien along instead. I know *he* wants to rip Brad in two for hurting Vanessa.

As Giulio keeps scrolling, his expression morphs into a scowl. "That's not fucking subtle, *Brad*. And what the fuck, 'you'll never find anyone if you're always such a prude'? Who the fuck does this guy think he is?"

There's the reaction I'd been expecting, and I relax a little. Giulio really is hard to get presents for, and I'd thought this would be a runaway hit. Not as good as assassinating Victor Corvi for him, of course, but something for him to enjoy. "A total dick, which, coming from me... Well, that's saying a lot. We are almost to his home, my friend, and I have the full torture bag in the trunk. Just for you."

Giulio starts smiling. "Aww, this is the most romantic thing you've done for me. We'll have to take all the pics to share with Damien. He'll be so jealous when he finds out where we've been."

"Would've taken him, too, but someone needed to stay with Vanessa," I say, and I'm surprised to find I'm being

honest. Damien dislikes me a whole lot more than I dislike him, but we still don't get along. Still, he'll get the full experience, like he's there, because I do plan on memorializing this occasion.

I pull into a parking spot a few streets away from Brad's place, out of sight from casual passersby. Turns out, when you're a rich fuck with nice, rich parents, you get your own place even as a college student. He couldn't have made it easier for us if he'd tried.

We get out of the car, and I grab my duffel bag of goodies from the trunk.

"We can't kill him, though," I warn Giulio. "That's more of a mess than I want to deal with."

Giulio grins at me, that same manic smile he'd given me the first time we'd met. "Oh, I think I can live with that. We're going to have so, so much fun."

GIULIO

There's a car parked outside the small house, a fucking luxury car of all things, and I have to wonder about Brad's parents. Do they know they're enabling him into being an entitled little dickwad?

Maybe they do, and they don't care. My old man sure as fuck wouldn't have.

I casually knock on the door and wait outside of the peephole's view. Only Slayer is visible, and he actually looks presentable.

These days, it's kind of a toss-up on whether anybody opens the door even when they are home, but it turns out Brad isn't as careful as some other people might be.

"About time," Brad says as he opens the door. "I ordered almost an hour.... Uh, where's the food?"

Slayer grins and pushes the door open the rest of the way. "We ate it, sorry."

Before Brad can yell, Slayer lunges at him and knocks the wind out of him. Brad stumbles to the ground, gasping, while I heft the duffel bag and shut the door behind us.

"Nice place," I say, looking around. "How much is the rent here? I'm thinking of getting a condo in Benton, but a little house in the suburbs might not be bad."

"The fuck?" Brad wheezes out.

I get a good look at him. I've been told I look like a douche with my frosted tips—which, really, is so offensive—but this guy just looks like an asshole from the start. Even struggling to breathe, his features look so arrogant that I want to punch him. Blond hair, blue eyes, tall but maybe not quite as tall as Vanessa, slender... He looks like every other college frat boy. What was Vanessa thinking, dating him?

“You got a tiled room around here? Bathroom might be a bit small, but maybe a basement rec-room? Or we can just use the kitchen. There's lots of knives there, anyway.” I start heading farther into the house. The kitchen's got wide-open windows with barely-there curtains, so that's out. But I do find a door leading downstairs, and wouldn't you know it, it's unfinished.

“Over here! It's perfect!” I call out to Slayer.

We're both wearing gloves, of course, and beanies to cover our hair. I'm reckless, but I'm not sloppy. We're going to have our fun... with proper protection.

I snicker to myself at that thought.

“What're you laughing at?” Slayer asks as he drags Brad to the stairs by the collar of his shirt.

“Thinking about how we need a barrier for all the fun we're about to have.”

That dress made your boobs look less tiny, he'd texted to Vanessa. My face hurts trying to keep the grin in place.

I pat Brad on the cheek. “Hey, cutie, you got condoms around here? I forgot to bring some.”

Brad looks at me, still looking dazed, and it seems to take him a moment to understand what I'm implying. When it hits him, though, he gapes at me like a fish out of water.

“Well?” Slayer asks, shoving him. “You got any or not?”

Brad shakes his head, though I'm willing to bet it's a lie. A guy like him would always have condoms around.

I give an exaggerated sigh and start going down the stairs. “Guess we'll just have to take him bare. When's the last time

you got tested, Johnny?”

“Eh, it’s been a few months,” Slayer says dismissively. “Been pretty active since then, though, so no guarantees I won’t pass anything on... but Brad here won’t complain, will you now?”

Brad finally tries to shout, “Help!” but Slayer puts his gloved hand over Brad’s mouth.

“Shh. You’ll wake the neighbors, and wouldn’t that just be rude?” Slayer mocks him as he pulls him along down the stairs with us.

Wake the neighbors, at this very late hour of 7 p.m. I snort in amusement. Once Slayer’s got Brad down to the basement—and much less likely to alert anybody next door—I open up the duffel bag and pull out the large tarp.

You should get some make-up tips from Michelle, I bet she could make your face look glamorous.

“Did you clean this properly?” I ask Slayer as I spread it out on the concrete floor. “I think I still see some blood stains on it.”

Brad’s eyes are wide with fright, and Slayer has his upper arm in a firm grip to keep him from trying to run now. “W-what? What the fuck are you guys doing? I don’t know who you are.”

“Is this the part where we do the cliched, *but we know who you are?*” Slayer asks with a laugh as he shoves Brad down onto the tarp on the hard floor. “Because we do.”

I push my foot down on Brad’s back before he can get up. He still tries to flop around a little, but I’ve got a lot of practice with this kind of stuff, and Brad’s been skipping arm and leg day.

It’s better when I don’t have to see his face, at least.

Here’s some sex tips vids. Might help you not be a starfish in bed.

“Here’s how this is gonna go, Brad,” I say. “We’re gonna play a little game. If you do a very, very good job, we might

only hurt you a little bit. If you don't... Well, my buddy Johnny is really, really good with a knife." I pause a little for effect. "And I'm less good with a knife. Unsteady hands and all. Just end up cutting all over the place. Somebody might lose a finger, if I have to wield sharp objects."

"Yeah, Sammy's really shitty with a knife," Slayer agrees. "You should've seen the last time. He was trying to cut a straight line and ended up... Well. I don't want to upset your poor little tummy by giving you details."

Brad whimpers pathetically, and I roll my eyes. We haven't even really done anything to him yet. I put more of my weight on his back. "You understand? Oink like a piggy if you do."

He twists his head, trying to look at me—like he thinks I'm not being serious or some shit. He doesn't make a sound.

"Well?" I demand, already getting impatient. "You know what I want. You need to know what's at stake?"

"We've got a lot of weapons to use on you, Brad," Slayer says. "Knives, cocks, some rope... I think we can figure out some more creative things, too. I always do love pushing the limits."

"Why are you doing this?" Brad wheezes out. "Who *are* you?"

Fucking slut bitch, you think you're too good for me now? You're ghosting me after all the good times I showed you?

I sigh heavily. "Sometimes, you piss off the wrong people, Braddy-boy. Sometimes, you have rich parents who piss off even worse people. You think your father's shady dealings have gone unnoticed? Real estate mogul my ass."

I'd done a quick search on his parents after Slayer had shown me exactly what we were up to. I'm mostly talking out my ass, but I do know the type. Real estate is a pretty corrupt business, in its own way. Bribery and connections and kicking people from their homes to buy up land.

Really, it'd be more of a surprise if his daddy was a completely upstanding citizen.

“Now, I think Sammy here told you to oink like a piggy,” Slayer says, nudging Brad’s side with his foot. “I’m being really gentle here, but if you don’t do what he wants... Well, what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t try to motivate you to do this one simple thing for him?”

I know Slayer couldn’t care less if Brad debases himself, but I always appreciate his willingness to go along with what I want in the moment. It’s one of the reasons we get along so well.

Brad whimpers, then lets out a pathetic excuse for an oinking sound.

Slayer glances at me. “What do you think, Sammy?”

“I think, if this is the best Braddy can do, we might as well just slaughter him.”

Slayer hums. “Yeah, maybe so. Oh well.”

“Wait!” Brad says, struggling to sit up and fighting against me. “I’ll do... I’ll do better. Don’t hurt me.”

I let up, but I kick Brad in the side. “Do piggies usually talk?” I ask Slayer. “Because I’m pretty sure they don’t. I’m pretty sure all they do is oink.”

Slayer nods, going to the bag nearby. “We’ll help him out. I guess we shouldn’t *start* by cutting out his tongue, huh?” he says, a little plaintively—and he probably is disappointed that he has to restrain himself.

Brad starts making frantic little oinking noises.

“That’s better.” I circle around Brad, who is either smart enough to realize he can’t make it to the door before we catch him or too scared to move. I can work with both. “Y’know what else? Most piggies don’t wear clothes.” I push my foot against Brad’s stomach. “But I’m generous. You get to choose, Braddy. You strip down to your undies yourself. Or you force me to do it, and then you’ll be completely naked.”

“I hope he makes you do it,” Slayer says, even though I know he has no interest in seeing another guy’s naked body. It’s a pity, but at least he’s good at playing along. Guys like

Brad practically piss their pants when they think they're being hit on by other dudes as it is, let alone in situations like this.

"I'll do it," Brad wheezes.

I step a little harder on his chest, just as a threat, before backing off. "All right. Don't make me regret trusting you." Then I laugh, loud and exaggerated. "Or do! Whatever floats your boat."

Brad scrambles away from me, toward the back of the basement. "I'm stripping, I'm stripping!"

It's a bit disappointing how easily he does this, but a rich kid like him, used to a cushy life where everything goes his way, probably has no idea how to deal with violence.

"Nice briefs," I say, barely even looking at him. "Johnny, tie him up."

Slayer grabs a set of rope from the duffel bag—the soft kind that we use when we don't want to leave marks, not the kind we use for people who are getting dismembered and distributed across state lines. Lucky Brad. "Sure thing," he says.

"You don't have to tie me up," Brad says. "I'm cooperating, see?"

"Oink for me and maybe I won't tie you up," Slayer says, grinning at him.

Brad looks pained, but he makes an oinking sound.

Slayer shakes his head. "Good try, but nah. I think I'm gonna have to tie you up anyway. What do you think, Sammy?"

I pick up Brad's discarded pants and start rifling through his pockets, finding his phone. It's got a thumbprint unlock, which has to be the worst kind of security you could put on your phone.

"Yeah, definitely tie him up. I need his thumb first." I give Brad a wild grin. "I don't care if it's still attached to him."

Brad lets out a choked little sound, holding his hands up. “No, no. You can just... Here, I’ll unlock it for you, man. You don’t need to get crazy.”

“Get crazy,” Slayer says, snickering. “Like you’re not already crazy as fuck.”

I hold the phone up to Brad, and he presses his thumb against it with trembling hands. When the phone’s unlocked, I pat him on the head. “Good little piggy.”

The first thing I notice is a text from some food delivery app. “Hey, your food got here! I’m gonna go pick it up. It’d be a waste to let it sit out there. Johnny, don’t have too much fun without me.”

Like he’ll have much time. I keep scrolling through the phone while I head back to the front door to pick up the food left on the doorstep. Brad really has terrible luck. If we’d shown up twenty minutes later, he might not have opened the door for us.

We’d have found another way in.

I pick up a chair from the kitchen and drag it down the stairs along with the food. Slayer ended up tying Brad’s arms behind his back, and Brad’s on his knees, legs spread wide.

“That’s just the right height for a blowjob,” I comment, setting the chair in front of Brad.

Brad pales even further and shakes his head. “No, man, come on. I’m not gay!”

“You don’t have to be gay to give a blowjob,” Slayer comments. He shoots me a look, as though daring me to remind him of that fact later when I want him to blow me.

I ignore the comment and pluck the receipt off the food delivery bag. “What did you order? Looks like... Italian? Are you serious? You paid.... Nearly fifty bucks for somebody to deliver spaghetti in tomato sauce? And, am I reading right, you didn’t even tip the guy?” I give Slayer a plaintive look. “I know I’m an asshole, but I always tip well. That’s just the bare minimum, right?”

“You can afford to tip well,” Slayer says, then laughs. “Oh wait. So can Brad.” He thumps Brad on the back of the head. “Just a dick move not to tip if you’re ordering out. Those people need to make a living, Brad!”

“The place is ten minutes away,” Brad complains. “And the company pays them. They don’t need a tip on top of that.”

Slayer slaps the back of his head again. “Dick move, Brad. But that’s not why we’re here, lucky for you.”

Even though the food is really basic and boring, I open up one of the containers on my lap and start eating. “This isn’t even *good* Italian, man. Fuck, rich kid like you should have more class.”

“You don’t have to eat it!” Brad whines. “That’s my food!”

I laugh, because that’s such a stupid thing to get stuck on when tied up and mostly naked. I pointedly slurp up more noodles. “Johnny, you want some? There’s enough food here for a few days. I’m guessing this little piggy doesn’t know how to cook.”

Slayer shakes his head. “Nah. Maybe after we’re done with Brad here, I’ll see if you actually left me any. Haven’t done anything to work up an appetite over yet, though, lucky for Brad.”

While I eat, I scroll through Brad’s texts. So many women’s names, Clara and Natalie and Paula and *Vanessa*. I already know what he’d sent to her, but I go through the other ones too.

Hookup tonite?

Your ass looks great in those jeans.

Just one pic, come on.

I won’t share, I promise.

Of course, when I switch over to the texts he’d sent to the male names, I see the same pictures the women had sent to him, distributed among all his friends.

“I’m almost impressed at how much of a sleaze you are,” I say, still scrolling. “Like, I thought I was bad. Here I am, taking money to terrify some rich brat, but it turns out you’re enough of a dickweed that I don’t even feel bad about it.” I smile at him. “You’ve got like ten different booty calls in here! Which of these chicks is your favorite? And don’t lie. Johnny’s really good at figuring out when somebody’s lying.”

“I’m getting bored, so I’d enjoy the exercise, easy as it would be,” Slayer says agreeably. “I mean, I’d rather just start cutting off fingers, but if you want to talk about his hookups, that’s cool too. Give us the deets.”

I laugh. “Cutting off fingers? I guess it’s a cliché for a reason. When’s the last time we did that? Must have been... Ooh, what’s-his-face, with the crooked nose?”

Brad whimpers and shakes his head. “No! No! Stop, it’s Clara! Clara’s my favorite!”

“So maybe I’m just getting old,” Slayer says, “but back in my day, if I had a favorite, I’d just... date her. Not have nine other hookups on the side. You know? I’d treat her well so she’d wanna come around and fuck me, but I guess that’s the hard part for you, huh?”

“Poor Clara. She really thinks you’re a nice guy,” I say, sending her a few pics of the other girls saved to the phone. I go in and do that to the other chicks too. It doesn’t take long for the phone to start receiving response texts, some angry, some hurt. I throw in a dickpic to the dudes, for good measure.

Then I set both the phone and the food down next to me on the floor. “Okay, that’s all the boring shit out of the way. Time for the fun part.” I pull my own phone out and open the camera app. “Oink for the camera, piggy.”

Brad pales, and he shakes his head. “C’mon, man,” he begs. “You don’t need to do this. I get it. I’ll tell my dad to lay off any shit he’s doing on the side.”

“Johnny, could you...?” I make a vague hand gesture at Slayer.

“Sure,” Slayer says, driving his fist into Brad’s gut. “That’s too nice, huh? I should get the knife.”

Brad shakes his head quickly, oinking desperately.

“Nice. Now crawl around as best you can. While oinking, please. Put some effort into this roleplay.”

“Is it really roleplaying if he’s actually a pig?” Slayer wonders aloud, stepping back to let Brad try to crawl on the floor.

He really looks more like a worm than anything else, the way he can’t move well with his hands tied behind his back. He moves, though, still oinking while I take a video of it.

It’s hilarious, watching him do this, but it isn’t scratching that itch inside me.

I don’t want to just humiliate him.

Fucking prude, nobody else is ever going to want your flat ass or tiny tits.

I want to drive a knife through his throat.

“Do you think anybody would miss him?” I ask, contemplating. “The tarp’s down. We could clean up the blood easy. Hell, if we dispose of the body properly, they might think he fled town to escape the massive public humiliation he’s about to face.”

“My dad will pay you!” Brad says, looking up at me with tear-filled eyes. “C’mon, man. You made your point. You wanted to terrify me? I’m fucking terrified. I’ll be nice to people. I’ll tip. I’ll apologize to Clara. Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do it.”

Slayer comes over to me, resting a hand on my arm. “Nah, gotta leave him alive, Sammy.” He squeezes a little, looking at me the same way he did the night we cut up Vanessa.

He thinks we’re going too far, or that we’re about to be going too far, which is just fucked up. We’ve done so much worse!

“You could see it though, right? Castrate him first, let him scream about his missing balls for a while. You don’t want unneutered pigs around anyway. Fuck, if we take him, we could do it all slow. Tie a rubber band around his balls so they slowly shrivel and die, like they do to livestock. Then you string him up and gut him. Carve him up like a pot roast. Season the gravy with his blood—”

Brad sobs, his entire body shaking. “Please, man. Please, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Slayer considers, and for a moment, I think he’s going to give me the go ahead. Not that I need his permission, but this is where he truly excels, and he usually takes the lead when we get someone targeted like this.

Instead, he shakes his head. “Nah, not this time. Orders were to scare him, not to neuter him. As much fun as that sounds...” He flashes Brad a smirk. “Then again, I doubt Daddy Dearest is going to stop pissing people off, so hey, maybe the next time we drop in, we can really do this in style. Get a spit, roast him up while we’re at it.”

“You’re finally getting a taste for exotic foods?” I laugh at Brad’s whimpering. “Oh, come on, I’m joking. I’m not a fucking cannibal.”

“He’d try anything once, though,” Slayer says nonchalantly to Brad, sounding almost like he’s serious, then he snorts and ruins the whole facade. “Anyway, I can just kick him around a little.”

“Kick him in the balls, at least.”

Brad shakes his head and starts begging again, but Slayer dutifully follows my order.

It isn’t enough. Fuck. Still holding my phone up to record the beating, I pick up Brad’s phone again. He’s the kind of idiot who has it set to stay unlocked for ages, apparently.

I snort a bit at the responses he’s received. Funny enough, there’s one dude who sent a dick pic back. I decide to see what other pics Brad has on his phone. Maybe there’s a cock with better lighting in there.

But I keep scrolling and scrolling, only finding pictures of girls—

Then I find a picture of Vanessa.

I stop and tap on that photo. She's clearly asleep, and Brad's pulled the covers off. This must have been after they'd had sex, because Vanessa is naked. Brad's got the camera angled between her legs.

"You've got quite the collection of pics," I say, my voice brittle. "Who's this chick?" I hold up the phone so Brad can take a look.

Brad's doubled over in pain, but Slayer grabs onto his hair and yanks his head up so he can see the picture of Vanessa. Slayer sees it, too, and his eyes narrow.

"V-Vanessa," Brad manages to choke out, still heaving even though nothing comes up.

"This is your type?" My eyes keep going back to the picture. It's not any different than what Damien had sent me, or ones I've taken. But Vanessa's always been awake in those photos. She's always known when we were taking pictures.

"N-no! I—" Brad whimpers again, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I like girls with bigger tits. More ass."

My grip on the phone gets tighter, and I clench my jaw. "Yeah? Why even bother with her then?"

"She... She was easy. Desperate," Brad sobs the last word. "Got her to give it up with just a few..."

I don't hear the rest of what he says. My blood is roaring in my ears as I go stand in front of Brad. Slayer says something, but it's just as insignificant.

My fist collides with Brad's jaw, and if Slayer weren't holding him, Brad would have been flung across the floor.

I kick him, in the jaw, in his chest, his side. I bring my boots down hard on his cock, and Brad screams loud enough that I think he might actually alert the neighbors.

I lift my foot to stomp down on his face, but suddenly Slayer is pulling me back. I fight against him, but he's stronger.

"Let go of me," I snarl at him. "Fuck!"

"That's enough, Sammy," Slayer says, his voice brimming with controlled fury. He's not any happier than I am, so why is he making me stop? "You can't kill him. Even if he does deserve it." He casts a disgusted look down at the nearly-unconscious Brad.

"I think we can. I think it would be really fucking easy to gut him right here. There's a huge span of woods where we can cut up the body and let some fucking wolves eat his carcass," I near shout. "Why the fuck are we even here if it isn't to kill this fucking waste of a human? He really is no better than a fucking pig!"

Slayer holds me firmly to him, and only my pride keeps me from flailing uselessly against him. He has to hear me. He has to agree with me. He saw the picture too. He heard what Brad said about Vanessa.

He brought me here.

"To teach him a lesson," Slayer says, his voice even despite the rage biting at his tone. "We've taught it to him. Now let's get the fuck out of here before one of his neighbors comes to see what's going on."

He's right. I know he's right. I've got enough heat on me with my mafia dealings and Corvi and Romano and everybody else who probably wanted my old man dead. I don't need to worry about this catching up to me too.

"What's even the point of being—" I cut myself off. "Fine. Fuck. You deal with the cleanup." I wait until Slayer lets up, then storm to the stairs. I stop there and grin at Brad. "Hey. You're so fucking lucky you caught me on a good day. Because I don't want to cause too much trouble for my friend. But if I find out you snitched about this to anyone... I probably won't be in a good mood anymore."

Slayer eyes me, almost like he's expecting me to double back and go for Brad again. He's not wrong to think it's possible, either. But I stalk up the stairs before either of them can respond.

Fuck.

Fuck!

I still have Brad's phone in my hand, and I stare down at it. The picture of Vanessa's still right there, and I want to go back down the stairs to finish what I started. I'm so close to doing just that, but Slayer comes up the stairs with the duffel bag over his shoulder in record time.

"Out," he barks, gesturing to the front door.

I shrug, pasting on a large grin. "It's like you don't trust me at all."

But I follow him out, because... because I don't trust myself, either.

VANESSA

Larry looks annoyed, but that doesn't stop Damien's lecturing.

"If he says he's going somewhere, you have to find out *where*. I know you can't stop him from doing what he wants —" not like Damien, who is the only person I've seen who can actually herd Giulio like the cat he is "—but at least make sure we can get a hold of him."

That's the main problem here. Damien and I had cooked dinner together, but when he'd called Giulio to invite him over, Giulio hadn't responded.

I take a sip from my cup of tea, enjoying the warmth, and I listen. I'm a bit bemused by the whole thing. Damien and I had actually had a decent day, somehow, until Damien had realized Giulio was missing. That had been three hours ago, and there's still no sign of him.

"He was with Slayer," Larry says for the third time. "It's not like I let him go off on his own. And I'm sure he has his phone. He always has his phone."

It's like a broken record, but Damien doesn't seem to be hearing anything Larry is saying.

"Then why isn't Slayer answering his phone?" Damien asks.

It's weird how Damien can manage to sound so intimidating without ever raising his voice. I remember how my father yelled; I remember Emilio Pavone raging. That

anger was scary, but Damien's quiet, intense voice is like a wall in its absoluteness.

Despite his protests, Larry is sweating.

"I'm sure they're fine," I say, feeling a bit sorry for Larry. "Damien, you know Giulio wouldn't..."

But do we know that? *I* don't know what Giulio would or wouldn't do. My neck prickles, remembering how he'd dumped me in the woods. The terror of being stretched out on the cold table.

Whatever I think, it doesn't matter, because there's a small sound near the door, then it swings open.

Giulio strolls in, grinning, and my entire body tenses. "Yo!" Giulio waves at us. "Hey, Larry. Get the fuck out, would you?"

The grin means bad news, and when Slayer follows him in, his expression is solemn—maybe even a little chagrined, which does not spell good things at all.

Larry looks between Damien and Giulio, like he's waiting for permission from Damien to leave. He's already in the doghouse, and he obviously doesn't want to piss Damien off again.

Giulio notices the hesitation and heads over to Larry, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "Hey, Larry. Quick question. Who's the boss around here?"

Larry realizes his mistake immediately. "You are, sir. I'm going now. Sir."

There's a flash of something in Giulio's eyes, and I brace myself for him to do something horrible, like stab Larry for taking too long to obey.

But after a tense moment, he lets Larry go. "Yeah. See you tomorrow. We're going over to... ah, fuck, I actually forgot. What's this about again, Damien?"

"You wanted to talk about the situation with the warehouses," Damien answers coolly.

Larry doesn't waste time getting out. He knows just as well as the rest of us that Giulio in a mood like this is a volatile, ticking time bomb.

Once the door closes behind Larry, Giulio wanders over to me and wraps his arms around my shoulders from behind.

I tense a little, settling my coffee cup on the kitchen island just in case he does something utterly unpredictable. I don't want hot tea spilling all over me, after all, and this has the potential to go poorly.

He takes a deep breath and kisses the side of my head.

My eyes briefly catch Slayer's, but he gives a tiny, almost imperceptible shake of his head as he stays out of this scene. He doesn't look like he wants to be here at all, which makes me wonder just what the two of them had been up to.

Then again, I'm probably better off not knowing.

"You're so fucking lucky, you know that?" Giulio whispers into my ear.

I blink. I don't feel very lucky most of the time, though things have settled for the most part. They've turned almost domestic, giving me days where I can just relax and cuddle in front of the TV while Damien handles phone calls and emails between kisses and paying attention to me. It's not even all bad, strangely.

But having Giulio's attention on me, and with those ominous words in my ear... I shudder, but I don't comment. I don't know what he wants to hear, and I'm too afraid of saying the wrong thing when he's so obviously unstable.

Then he lets go and wanders over to Damien and sets his arms on Damien's shoulders. Since Giulio is shorter, he has to look up at Damien. Giulio's grin never slips, even though Damien's expression remains stoic.

"Where were you today?" Damien asks, somehow ignoring how Giulio is touching him.

Giulio snorts and leans up to kiss Damien's jaw. "You would have hated it. Or loved it? Not sure. Anyway, I was

thinking—”

“Giulio,” Damien interrupts. “You can’t disappear like that. You have responsibilities. Not just to the organization. But Vanessa—”

“Oh, fuck off.” Giulio pushes away from Damien, scowling now. “Whatever. Lecture somebody else, I’m not in the fucking mood.”

He stalks off toward the bedroom, fists clenched tight.

The door slams shut loudly.

I let out an unsteady breath, and some of my tension dissipates. Whatever is wrong with Giulio, at least he’s not in the room with me anymore.

Damien stares at the closed bedroom door before setting his attention on Slayer.

“Well?” Damien asks. “What did you do to get him into this mood?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Slayer says, looking resigned. “But I’ll admit I fucked up. I thought I was doing something fun for him, something he’d enjoy, but it... did not go as planned.”

I wince, looking between Damien and Slayer. Damien is obviously waiting for him to continue, but Slayer doesn’t go on.

“I know that Giulio trusts you,” Damien says, closing some of the distance between the two of them. “But I don’t trust you. Especially not if you take him out on trips, don’t even let me know where you’re going, and bring back Giulio in a worse state. He was doing fine this morning.”

“Fuck off, he’s a grown-ass adult and doesn’t need you treating him like some fucking kid,” Slayer snaps. “If he wants to go on a field trip without letting Daddy know, that’s his prerogative.”

“I’m not—” Damien starts, but he breaks off. “I just know how Giulio operates. He’s been volatile. This is a bad time to add more *surprises* to the mix.”

“Yes, I know he’s been volatile,” Slayer says testily, staring Damien down. “That’s why I thought we could let off some steam.” He glances at me, almost warily, and I don’t know why he’s looking at me like I have something to do with this situation.

I tense, trying to disappear into my chair.

“So what did you do?” Damien asks. “So I know how best to... defuse this situation.”

I’m starting to wish Giulio had stayed home and we’d had the nice dinner together. Even if Giulio and Damien would have wanted to have sex after that, it probably would have been more comfortable than the tension in the room now.

“Maybe Vanessa shouldn’t be here for this,” Slayer hedges, glancing at me.

He’s right. I don’t want to be there for whatever *this* is. I glance at the bedroom door, where Giulio is doing... something. I’m struck by this strange feeling that I should go to him, even though that feels dangerous. He’s volatile; we all know that. He’s in a mood, and he even blew Damien off—then again, that’s not altogether new.

“I’ll just... go,” I say vaguely, darting out of the kitchen. They barely pay any attention, and as soon as I’m in the hallway, I can hear Slayer start explaining, something about Benton and long car drives.

I stop in front of the door to the nursery. The door is propped open a little, maybe in acknowledgment that it’ll finally get some use. My hand goes to my stomach. It’s still the same it’s always been. Maybe I’m not really pregnant.

All the cravings and morning sickness say otherwise, though.

Even though it’s the safer choice, I don’t enter the nursery. I keep walking until I hit the bedroom, and I carefully push the door open.

Giulio’s on his side on the bed, watching something on his phone. He lifts his head when he notices me and gives me a nasty grin. “Hey, Mama. This is your only warning. Like,

you'd be really dumb to come in here, but if you do, you'd better be prepared to deal with me.”

“Are you going to risk hurting the... the baby?” I ask, my voice quiet, uncertain. What the fuck am I thinking? I should just flee. I shouldn't be in here. It's stupid, and we both know it's stupid. But for some reason, I feel drawn to Giulio, and I can't just leave him in here alone.

He snorts and shakes his head. “Guess not. Come in, shut the door. I've got some fun vids to show you.”

That doesn't bode well. I glance at the door, and I know I should go to the nursery instead. I don't know why I don't, why I instead pull the door closed and cross the room to him. “I don't think I want to watch any videos,” I say carefully, going to sit beside him on the bed. “Especially not if they have you in a mood like this.”

He pulls me down next to him and spoons up against me, trapping me in place. I'm still tense, but he isn't hard, and that's a small comfort.

Then he holds up his phone in front of me.

The screen shows a man in his underwear, arms tied, in a basement. There's a bright blue tarp on the ground.

It takes me a moment, but I recognize him.

It's Brad.

My blood runs cold. “What did you do?” I ask, my voice strangled and the words coming out strangely. “Giulio... What did you *do*?”

He kisses the nape of my neck, nibbling at the skin. “He's a real piece of work. Nicest thing he did for you was break up with you.”

The memory is still tender, like a bruise that hasn't yet healed, and I wince at the reminder. I still feel a little small, uncertain, and utterly miserable at the memory. My sister had told me something similar, but Brad had been my first.

“Yeah,” I mutter, grabbing Giulio's wrist and trying to get him to put the phone down. “C'mon, Giulio. We don't need to

talk about him.” I squirm in his arms, turning to face him instead of the phone.

Giulio keeps kissing my neck, and it makes me hopeful that I can distract him with... with my body, at least, but then I hear the phone’s audio start.

“Who’s this chick?”

“V-Vanessa.”

“This is your type?”

“N-no! I—I like girls with bigger tits. More ass.”

I freeze. The words make bile rise up in my throat, and I try to turn back, so I can grab the phone. Giulio’s arms tighten around me, though, keeping me in place so I can’t help but hear every word.

“Yeah? Why even bother with her then?”

“She... She was easy. Desperate.”

Tears start to prickle at the corners of my eyes, and I try to blink them away. “Giulio,” I say hoarsely. I’d expected violence when I’d come in, that he might throw me around a little, that he might fuck me hard. I hadn’t expected this kind of violence that’s somehow every bit as bad as if he’d been physically hurting me. “Why are you making me listen to this?”

“Just wanted you to know what a piece of shit he was,” Giulio says, still kissing me.

The phone audio continues, and suddenly there’s screaming. Cracking. Crying.

Brad begging for his life.

“*Let go of me!*” Giulio’s voice says, and the video goes quiet.

The bedroom goes silent, too, except for the way my breathing has picked up. I feel like I’m falling apart. “What... Why?” I whisper. “Why did you... Giulio...”

“I wanted to fucking murder him,” Giulio says. He drops the phone and gets his hand on my waist. “Thought about what he’d look like carved completely open. *Easy. Desperate.* I could have made him beg. He’d have been *easy* too.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I say, tears sliding down my cheeks. “Why did you hurt him? You already punished Stef. I don’t... I don’t understand.”

I’m trying so hard not to think about the words, about how Brad had felt about me, and it’s surprisingly... *easy*. I’d known how he’d felt. He’d made it clear all the time, but I’d gone to him over and over because when he’d wanted to, he could make me feel special, too.

Giulio’s kisses stop, and he buries his head against my shoulder. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” he agrees. “Brad did, though. You’re gonna tell me you feel bad for that sorry piece of shit?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “He was a dick, but he didn’t deserve...” If anyone deserved that, it would be Giulio, Slayer, and Damien. They’d done far worse to me than Brad had—and the life forming in my belly right now is more than proof of that. I don’t want to say that, though. I don’t want to risk provoking Giulio by accusing him of being a worse predator than Brad had ever been.

Giulio laughs though. “I know what you’re thinking.” He props himself up with one elbow on either side of me, grinning down at me. “But Giulio! You’re so much worse than my douchebag ex who’d been fucking ten other girls at the same time and sending all the pictures to his buddies! So what if Brad made me think I was ugly and bad in bed!” He kisses the tip of my nose. “Is that about right?”

I could lie, but there’s really no point in it. I meet his eyes and nod, for all that I can’t gather the strength to reply aloud.

“Mama, I’m an unhinged asshole, but I know who I am. I also know that I think you’re fucking hot. And any photos I take are a secret for me, Slayer, and Damien only.” Then he scowls. “You know he had a photo of you? Must have snapped it while you were asleep.”

My blood runs cold. I'd never sent Brad any pictures, even though he'd tried to get me to. I'd never let him take any. He'd known how I felt. To take one while I was sleeping...

"Naked, legs a little splayed. And judging by what he did with all the other photos of chicks on his phone..." Giulio snarls. "Fuck. I should have kept his phone so I could find all his fucking loser buddies."

"Why do you care?" I ask hoarsely, not even bothering to try to wipe away my tears. "Giulio, you... It's not like you're a feminist or a vigilante. You're a mafia boss. You..." I shake my head. How is it that he has me thinking Brad is actually worse for taking a picture of me when I was sleeping and passing it around to his friends? It makes no sense. But I feel just as violated as when Giulio touches me.

"Why shouldn't I care?" Giulio rubs the corners of my eyes to wipe away the tears. "You're mine. I near carved you up because you hurt Damien. You think I wouldn't do the same to somebody who hurt *you*?"

There's a lump in my throat that I can't make sense of. I'm not like Damien. He doesn't care for me the same way. There's no possible way...

But actions speak louder than words, don't they? And Giulio and Slayer had hunted Brad down to make him pay for a few insults, a few fucked-up things. It's almost... touching, in a way, but I don't know how I can even think that. I should be horrified and terrified, but instead, I feel a little... warmer.

"I'll tell you a secret though," Giulio says, lowering himself to be almost fully on top of me. "I was never going to really hurt you. You looked hot, all teary-eyed, thinking I might rip you apart. But I didn't want to kill you. Brad, though? He's fucking lucky Slayer's got more sense than me." He pauses to laugh. "Or maybe he's unlucky Slayer was stupid enough to take me along on that field trip."

I blink up at him, trying to understand. "What? Slayer brought you to Brad's? Why?"

“A fun romantic outing to congratulate me on my pregnancy,” Giulio says, snorting again. “No fucking clue. Ask him why he’s such a dumbfuck.”

“That really was stupid,” I say quietly. “Going to Benton at all, let alone torturing a rich guy with lots of connections on Victor Corvi’s turf. It’s going to cause problems...”

“Nah.” Giulio starts attacking my neck again while one hand winds under my shirt. “He’ll be too humiliated to say anything. He’ll have to admit he was stupid enough to let us in the door in the first place. And... Hey, do you think he’s the type to go to a strip club? I hope he is. He’ll show up at my new place, and the bouncer will recognize him—he’d be on a list—and then I’d... beatings or blackmail, which do you think would hurt worse? No, public humiliation. At that point it’s his own fault, if he’s getting his dick out for a stripper.”

“I really don’t understand why you’re doing all this,” I tell him, but I reach out to tentatively card my fingers through his hair. “He’s in my past. I’m never going to see him again.” The words are bittersweet, but would I really prefer being yanked around by him to this? At one point, I’d have said *definitely*, but now, I’m not so sure, and that scares me a little. “I know you think you’re defending my honor, but—”

The door opens before I can circle back around to the same question I’ve already asked, the same question I know I won’t get a satisfactory answer for. Damien and Slayer step inside, and they’re both tense, wary, like they expected to see Giulio pounding into me or worse.

What do they think, seeing this instead? Giulio atop me, fully dressed, kissing my throat while I run my fingers through his hair?

“Look, I didn’t murder her,” Giulio says. “You two can stop worrying now.”

“I didn’t think you would,” Damien answers, although he doesn’t sound convincing. “Next time, don’t go to Benton without telling me.”

I want to ask Slayer why he did it in the first place, but at the same time, I'm not sure I really want to know. "Will the three of you leave Brad alone now?" I ask quietly, letting my hand drop down to the bed. "Please? He's learned his lesson, I'm sure. No more visits to Benton to see him, no more torture."

Slayer snorts, shaking his head. "He deserved every bit of it and more. If you'd seen the shit he's been texting you—"

I stare at him. "You went through my phone?"

I feel even more violated, and Slayer grits his teeth. "Yes." No apologies, no explanations, nothing.

Giulio cranes his neck to look over his shoulder at Slayer and Damien. "Damien, back me up here. If you'd seen those things, and you had Brad alone in a room with you, fuck the consequences—"

"I'd have shot him, yes," Damien answers. "But there *are* potential consequences. You could have planned something better. Lured him here, had him die in a random mugging gone wrong. Going to his house was ill-advised."

Slayer grimaces. "I didn't think it would get so out of hand, all right?" he says, like he's already said it a thousand times. "And I even said I was fucking sorry. So drop it, Damien."

I don't understand the three of them. After all they've done to me, they still want to kill Brad for a few words, a picture. Why don't they want to kill each other, if they're so damn protective?

I'm never going to get satisfactory answers to that question, though, and I know it.

"The problem was just the venue!" Giulio suddenly sits up and straddles my waist. "Okay, I've been *really fucking good* here, Vanessa, but all that violence did get me revved up. Let's give Damien and Slayer a show."

"The violence was three hours ago," Slayer points out. "And I don't want a show. I want to be part of the action."

The idea of just taking Giulio while the other two watch is strange, somehow intimate but terrifying all at once. It means something more than just sex, and I don't understand why. It's always been the three of them if they're in the same place at the same time. Giulio's never refused to share before.

I'm not sure whether I feel hopeful or disappointed for the future if he gets more possessive of me.

"Nope!" Giulio declares, tugging on my arms. "Vanessa's all mine tonight. You can stay to watch, or you can get out."

Slayer grumbles, but he waves a hand in our direction. "You kids have fun, then. I'm tired."

Damien takes the chair in the corner, though. "I don't mind watching... And it is my bedroom."

I blush a little, even though this is one of the tamest things they've ever done. One person having sex with me while one other watches? That's nothing in comparison to all three of them taking me together.

"Later," Slayer says, letting himself out of the bedroom. I'm surprised he's leaving. I'd have thought out of anyone, he'd be the keenest on watching. But he's gone before I can even think twice about it.

"All right, Mama. Let's give Damien the best porn programming ever."

Giulio kisses me on the lips, and Damien watches us both intensely.

I close my eyes and decide to stop thinking about it, to just go with the flow.

It's the best way to deal with Giulio, after all.

SLAYER

“Can we call this Baca thing a cold case now?” Tiago says as he hangs up the phone. “I’ve got more important shit to look into than...”

He trails off, because he doesn’t want to say a dead cop is unimportant.

Neither do I. I glance around, but it’s getting close to that hour where the day shift is leaving, and the evening shift is only just starting to drift in.

“Eh. It’s not really our precinct, is it?” I say, jabbing the keyboard to finish up a report on a different case.

That seems to be the end of that line of questioning, until I look up and realize Tiago is staring at me.

“What?” I bark at him.

“What’s got you in such a bad mood lately?” Tiago asks. “You roughed up that perp real good earlier, and you know I think they deserve it, but it was a bit extreme even for you. You know you got to pay more attention these days, with all the social media bullshit and every perp crying about how they have rights or whatever.”

I grunt. The guy *had* deserved it. He’d had the audacity to pimp out girls on Giulio’s turf, and when we’d gone in to arrest him, he’d been in the middle of beating one of them. Normally, that wouldn’t have bothered me. I’ve never much cared before.

But all I could see was Vanessa’s face. *She’d* have cared.

Fuck, I don't even know what's going on with me. After Giulio had kicked me and Damien out of the bed the other night, I'd been all out of sorts. Oh, sure, he'd said we could stay and *watch*, but I hadn't liked the feeling of being excluded. I'd been the one to take Giulio down to rough Brad up. I'd deserved to be inside of her as well, a part of the intimacy.

The idea that Giulio might cut me and Damien off completely is not a pleasant one, and it's not even about the sex. I don't know what it actually *is*, though. I can't figure it out.

"Graham?" Tiago prompts when I don't answer right away.

"Yeah, sorry," I say, forcing myself to think about the case instead of Vanessa. Tiago would laugh and laugh if I told him I had a woman at home, especially a pregnant woman. He'd never believe me, either. I've had girlfriends before, but never anyone serious. "But he was a pimp beating a helpless woman, and he didn't instantly surrender. People can freak out about that all they want, but I'm not gonna feel sorry for making that guy pay."

"The captain's gonna call us in if you keep doing it though," Tiago points out, sighing and leaning back in his chair. "Don't need another fucking lecture about correct procedure."

Detective Kawano passes our desk and waves to us, a quick goodbye. I check the clock on the wall—5:45pm already, damn. I've been sitting on this report for at least half an hour, and all I've added is...

fuck off giulio she's not just yours

Jesus fucking Christ. I delete everything, save the few bits of the report that are salvageable, and turn everything off.

"I'm leaving," I say, shoving away from my desk. "Fuck. I just need..."

I need to get her out of my head. I need to get them both out of my head. I'm not going to get down like this because of a woman. Because of Giulio. I've never gotten upset about

being denied a woman before; I could always get another one. They don't usually say no to me. It's not like I'm bad-looking, and while my cock might only be *average*, I know how to use it.

Tiago nods and gets up too. "Sure. Want to hit up The Web again? I bet we could find somebody for you, too. I call dibs on Chantal though."

The idea of hitting up a strip club is so unappealing, though. I can't take out my frustrations on some random stripper, and just watching someone else be off limits to my touch... No.

"Nah. I need something a little more fulfilling than a striptease," I say, and that's honest, at least. But maybe it's just a matter of the person giving the striptease...

"Then let's go to a bar, get a few beers and see if any of the ladies there are looking for fun. Which they will be, when they see us." Tiago glances around the open office. "Hey, Davidson, want to come out for drinks with us? Graham needs to get laid."

"Why invite me, then?" Davidson responds. "I'm not fucking him!" He's laughing though, already pulling his coat on. "Tell you what, I'll be a good wingman for you. I won't even tell the chicks about your tiny-ass cock."

"Jesus, what is *wrong* with you people?" I explode before I can catch myself. "If you're not sporting a foot-long dick, you're suddenly small these days?" My defensiveness is going to make it sound like I really do have a tiny dick. I force myself to calm down. "You're just jealous because I don't need to brag about my size to get a woman."

Tiago and Davidson are both staring at me, letting me know my attempt to deflect hadn't worked.

"Uh, maybe you should just go home," Tiago finally says. "You got a tub? Bubble baths are, I swear, actually really nice and relaxing. I think you need that more than the fuck."

Davidson nods along. "Yeah, don't be one of those workplace stress casualties, Graham. They'll make you take

psych evals and deem you unfit for work, because we all know you wouldn't pass."

I nearly growl at the thought of that. I'm just *fine*. There's nothing fucking wrong with me. I'm just a little irritable. "Shove your bubble baths," I mutter, but there's no real venom in the words. "Fine, whatever, a beer and a fucking bath, and I'm sure I'll come back tomorrow and tell you what a miracle cure it was."

I grab my stuff so I can get out of there without any more ribbing, or god forbid, friendly concern.

Once I'm in my car, I swap phones. I stare at the contacts list for a minute, then stab my finger at one of the numbers. It rings, and I wait for Damien to pick up. With any luck, Vanessa's still there.

With any luck, Giulio hasn't made her completely off-limits to me.

"What?" Damien asks, sounding just as irritable as I am. "If you want permission to take Giulio on another field trip, the answer is *no*."

"I don't fucking want Giulio. You can deal with him and his bullshit," I snap at him. "I'm coming to get Vanessa."

There's a long pause, and I'm already imagining how I'm going to beat Damien bloody if he tries to deny me.

"Okay," Damien says, a little steadier. "I need to run some... errands with Giulio anyway. She'll be better off with you than one of the men."

Jealousy surges through me even more strongly. Damien would leave her with one of the guards instead of calling me to take her for a little bit? Christ, are they completely cock-blocking me at this point? "You can always call me to take her if you need a break," I say testily. "I'll be there in ten."

I hang up before I can say anything that makes him change his mind, but I'm seething. My knuckles are white from where I'm gripping the steering wheel so tightly, and it's all I can do not to let road rage overwhelm me as I hit three fucking red

lights in a row on the way to the fancy condos Damien and Giulio live in.

When I get there, I wait for the familiar guy at the desk to buzz me up, and I take the elevator to Damien's floor. I'm calmer by the time I knock on the door—or at least, I look calmer, because I know he wouldn't let Vanessa come with me if he realizes how pissed off and agitated I really am.

Of course, I nearly fuck that calm up when the door opens and it's Giulio standing there, munching on an ice cream bar of all things.

"Hey," Giulio says, and it sounds like he's taunting me. "You want some leftovers to take along? I promise I didn't let Damien completely drown it in spice, although apparently Vanessa's suddenly got a taste for it."

"I don't want your artisan crap," I say, trying not to growl out the words. Good for him that he's so relaxed and at ease, just eating his fucking ice cream while I'm trying not to reach out and strangle him.

Giulio stares at me, licking the ice cream obscenely. "Sure. We made khao soi together. Vanessa's actually not half bad at cooking. All that maternal instinct or whatever other sexist reason there is why women can cook better than men as long as it's unpaid." He laughs to himself. "That's good, right? I swear, she always boggles when I make it clear I do know what a dick I am."

I clench my jaw, really, really wanting to strangle him, and I can't stop the surge of jealousy that races through me. So Vanessa cooked, and the three of them had a really nice dinner, huh? I could've left work early, if they'd invited me. It's only just past six. Since when does Giulio even eat that early? It's like they were purposely trying to leave me out and make sure I couldn't come.

I'm being paranoid, I'm sure, but at the same time...

"Nah," I say shortly. "Where's Vanessa? I'm ready to go."

He keeps staring at me though, while he keeps licking his ice cream. His tongue darts out, and I know he's doing it on

purpose now, trying to make it look like he's sucking something a bit warmer than ice cream.

“Want me to blow you before you go?” he suddenly says. “Just this once, I won't even suggest you return the favor.”

I blink at him. I hadn't been expecting that at all. But it digs at me, because it almost feels like a consolation prize. A going away gift.

Fuck, what am I going to do if they really do cut me out of their lives?

“No,” Damien says, popping out from the kitchen. “We don't have time for that. Stop trying to be late for everything.”

Vanessa is standing next to Damien, dressed in a knee-length wool sweater dress, tights, and long boots.

Giulio laughs and claps me on the shoulder. “He sees through everything! And blowing Slayer is a much better use of my time than meeting with that boring old fart.”

“Giulio, you're already planning on cutting off a finger or something. It's not going to be a boring meeting.” Damien rubs his brow. “Stop acting out.”

“He thinks I'm a toddler,” Giulio whispers loudly to me. “He's going to regret having kids. Or maybe not. Everybody's more manageable than me, right?”

I stare at Giulio, unimpressed. Usually, he'd have gotten a snicker or something from me at the very least, but I'm just not in the fucking mood. “Go have fun cutting off body parts,” I say. “Come on, Vanessa.” I try to keep my voice as even as I can. I don't want to take my anger out on her. If I do, that'll give Giulio the excuse he needs to keep her away from me.

Not that he really needs an excuse, apparently.

To my shock, Vanessa pauses long enough to give Damien a sweet kiss, doing the same with Giulio before she comes to my side. She hesitates, then leans in to kiss me, too. Startled, I don't kiss back immediately, and she frowns when she pulls away.

I wrap an arm around her waist, my voice a little rough as I tell her, “C’mon.” I glance at Giulio and Damien. “I’ll drop her off in the morning.”

“Sure. Have fun. Vanessa, make him show you the train room. That might put Slayer in a better mood,” Giulio says, right before he shuts the door on us.

“Dick,” I hiss at the closed door.

Vanessa looks up at me, squirming a little against me. She looks unsure, and it’s clear she can sense my mood—not that I’m doing a lot to try to hide it. She says nothing, though, letting me lead her to the elevator. She doesn’t try to make small talk, and I don’t either. It isn’t until I get her in the car that I finally speak again.

“So, good dinner, huh?” I ask, my voice a little ugly.

She eyes me warily. “Yes. Giulio’s a good cook.”

I back out of my parking space, trying desperately to fight back the jealousy that just keeps creeping up more and more. “Good.”

She’s quiet for several moments while I get on the road heading toward my place. “Are... Are you all right?” she finally asks.

“Like you give a fuck,” I snap at her, unable to keep myself in check.

Vanessa flinches, her cheeks turning pink. “I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t want to know,” she says, a little defensively.

Yeah, she just wants to know what she can do to keep me from turning my anger onto her.

I know on some level that this is absolutely not fair to her. She hasn’t done anything wrong. She doesn’t control when they eat, or if Giulio kicks me out of the bed—though she’d probably have made the same choice. She didn’t, though. This is my quarrel with Giulio, not Vanessa, and I want to have a decent evening to make up for the shitty day I’ve had.

“Just a rough day at work,” I mutter. “You don’t really want to know the details. I deal with shittier people than

myself on a daily basis.”

She doesn't comment on that.

This is a bad idea. I should just bring her back and let one of the guards watch her... but no. The idea of leaving her alone with one of them just brings rampant jealousy back to the surface, and no matter how much I hate it, I can't do a damn thing about it.

We leave Giulio's fancy neighborhood and end up in mine. Rush hour traffic is a bitch though, enough that I almost want to turn on the sirens just to get home at a reasonable rate. It's not worth the hassle though, and the car ride gives me more time to try to calm down.

Or it gives me time to get more pissed off.

“What did you do today?” I ask, even though I know I'm going to hate the answer.

Vanessa grimaces. “Doctor's appointment,” she says.

I'm sure they did that as a big, happy family, too, with everyone crowding around to fawn over the mother-to-be while I dealt with pimps and paperwork. “Yeah? How'd it go?”

“Not too bad, I guess...” She trails off.

“What?” I ask, glancing at her while I stop at yet another red light.

She shakes her head. “I just wasn't comfortable with it.”

Rage and jealousy threaten to boil up within me again at the idea of anyone else touching Vanessa, even if it was a doctor or a nurse. “Damien and Giulio were there?”

“It was just Damien,” she says. She pauses, then slowly adds, “And he... likes that sort of thing.” She shudders.

Yeah, it doesn't surprise me that Damien would get off on something like a medical visit. “Everything good with the baby?”

She bites her bottom lip, quiet for a moment. “Yes,” she finally says. “Everything looks good. The heartbeat is strong.

They took blood and all to make sure everything's okay. There's another appointment for an ultrasound."

"Oh." I don't really know what to say to that, and it's my turn to fall silent. Neither of us talks the rest of the way to my apartment. I get out of the car, going around to let her out like I'm a gentleman, and she even takes my hand to let me help her out of the car. It's a small thing, but I like it.

Fuck, what is wrong with me?

I lead her into the building, heading to my apartment. Once inside, I toss my keys onto the table. I stare at her, unsure of what to do next. I want to take her to my bedroom and fuck her, but I don't trust myself. I'm too keyed up, and if something happened to the baby because I was careless, Giulio really would block me out of their lives. Hell, *I* don't want anything happening to the baby. I want to see her belly swell, to know there's a new life in there, and for her to eventually produce a child that might even carry my DNA. It'll be Giulio's, sure, but...

"Do you want me to fix you something to eat?" she asks after a moment of fidgeting beneath my stare.

Maybe watching her be all domestic in my kitchen would help my mood. "Yeah, sure," I say. Not that I have much on hand. "You can make me an omelet." There's at least enough shit for that.

We go into the kitchen, and she starts to dig things out. I help her find the frying pan, getting things out of the fridge. Eggs, onions, bell peppers, mushrooms... I clumsily chop some of them up. I'm no chef, but it's just eggs.

I sit down while she starts to do the actual cooking portion, watching her.

"This how you cooked for Giulio and Damien?" I ask. Apparently I just want to poke at all my sores.

"No," she answers quietly. "I chopped and mixed stuff while Giulio directed. But apparently my chopping skills are better than Damien's." She bites her lip, like she's trying to

hide a smile. “And Giulio threatened to pour Damien’s spice packets down the sink.”

It would’ve been heart-warming and funny if I’d been there, I’m sure, but it does nothing to lift the clouds from my dark mood. “Yours, too,” I say, trying to fight off the feeling. “Since Giulio said you’re starting to get spicy cravings too.”

Vanessa nods, glancing a little uncertainly at me. “It’s weird. It’s not stuff I’d normally like, but I can’t seem to get enough of it.”

“You hungry again? You can fix something for yourself, or I can order something,” I say.

“No, I’m still full. Thank you, though.”

Silence falls between us again, and I find myself wishing all over again that I just hadn’t even tried. I should’ve gone to the bar with Tiago and Davidson. Fuck their suggestions of a bubble bath; I need liquor and a hot woman to fuck.

Except I have liquor here I don’t feel like touching, and a beautiful woman who feels out of reach now.

“Some guy was beating down some prostitutes,” I burst out without even thinking about what I’m saying. “It pissed me off.”

She jumps, startled, and looks at me.

I grit my teeth, berating myself for just saying whatever the fuck is coming to mind. “I never used to care, you know.”

Her eyes darken at that, and she turns back to the pan.

“Yeah. I’m a real piece of work. You know that. Just like Giulio, and Damien. All three of us are monsters, right? But there are worse monsters out there, and I guess having you around has made me see things a little differently,” I say, finally getting up to get a beer out of the fridge.

“If that makes you feel better,” she says quietly. Then her eyes widen, like she realizes what she just said, like she’s afraid I’m going to be pissed off at her.

I want to scowl at her, but I only sigh. “Look,” I say, plopping back down into the chair. “I know you think I’m a total dick, especially with the cop thing.”

“I didn’t say that,” Vanessa says quickly, flipping the omelet over without looking at me.

“You asked me that night why I became a cop,” I say, peeling the label on the beer bottle without taking a drink from it.

Her shoulders go tense, but she doesn’t look at me, doesn’t speak.

“None of us grew up in a happy home,” I say after a moment. “My dad, he was a cop. Always working, always up to one thing or the next. He’d come home, ranting and raving about how the perps got away with everything. How he couldn’t do anything because they’d always get out on a technicality.” I sigh.

She stays quiet, getting a plate from the cabinet but still not looking at me.

“He died,” I say bluntly. “In the line of duty. Guy was never even convicted of it. A cop killer, and nothing happened to him.” I laugh bitterly. “Yeah. That was... I don’t know. I joined the force, thinking it’d be the first thing I’d ever done to make him proud.”

Why am I telling her this? I take a large gulp from my beer, like that’ll help, but it doesn’t. It just reminds me of all the nights I’ve spent at home with beer and the TV, alone and miserable, when Giulio hasn’t needed me around.

Jesus Christ, when did I get so pathetic?

“My dad was angry all the time,” Vanessa says. She places the omelet in front of me, then sits down on the chair farthest away. “And my mom was a drunk. Still is a drunk, probably. But you already know all that. You know everything about me.”

I pick up a fork and stab into the omelet, taking a bite. “Yeah. It’s not fair, is it?”

She shakes her head. “But none of this is fair, is it? My sister is Victor Corvi’s... I don’t know. I don’t know what happened to her. My mom pretty much sold me out, my dad is dead, I’m carrying Giulio Pavone’s baby—”

Or mine, I want to say, but I don’t speak.

“—and I just wanted a normal life.”

“Yeah,” I say after I swallow my first bite. “Thanks for the food. Listen...” I look at her, and she meets my eyes. “I know you hate me.”

“I don’t hate you,” Vanessa says. Lies.

I snort, taking another swig of beer. “Whatever. I still want to be a good uncle. To the baby, and all. I don’t know how to be a good uncle, but I figure I can learn.”

Vanessa plays with the sleeves of her dress, tugging at the fabric. I’ve rarely seen her so covered up, but Damien or Giulio did a good job finding something that she looks good in.

I really shouldn’t be thinking of her as hot when she isn’t even showing any skin.

“Why did you go to Benton with Giulio?” she asks after a long moment of silence.

I finish chewing my bite of eggs and sigh. “I already told you, I went through your phone, and there was all this shit, and it pissed me off,” I say. “He deserved to be put in his place. Giulio and Damien get pissed just because he exists, pretty much, and I thought... Ugh, it was a dumb idea.” I shake my head. “Don’t worry. Damien laid into me pretty hard about it. I get it. Nice feeling like a five-year-old who did something wrong.”

Which is probably why they’re excluding me now, because I fucked up.

“He lectured Giulio the next morning,” Vanessa says, still barely looking at me. “But Giulio grinned through it all. If you’d stayed, you might have witnessed it. I think Giulio got off on it a little.”

I blink at her, a little surprised to hear her say that. I quirk my brows. “Yeah?”

She nods.

I don’t say anything, trying to imagine it. Yeah, I can see Giulio blowing it off and getting turned on by it. He likes putting Damien through hell.

“Why didn’t you stay?” she asks abruptly. “To... to watch.” She’s blushing furiously, and she stares down at her dress instead of looking at me.

I finish the omelet and guzzle down the rest of my beer, not wanting to answer that question and trying everything I can to stall. I should just tell her to fuck off. She doesn’t need to know about my *feelings*, or whatever.

“I didn’t want to watch,” I finally say.

“I think Giulio wanted you to stay.” She brushes a lock of hair behind her ear. “*Damien* wanted you to stay. Because he kept getting annoyed at Giulio.”

I’m surprised to hear her say that, and my mouth goes a little dry. “Yeah? What about you? Did *you* want me there? Watching while Giulio fucked you raw?”

Vanessa blushes, still fidgeting. “I...” She seems at a loss, and for a moment, she just stares down at her lap. “I don’t know. It... It was sort of nice, to have Damien watch. It might’ve been nice to have you watch, too.”

I don’t know what to think of that. Is this the same woman Damien and Giulio had kidnapped?

“I guess I just didn’t feel like I should be there. It felt like it was... between you and Giulio,” I mutter.

I need another fucking beer, but I don’t get up to get one. The last thing I need is to get drunk.

“It’s never just between me and Giulio, or me and Damien, or even me and you,” Vanessa mumbles. “You’re always there, even if you’re not.”

There's a lump in my throat, and I don't know what to say to that. I want to ask if it's a good thing, but I really don't think she feels like it is, and I don't want to hear her say that. "We... care about you, you know," I finally say, my voice so uncertain I barely recognize it as my own. "That's why we did what we did with Brad. Why Damien said he'd have shot him. He hurt you. Yeah, we hurt you too, but you're... You're *ours* to hurt."

"That doesn't make any sense," Vanessa says with a short bark of laughter that doesn't sound amused at all.

"If anyone else hurts you, we'll kill them," I say bluntly. "You belong to us." To *us*. It has to be us, not *them*. I don't know if I can stand it if I'm left out of this whole family. Not when I'm finally starting to feel like I fit in somewhere, not when something is finally going right for once.

"Why?" Her voice cracks a bit. "I'm just... I'm *boring*. Average. No ass, no tits." She laughs brokenly. "No skill in bed. There really are a million other women out there who'd fit you better. So why me?"

I stare at her, and her obvious pain drags me out of my own stupid jealous possessiveness. How can she still think that about herself? Haven't we shown her how much better she is than that?

I get up, going to stand beside her, and lean down to kiss the top of her head. She flinches but doesn't pull away, and I gently urge her to her feet so she stands in front of me. She's almost as tall as I am, which I've never been into until her. "You're gorgeous, Vanessa," I say quietly, feeling awkward, like I'm some teenager in a Hallmark movie expressing his love or some shit. "You're amazing in bed. Yeah, we like it when you're scared, when you're hurting, when you're crying, when you're pregnant... but that's just us."

She doesn't say anything, even as I wrap my arms around her and pull her tightly against me, but it isn't long before I feel tears leaking into my shirt. I rub her back.

"Fuck, Vanessa," I say with a strained laugh. "I got so pissed off that Giulio wouldn't let me near you that I came

home and sulked.” I can’t believe I’m admitting that to her, but she’s being so vulnerable, sounding so lost and uncertain, that I can’t help but reciprocate just a little.

She rubs at her eyes and glances up at me. “What? Giulio wouldn’t do that. I mean... you know him better than I do. But I think... he likes sharing?”

“Yeah, I know. Usually. But you’re different for him. Special.” I hesitate. “He doesn’t give a fuck about people, Vanessa, but when Brad said that shit about you... He fucking lost it. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to keep Giulio from killing him.”

Vanessa shudders, which wasn’t exactly the reaction I was going for. But I guess not everyone thinks that someone being willing to kill for their honor is sexy or a sign of devotion.

Their loss.

“Anyway,” I say, not wanting to dwell on that. “Let’s just... Vanessa, you’re...” I let out a frustrated sound, trying to figure out what exactly I want to say but failing miserably. “You need to stop thinking of yourself like that. We think you’re perfect the way you are. We’d fight to keep you, because you’re *you*.”

“Damien said I was just a... a broodmare. You don’t have to hurt people for my sake. I’m already pregnant.”

Ugh, fucking Damien. “Yeah, and you know what Giulio told me?” I tilt her chin up. “That Damien’s been into you since the first moment he laid eyes on you. At some pool party. I think Damien doesn’t always say what he means. He gets off on calling you those things, but it doesn’t mean he doesn’t like you.”

“Right,” Vanessa scoffs. “Because people always talk so cruelly about people they like.” She shakes her head. “That pool party was a nightmare.”

Giulio had made it sound almost fun, but of course Vanessa wouldn’t have seen it like that.

“I’m glad Damien’s as hard-headed as he is,” I say, kissing the side of her head. “Because that means we ended up with

you.” I pause, then add, “And he’s not that bad, y’know? I’ve seen how he treats you, and he’s mellowing out some.” I smirk and run my hands up and down her back. “He doesn’t hate me as much as he used to, which is progress.”

“Because you’re a cop?” Vanessa asks.

I nod. “That, and he thinks I’m a bad influence on Giulio.”

Vanessa peers up at me, and there’s a small, crooked smile at the corners of her lips. “Well... Aren’t you?”

Snorting, I shake my head. “Absolutely not. Giulio’s the bad influence.”

“Without Giulio, you would have been an upstanding cop?” Vanessa asks, with a heavy dose of doubt in her voice.

“I see where this is going,” I say, laughing. “Maybe not. But let’s be real, Giulio brings out the... most interesting part of all of us. Bet you didn’t think you’d get so good at roleplay, huh?”

“It’s a skill I could’ve done without,” Vanessa says. “I’ve never felt a calling as an actress.” She pulls away from me.

I briefly let her go, and she turns so she’s facing the table instead of me. My hands slide down her sides, and I nuzzle her neck. “Don’t pull away from me,” I murmur, my hands going down farther so I can start bunching up the fabric of her dress. I pull it up, rubbing my mostly-soft dick against her ass. “You’re so beautiful, Vanessa. You just have to be near me, and all I can think about is you.” I kiss her neck, one of my hands going to rest on her small breast. “My coworkers wanted me to go out with them tonight. To get drunk and get women.” I laugh, but the sound isn’t really all that amused. “I couldn’t get my mind off of you.”

Vanessa half-sobs, half-laughs. “I don’t think that’s as romantic as you think it is.”

“That’s fine if you think that,” I answer, pulling her dress up higher so I can get to the waistband of her tights. “Also, Christ, did Giulio put all these layers on you just to annoy me?”

“No, I... I asked for real clothes. And Damien had them already.” Vanessa’s hand joins mine in pulling the tights down.

I snort in amusement. “You really think Damien doesn’t care? He isn’t buying gifts for any other women.”

But I don’t really want to talk about Giulio and Damien anymore.

“Anyway,” I say, holding the dress up even as we get the tights down, “it doesn’t matter. I told you I care, and that’s...” I let out a quiet laugh, feeling like a teenager again. “Something? Right?”

Vanessa is quiet for a moment, then she nods. “Yes,” she says. “It’s something.”

I want to press, but I don’t want her to shut down on me, either. Instead, I unfasten my belt and pants, letting them fall to my ankles as I stand behind her. I keep kissing the back of her neck, down to her collarbone, anywhere I can reach. Her skin is so soft, and she smells amazing—like flowers, but not like an old sachet in some old lady’s home. Sweet and light, like honeysuckle. I breathe her in, and for a moment, I wish she would turn around and kiss me instead of simply accepting what I want to do to her.

I shove that thought away quickly, though. Instead, I rub my dick against her underwear before pulling those down, too, until her ass is completely bared to me.

I run my fingers between her folds, and she’s already so warm. Not completely wet yet the way she usually gets, but judging from how her breathing has pitched, it won’t take long.

“Want me to finger you first?” I ask her, teasing her hole. “Or skip straight to the main event?”

She shudders, her indecision weighing heavily on the air. To admit she wants pleasure, or to simply allow me to take her and pretend she had no choice in it—it’s got to be a difficult call for her.

Finally, though, she whispers, “Touch me first.” She nearly chokes on the words, but adds, “please.”

I grin against her shoulder, nipping the skin I can reach around her dress. "Of course."

I stroke her gently, finding her clit and teasing it. I run my finger up and down her folds, dipping my finger inside of her every so often to see if she's truly getting turned on or if the breathy sounds she's making are for show.

Judging from how wet my fingers soon become, they aren't.

Vanessa is always so sensitive to touch, and that clearly hasn't changed just because it's only the two of us. My touch excites her, just like Giulio's and Damien's. I revel in that as I finger her.

I bet Brad never did this to her.

I gently bend her over the table, smoothing the dress up until her ass is completely bare to me, but I don't stop fingering her until she tenses and whimpers, until she moans and her entire body convulses with her climax.

Quickly, I thrust into her, enjoying the way her walls clench around me as pleasure sweeps through both of us. It's like she's fisting my cock this way, squeezing tightly but with even more pleasure offered than just a hand ever could. Soft, and warm, and wet... I moan, enjoying the feeling of her body around my cock.

It hits me then that she's already pregnant. I have her like this, hot and horny and begging for my cock, and there's already a life growing inside her. My DNA or Giulio's or Damien's, it doesn't matter. The thought is so overwhelming that I come way too fast.

I cling to her through my orgasm, kissing her neck and cheek, anywhere I can reach.

She moans, and while she doesn't come again, she's still tight around me. It's enough.

For now.

I hold her to me after I finish, not ready to let her go. I feel irrationally needy, clingy, and I'm glad I have her until

morning.

After my cock slips out of her—too soon, I just want to stay close to her—Vanessa awkwardly turns around. Her face is so beautiful like this, too, flushed, a bit of sweat on her brow, breathing hard. I kiss her, groaning when she wraps her arms around me to kiss me back.

I don't know what I'm doing, just that the sex alone wasn't enough to satisfy me.

She smiles a little shyly after I break the kiss.

“What?” I ask, happy to see the expression even if I'm a bit confused.

“No. I just remembered...” Vanessa averts her gaze. “Can you show me your trains? I saw some of the build last time I was here.” She points toward the wall shelf in the kitchen, where a German train model is sitting in a display case. “You really like them, huh?”

I don't know why that makes me feel even more vulnerable. But I nod, and after another kiss, I pull back. “Yeah. Whatever Giulio told you about them, I bet he got it wrong. My trains are better than his pets.”

She giggles and nods. “Yeah. I think I agree.”

I love the sound of her laugh, and before I know what I'm doing, I've pulled her into another kiss.

I'll need her again.

And again.

Until something finally settles inside of me... assuming it even can.

DAMIEN

My phone has a string of messages from Giulio on it.

Why the fuck is this still an issue?

Torture somebody to figure this shit out if you have to!

I was hoping to avoid that, but it's true that it's been over two months since the accounting issue at Ntimacy was brought to our attention, and it's still no closer to resolved.

Vanessa peers over my shoulder to look at my phone.

"Oh. I thought he was going to ask you for pictures," she says, completely tense.

We're sitting in the waiting room of the obstetrician's office. Everything is a bland beige, with posters on the wall about pregnancy health and prenatal care. Photos of smiling babies too, to remind everybody why they're here.

There's one other woman in the waiting room, heavily pregnant, and she's busy on her own phone.

It feels like a risk, to have Vanessa out here, in public, but she's been really good the past week. And she has the GPS inside her, so even if she ran, where would she go that we wouldn't find her?

"He did," I say, scrolling the texts up. "But I don't think he meant it."

"Well, he can wait for pictures," she says. She stares down at the phone. "I've been *trying* to figure out what's going on, but I'm getting information third-hand. I don't have receipts to

match up, I don't have the girls' totals to match up... I know something's wrong because the debits aren't balancing with the credits, but that's all I've got right now."

"It isn't your fault," I say quickly, because it's true that she doesn't have all the information. Maybe if I sat down and compared everything, I'd be able to find the problem, but I don't have time for all that. Romano's been posturing, Giulio's business prospects in Benton are getting hassled by Corvi, and of course I've been helping Giulio run everything here in New Bristol too.

We need more people to delegate to, but Giulio's been dragging his feet on that too. He doesn't trust anyone.

"Mrs. Pavone?" the receptionist suddenly calls out. "Dr. Savage is ready to see you now."

Vanessa flinches, just like she did the last time she attended a doctor's appointment under the name *Vanessa Pavone*. But I offer her a hand, and she gets up, letting me lead her to the doorway.

A smiling nurse waits at the door to lead us into the back. She gets Vanessa to hop onto the scale first, then brings us into one of the rooms nearby.

"Here we are!" the nurse says, starting to type on the computer in front of her. "Let's get your vitals. Any symptoms you're worried about?"

Vanessa shakes her head, holding out her arm for the nurse to check her blood pressure. I can see the numbers on the device's screen, and they look good. Everything seems to be going so well, and it'll be even better today when we can see the baby for the first time.

Our baby.

Even Giulio's irritation and impatience can't take this moment away from me.

The nurse leaves us alone in the room. Vanessa very pointedly sits down on the chair in the corner, not the exam chair in the middle of the room.

I cover my amusement and go to stand next to her, kissing the top of her head. “You’ll have to remove your tights and your underwear,” I say as I rub her shoulders. “For the ultrasound.”

“It’s too soon for an ultrasound,” Vanessa tries to protest, but she gets up anyway. She takes off her shoes and pulls her tights and panties off, folding them neatly and setting them on the chair. She goes to sit on the exam table, pulling the sheet over her waist.

“It isn’t. You’re... seven or eight weeks pregnant?” I wish the tracking app could help me determine that. I know when her last period was, but there’s no telling when she actually became pregnant. It had probably been after Giulio had stopped her from using the contraceptive sponges, but those don’t have a one hundred percent success rate at preventing pregnancy anyway.

“I don’t know,” she says, her body a little tense as she looks past me instead of at me. “I guess we’ll find out today.” I wish she sounded as happy as I feel about the whole thing.

“We’ll get an ultrasound now, one in the second trimester, and again in the third.”

If it were up to me, I’d have her get one every month. Every week. I want to see our child developing. I want to document every step of this process.

I should be taking more photos of Vanessa, too, so we can look back at how much her belly grew. She’s not too keen on the idea, but she’s been dutifully posing for them anyway.

The door opens, and this time, the doctor steps inside.

“Dr. Savage,” I greet, extending my hand to him.

He eyes me before shaking my hand. “Rossi. It’s been a while.”

Dr. Hunter Savage is a family friend of the Pavones. The Savages have long ties with the Pavones—not overtly organized crime but taking bribes to help their political careers. Dr. Savage isn’t the only one in the family to have

gone into medicine instead, but somehow, he and Giulio hit it off.

Possibly because Giulio was always happy to introduce Savage to women.

Giulio had once called Savage handsome, and I suppose he's right. The man is a little taller than Vanessa—shorter than me—and has curly black hair, high cheekbones, a sharp nose, and just a hint of scruff on his face.

Shortly after Giulio had mentioned how attractive he found Savage, he had also lamented that Savage was “way too straight.” It did amuse me to know that there were some men even Giulio couldn't talk into a threesome.

Savage looks at the digital chart. “Routine pregnancy check, is it? Giulio mentioned something about this.”

Vanessa fidgets, looking at the doctor for a moment. She recognized the name as Stef's buyer, so she knows what kind of man she's dealing with here—and it's not someone who would help her if she tried to ask for it.

“Yes,” I tell him. “We had the initial exam done at the other office, but we still need the first ultrasound to figure out the conception date and potential delivery date.”

Vanessa flinches, not looking at me or the doctor. She plays with the seam of the sheet draped over her waist instead.

Savage nods and sets the tablet aside. He peers at Vanessa, then asks, “Do I need to call the nurse into the room?”

“No,” I answer, before Vanessa can say anything. “I'm here to watch over her.”

“I think I'd like a nurse in here,” Vanessa says anyway, her voice trembling a little bit as she looks between us.

Savage meets my eyes and gives me a wry smile. “Giulio did mention your... predilections. But this is going to be a strictly professional exam, even if I shouldn't be the one doing the ultrasound.”

I'm not surprised that Giulio has been talking about me, although I wish he would be more discreet. “Of course.

Nothing untoward will happen. I'm chaperoning, after all."

Vanessa glances at me furtively, and I can tell she's thinking about the first examination she went through with me "chaperoning." She frowns, shifting on the exam table, but she nods to the doctor. She doesn't seem to believe him, though, if the look on her face is any indication.

"Legs in the stirrups," Savage says to Vanessa in a bored tone, like he fully expects her to comply without question.

Like she's nothing more than livestock.

To her credit, she doesn't argue, but she does pull the sheet a little more tightly around herself as she sets her feet into the stirrups at the end of the table.

"Move down a little more," he directs her, until I think her ass is at the very edge of the examination table.

Again, she obeys, but she keeps casting wary looks in my direction.

Savage wheels the ultrasound machine and its monitor closer, angling it so Vanessa and I can see the screen. He pulls on a pair of latex gloves and lubes up the wand.

I wish I were the one holding the wand. I wish I were the one sitting down on the stool between her legs, gently touching her pussy and spreading her hole to get the wand inside her.

"She shouldn't feel any discomfort," Savage says, and I have to cover the warring annoyance and amusement.

He isn't even treating Vanessa like a person. I want to comfort her and tell him off, but I feel the thrum of arousal in my cock too.

I do want to see, though. I close the gap between me and Vanessa and tug at the sheet. She tries to hold onto it, but I'm stronger, and I have it off her. The skirt still offers her a minimum amount of protection, but I pull that up too so it's bunched around her waist and I can finally see where the wand goes into her.

My mouth goes a bit dry. Vanessa whimpers and squeezes her eyes shut.

Savage pretends like nothing has happened at all and continues to push the wand deeper into Vanessa. My gaze is transfixed on that.

Maybe I could convince Giulio to set up a proper doctor roleplay...

“Well. There you go,” Savage says, motioning to the monitor. “There’s the future baby.”

Vanessa’s gaze is on the screen, and she bites her bottom lip. I glance up at her, trying to get a read on what she’s thinking, what she’s feeling, but she doesn’t say anything.

I’m speechless myself, staring at the monitor. Just a tiny little white shadow on the screen, but that’s going to be my child. Giulio’s child.

“Is it healthy?” I ask, transfixed. I can tell where the head and legs are going to be. It’s still not much more than a tadpole, but I already feel my heart swelling just looking at it.

Savage glances at the monitor and does something with the wand to change the angle of the image. “Yeah. You can see the heartbeat. Obviously, a lot of issues can arise later, but for now, and given how young she is, I don’t see anything to be worried about.”

Vanessa makes a strange sound. “How... How far along am I?”

Savage shrugs. “Given the size, eight-ish weeks.” He moves the wand a bit more and hits some buttons on the ultrasound device. “I assume you want copies of these.”

“Yes,” I answer immediately. “Video too, if you can.”

“Yep. The magic of modern technology.” Savage meets my eyes and raises his brows. “Are you done? Or do you want to stare a bit more?”

Years and years with Giulio have taught me not to show any expression at all, even though I feel a faint sense of

embarrassment at being so obvious. “I’m done, thank you,” I say coolly.

Savage nods, pulling the wand out of Vanessa.

She hisses out a breath, but she quickly asks Savage, “Is Stef all right?”

He freezes for a second before continuing what he was doing, setting the wand aside to be sterilized and getting up to throw the latex gloves in the trash. “That’s none of your business.”

Vanessa scoots up on the examination table and sits up, and despite the heat in her cheeks, she says, “She’s my *friend*. Of course it’s my business.”

“*Stef* is done with that part of her life.” Savage turns to glare at me. “You and Giulio are very permissive.”

I hand Vanessa her underwear and tights. “We’re trying to keep stress down. For the sake of the baby.” But I lean down to whisper to Vanessa, “Let it go.”

Vanessa casts a defiant look at me, and before I can stop her, she retorts, “*Stef* is still a person, not your toy. All I asked was how she was doing.”

There’s a moment where Savage sneers at Vanessa, but he clears that expression to something a little more palatable. “In which case: she’s fine. I won’t tell her you asked—for her own sake.”

It’s obvious Vanessa wants to say something else, but I put my hand on her arm and squeeze lightly, shaking my head.

She glowers at me, but she starts to get dressed again, pulling her underwear back on.

“They’ll get your pictures to you at the front, and they’ll email you the video,” Savage says, his voice still a bit cool.

“Thank you,” I say, wrapping an arm around Vanessa. “I really appreciate it.”

Savage snorts. “Yeah. It was supposed to be my day off. A radiologist could have done this for you.”

“But it would have been less interesting,” I respond, and I can already hear Giulio chuckling about that. Maybe I should bring him along for the next appointment. He’d invite Slayer too, though, and with the three of us, it would be too suspicious to take Vanessa to a regular doctor’s office.

It’s a good thing Dr. Savage is an obstetrician.

He looks at Vanessa again, with a bit more open disapproval. I pull her closer to me.

“She did tell me about you,” he says, after a pause. “I think it’s better for her that she’s no longer in contact with you.”

He leaves before Vanessa can respond to that. She looks like he just slapped her, though, with all the color draining from her face. She looks up at me, helplessly, and to my shock, she wraps her arms around me and presses her face against my shoulder.

“Don’t take it personally,” I say, rubbing her back. “It sounds like he likes Stef, so that’s a good thing.” I start leading her out of the exam room. “Let’s pick up those pictures and send some to Giulio. And Slayer. We can celebrate the little tadpole tonight.”

She stays at my side, her voice quiet but tentatively amused as she says, “Tadpole?”

“That’s what it looked like on the monitor,” I explain, fighting a small smile. “It’ll grow a proper head and legs later. Like a frog.”

Vanessa shakes her head, but she doesn’t comment as we approach the front desk. The woman hands me an envelope, and inside is a series of pictures of the little tadpole itself.

A baby, just for us. I feel my eyes prickle as I stare at the pictures some more.

Maybe I can actually trust that my hopes will become reality this time.

VANESSA

“I need to talk to Donny. You can talk to the girls while you wait,” Damien says to me.

I’m still reeling a bit from the pictures of the... of the tadpole. I don’t know why, but part of me was still holding on to hope that the pregnancy test was wrong, that the morning sickness was a flu, that my sore breasts were my period about to make its—late—appearance.

But no.

It’s inside me. Growing exactly as it should be.

And if it’s already at eight weeks... That means I got pregnant while using the contraceptive sponges. Before Giulio had discovered me.

I want to cry all over again. Everything I went through, and everything Stef is now going through, and it hadn’t even delayed anything.

Damien leaves me standing alone in the middle of the main hall while he heads upstairs to talk to Donny. I contemplate simply sinking to the floor and letting the tears fall.

It’s been a few weeks since I’ve been here, but I haven’t forgotten just how little the girls care for me. There’s Elena, who sold me out and who’s been giving me strange looks ever since. Traci and Cat don’t waste an opportunity to say nasty comments. The others... are less obviously hateful, but I can feel the distance.

Nobody wants to get close to the boss's broodmare.

I wipe at my eyes and decide I can still make myself useful around here though. Maybe mopping or scrubbing some tables will distract me. I head toward the bar, where I can already hear some people talking.

It's Paul and the bartender Jenna. She's not in her work outfit yet, so she's wearing jeans and a baggy t-shirt. Paul looks the same as ever.

"Oh, fucking hell. Why are you here?" Paul asks when he spots me.

I shrug, hoping my eyes aren't as red as they feel. "Going to meet with Giulio and Slayer later. But I thought I'd help out while I was waiting?"

"Please," Jenna says, motioning at some cleaning supplies. "Paul's fucking useless."

"Fuck off." Paul puffs himself up. "I'm the boss around here, I don't do the menial shit."

"You're not even close to being the boss," I say as I grab a spray bottle. "There's Giulio, then Damien, then Donny... and then there's you, although Damien's been trusting *me* a lot more with things." I feel self-conscious throwing in that last part, but it makes Jenna giggle and Paul's face go red.

"Yeah, we all know why Damien's into you. His little broodmare. Fucking Giulio's such a cuck, letting other men fuck his whore," Paul snaps.

If he thinks that's going to offend me, well... I've been called much worse. And Giulio got off on role plays where Damien fucked his "wife" more than once, so I doubt he'd care either. Still, it annoys me that he feels like he can say those things about us, and I don't even understand why I care.

"I dare you to say that to Giulio's face," Jenna mocks. "Or just go see what Damien thinks about it, if you're too pussy to say it to Giulio."

Paul's face only gets redder. "Fuck both of you, whores." He storms out of the kitchen.

Jenna rolls her eyes. “Fucking manbaby. Anyway, if you could wipe down the bar counter and all the bottles while I start slicing up a few lemons, that’d help me out.”

“Sure,” I tell her, starting to spray down the counter. It’s nice to have something to do with my hands, to get my thoughts away from the *tadpole*—and from Giulio and Damien, too.

I’ve just finished wiping down the first section when a knock sounds on the back door.

Jenna glances over at it. “Can you get that? It’s probably just the delivery guy.”

My heart thunders in my chest. I keep having opportunities to try to run, to try to ask for help, but... I know better. What if the next person they hurt is Jenna? I like her, and she’s always decent to me. “Sure,” I say, my voice sounding distant to my ears.

I open the door to see a man standing there next to a dolly full of cases of beer.

Barely glancing at me, he offers me the clipboard. “Here’s the beer delivery. Just sign at the bottom.”

He sounds almost bored, but I guess this isn’t his first or his last stop for the day. I take the clipboard and pen.

“Is Paul out today?” the delivery guy asks.

“Yeah. I’m just filling in.” I sign my name at the bottom—Vanessa Bellini, not Vanessa *Pavone* like at the doctor’s office—and notice the subtotal. I frown at the number. “Did you guys give us a discount?”

“Huh? I dunno. Should be the same as always.” He takes the clipboard back and hands me a copy of the invoice.

He rolls the delivery inside and I follow a bit absently, not really paying attention to what Jenna says to him. He’s deposited the boxes soon enough, fast due to constant practice. “See you next week. Hope it’s you again. You’re way easier on the eyes than Paul.”

“Y-yeah,” I say, too distracted to deal with his comment as I stare at the number on the receipt. The paper looks identical to the ones I’ve received, but the number is almost a hundred dollars lower than usual.

“Is Paul always the one to sign for this?” I ask Jenna. She’s already unloading some of the beer bottles to where they belong.

“Huh? Yeah. That’s like, his one duty he takes seriously.” She snorts. “He’s gonna be pissed he missed out just because he was being a little bitch.”

I’m going to have to compare, but suddenly everything is making sense. It wasn’t the girls skimming. It was Paul, changing the cost for the supplies—making it look like they were higher, so he could pocket the difference. Even going so far as to falsify the receipts.

How long has he been doing this?

“I have to... I have to talk to Damien,” I say. “I’ll come back to finish helping you once I’ve done that.”

I can’t believe it was that simple. I guess we all suspected somebody had to have been stealing, but somehow, I didn’t suspect Paul—not because I think he’s incapable of it, but more that he always seemed so afraid of Giulio.

I’m halfway up the stairs when I realize exactly what this all means. If I tell Damien, if I tell Giulio... I’m sealing Paul’s fate.

But I can’t *not* say anything, not when I’ve been looking for the answer to this very problem for weeks now. I hesitate instead of continuing up the stairs, looking down at the piece of paper. He had to have printed off new copies of the invoices or covered the totals and made copies to make them look original. This one does look identical to the others I’ve seen. I should know; I’ve looked at them countless times trying to find anomalies.

The upper door to the stairwell opens, but I barely register it.

“Are you going to move?”

I jerk and look up, finding Traci standing a few steps above me. “Yeah. Sorry.” I squeeze to the side so that Traci can walk past me.

She doesn’t, though. “What are you staring at?”

“Nothing important,” I say evasively, folding the paper in half. “Just bringing something up to Damien.”

Traci snorts. “Yeah, might as well turn around. Damien’s in the office with Donny. Sounds kind of heated—you know it’s bad if you can hear Damien through the door. He’s fucking pissed. What did you do?”

“Me?” I’m a little surprised. Damien had seemed to be in a fairly good mood when we’d arrived, but then... There had been the near-constant texts from Giulio while we’d been at the office demanding he figure out the accounting and mole problems. The idea of him actually being heard through the door is almost incomprehensible. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Then why are you here again? I thought you got *upgraded*.” Traci’s voice is dripping with malice.

“He had to stop by to talk to Donny,” I say, feeling defensive even though I don’t understand why. I’m not doing anything wrong.

Even if I am potentially sentencing someone to death. Fuck. I need to just go downstairs and leave the invoice somewhere Paul can alter it...

But I know I can’t do that. I can’t pretend this didn’t happen.

“Yeah, I got that. It’s the same shit right, the accounting, blah blah. It’s the only thing Donny’s been going on lately. Giulio’s been breathing down his back, threatening to demote him.” Traci makes a disgusted noise. “I’d think it was hilarious if that didn’t mean Paul would probably get promoted.”

“Paul’s definitely not going to get promoted now,” I say without thinking. Once I realize what I’ve said, I wince, but it’s not like it’s going to be a secret for much longer. At the very least, Giulio will be kicking Paul to the curb. Hopefully I can talk him into just doing that and nothing more...

“Oh?” Traci comes down a few steps, so she’s only one step above me. “Why would you say that?”

“No reason!” I say quickly, as brightly as I can. “Just... He keeps doing stupid shit, you know. One day Giulio’s going to get tired of it.”

“No,” Traci says. “You know something. What did Paul do?” She looks me in the eyes.

Even though we’re at the same height now—Traci needs that extra step to be at eye-level with me—I still feel the urge to shrink back.

After a pause, Traci smirks. “He’s the fuck-up, isn’t he? The accounting fuck-up. What, he sucks at math? I don’t think that’ll save him from Giulio’s wrath.”

I sigh. “There are problems, yeah. Just... Don’t tell Paul I’m talking to Damien, okay?”

Traci laughs. “Sure. Not that I’m shocked. Paul’s a squirrely bastard. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was shacking up with the competition, too.”

That’s such a strange thing for her to say. I frown at her. Does she know someone’s talking behind Giulio’s back? Or was that just a guess? “You think it’s him?” I ask, just to test the theory. Maybe she’s just speaking hypothetically.

Traci waves her hand a bit dismissively. “Oh, sure. Paul’s easy, right? If somebody came in, offering cash in return for some info, he’d absolutely go for it. He has to be the guy.”

I try to keep my expression blank, though my thoughts are whirling. *The* guy. She... shouldn’t know about this. No one should know about this. So how does she? “Oh,” I say quietly. “Anyway, I should... I should go.” I’m not good at keeping secrets, and I don’t want her to realize what she’s said—and to who.

Traci blocks my path, one hand on each stair rail. There are obvious bruises on the insides of her elbows from where she’d injected.

“Oh no. You think you know something now, don’t you.” Traci’s lips thin out into a creepy grin. “Whatever you think you know, you don’t.”

“Okay,” I say quickly, raising both hands up, one palm out while the other hand clutches the folded-up invoice. “I’m not going to say anything that’ll get you into trouble. I promise.”

Because while they might only beat the shit out of Paul and kick him to the curb for cheating them, they would murder Traci if they even thought she was the person talking to the Romanos.

“Isn’t that what you said to Stef, too?” Traci asks cruelly. “Where’d that land her?”

I have to blink back the sudden threat of tears. “I learned my lesson,” I say weakly. “I’m not going to get anyone else into trouble. I’ve been behaving so no one... no one else has to...” I can’t even finish the sentence aloud. It hurts too much, to think of what Stef has endured—and is currently enduring—because of me.

Traci leans forward a bit and jabs me in the chest. “Yeah? And that’s why you’re going to snitch on Paul now?”

“I... I’m not... Paul isn’t...” I stammer, because it isn’t the same with Paul.

“It’s good though. Tell on Paul. And tell them he’s been selling them out, too. Win-win for everyone, right?” Traci’s voice is a lot lower now, barely a whisper. “You get what I’m saying?”

She jabs my chest again, and I instinctively try to step back.

But there isn’t anywhere to step.

My heel lands on air, and suddenly I’m falling backwards.

Traci looks at me with wide eyes—and runs up the stairs, out the stairwell door.

I scream as I fall.

My head knocks against something hard, and my vision blacks out.

GIULIO

I must have stared at the stupid white blob for ten minutes straight while in the car. I can barely even tell what it is, although Damien assured me it was the fetus. Our soon-to-be baby.

“You have kids, Ben?” I ask the bouncer at Ntimacy’s door.

He scratches his neck awkwardly. “Yeah. But my ex took them out of state, so I don’t see them much.”

No wonder he hasn’t mentioned them. I hold up my phone to show him the little white blob. “Apparently this one’s mine.”

As soon as I’ve shown him the picture, I regret it. I don’t want to share this with Ben, or with Donny, or any of the other fucks who work here. But I keep the smile plastered on my face. No need for Ben to know how I’m feeling.

Ben clearly doesn’t know how to react either. He stares, then gives the most pathetic little attempt at a smile. “Wow. Congrats, boss.”

I clap him on the shoulder and pull my phone away. “Yep. Anyway, what’s going on tonight?”

“Just getting set up. Damien and your baby mama are already inside. It sounded like Damien was going to ream Donny.”

“And he didn’t invite me?” I joke, although it’s good to know Damien’s actually trying to figure out what the fuck is

going on here. I don't like the thought of somebody cheating me in my own fucking business, especially Ntimacy. It's the first club I'd taken over, to show my old man I could run this shit better than him.

I head inside, spotting Jenna by the bar. Even though I'm itching to find Vanessa and Damien and do... something, it doesn't hurt to make nice with the staff.

"Yo," I say, sidling up to the bar. "How's it going, Jenna? You still seeing that asshole?"

Jenna rolls her eyes at me. "Yep. He took me out for our anniversary last weekend. Bought me flowers and a nice necklace." She stretches her neck out so I can see the necklace while she continues to set up the bar for the evening.

That's really nice of the guy, but I also know he had Jenna crying only a week before that. Sucks for her, but if she's fine with it, who am I to interfere?

"Damien, Slayer, and I are going to want a lot of drinks tonight," I tell her. "Did we somehow end up stocking champagne?"

Jenna gives me a look before laughing. "Yeah, sure. Champagne, fresh from the Champagne region of France. Only twenty bucks a glass."

I pretend to be disappointed. "Jenna! I always ask for the nice stuff. You could stock it for me."

"You also said it's not worth it to get anything that costs more than fifty cents a glass because none of the losers who come by here can afford more, and—"

Whatever else she's going to say is interrupted by a scream.

Vanessa's scream.

I look around, my heart suddenly pounding hard. That was Vanessa. I'm sure of it. Dulled, a bit farther away.

"Where's Vanessa?" I ask sharply.

Jenna shakes her head. “I thought she went to talk to Damien.”

Sure, it’s plausible Damien is making her scream. I’ve made her scream. But it didn’t sound... It didn’t sound like that.

I go toward the stairwell, hoping to find Vanessa and Damien upstairs. Maybe it was just nothing, and the stupid white blobs and medical results are just messing with my head, and—

Vanessa’s lying at the bottom of the stairs, eyes closed.

For a few seconds, I can’t hear anything. My vision whites out around the edges.

I stare at her body, and I think...

If she’s dead, I’m burning the entire building down, with everyone in it.

“Vanessa?” Damien calls out from the top of the stairwell.

I gasp and snap to my senses.

“She’s down here, Damien! She... fell?” I go over to her and realize with relief that she’s breathing, and I don’t see blood anywhere.

Damien rushes down the stairs to join me, and now we’re both crowding around Vanessa.

Vanessa’s eyes flutter open, and she blinks up at me. She looks dazed, and though her lips part, she doesn’t speak.

“Hey, guys. I—” Slayer’s voice sounds from just behind us, but he cuts himself off with a, “Fuck! What happened? Vanessa, are you okay?” He shoves his way through until he’s kneeling beside her with us.

Damien gets his arm under Vanessa’s back. “Can you look at me? Are you hurt?”

Vanessa glances between the three of us, eyes wide, but her pupils are tracking properly so I don’t think she’s concussed. Of course, I’m not a doctor, just somebody who’s had a few too many injuries—and caused even more.

I notice a paper lying on the stairs near Vanessa, and I pick it up. It's a receipt for booze, signed by Vanessa and dated today. I have no idea what it means, but I pocket it anyway.

"I'm... I'm fine," Vanessa says unsteadily. "I... slipped?"

That doesn't sound very convincing, but Slayer's the one to say it. "Are you sure?" he asks carefully. "Vanessa, did you trip going up the stairs or down?"

Vanessa blinks at him, lifting a trembling hand to run through her hair. "I... I was..."

The fact that she can't answer immediately makes me frown.

"Down," she finally mumbles.

I look at where she is on the floor. I remember Jenna saying Vanessa had gone up to talk to Damien. The receipt in my pocket... She must have wanted to give that to Damien, too.

"Why were you upstairs?" I ask mildly.

"I was going upstairs to give Damien..." She looks around, frowning. "An invoice..."

"So you finished talking to him and you were coming back downstairs?" Slayer prompts, ever the detective.

"No. I was still in the office when I heard the scream," Damien says. "Nobody even knocked on the door."

If Vanessa wasn't already pale, I suspect she'd be getting paler.

"So you went upstairs, and just turned right back around? And slipped... on what?" I glance at her shoes, which are the tall boots without much heel to them. She can't blame the shoes.

"I don't know," Vanessa whispers, grabbing for my hand. "I just slipped. Please, I'm sorry, Giulio. I didn't do it on purpose. I promise. It was an accident."

"Damien, call a doctor for Vanessa. So we can know just how pissed off I should be," I say, cheerily.

He gives me a look but nods and backs away from Vanessa and the stairwell to make that call. That leaves some empty space next to her, and I sit down on the floor, putting one arm around Vanessa's shoulder.

I pull my phone out and scroll over to the picture of the white blob. "You know what this is, Vanessa?"

Slayer peers over at my phone, looking at the picture I know Damien sent to him as well. His expression is blank as he looks between us. I don't need him to tell me she's lying about something.

"It's the baby," Vanessa says, her eyes welling up with tears. "I really did slip, Giulio. *I promise*. I wouldn't hurt the baby. I would never hurt a baby."

The way she says it, I actually believe her. But that doesn't stop the anger coursing through me. Because if she didn't slip, and she didn't do it herself...

Somebody pushed her.

"*Baby*," I say, mockingly. "Vanessa, it's a white blob. A few cells that might become a human after you've incubated them long enough." I scroll through the photos Damien had sent me, and a few more of Vanessa I'd taken, until I land on the ones of Brad. "We can always get a new white blob."

Vanessa is so pale, and she looks between me and Slayer, pleadingly. "I slipped," she whispers. "I'm sorry. I'll be more careful. It's not... it's not just a white blob."

I zoom in on Brad's bruised face. "How often do you hear that one, Slayer? *I ran into a wall. I fell off my bike. I slipped on the stairs.*"

"Pretty often," Slayer says, reaching out to touch Vanessa's chin. He turns her face side to side, examining her. "Doesn't look like she has a concussion," he confirms what I already guessed. "But it's good Damien's getting a doctor."

Damien re-enters the stairwell, as if summoned. "Dr. Savage is on his way. He says this early in the pregnancy, the fetus should probably be fine, especially if she didn't land on her stomach."

“If it’s a baby...” I hit play on the video of me beating up Brad. The sound is muted, which is a shame. “If it’s a baby, Vanessa, what do you think the person who did this to you deserves?”

Vanessa wets her lips with her tongue, her breathing coming a little more swiftly. She looks up at Damien, as though he’s going to grant her some kind of reprieve, but his expression is as hard as mine and Slayer’s are.

“No one did this to me!” she insists. “Really, Giulio. I lost my footing. I went to turn around, and I just stepped wrong.”

“But you didn’t fall forward,” Slayer says quietly.

Vanessa swallows hard, not looking at the phone. “Please, I’m serious. I just went to take a step and it... wasn’t there. I’m not lying.”

I snort and put the phone away. “Mama, you’ve been getting better at roleplaying, but not *that* much better.”

Vanessa shakes her head again, and she’s starting to look frustrated. “Giulio, I’m not role playing, I’m not acting, I’m not lying. I really did just misstep.”

I grip Vanessa’s chin and force her to look me in the eyes. “Repeat that,” I hiss coldly.

Her eyes widen in fear.

Then Damien coughs. “Let’s get Vanessa to a bed. We can figure out what happened once she’s comfortable.”

I let go of her, and she immediately averts her gaze.

Slayer reaches a hand down to her. “Here, Vanessa. Let me help you up.”

She takes his hand, though she’s trembling so violently he has to pull her to get her to stand up. He wraps an arm around her, casting me an unreadable look.

“Take her to the VIP room,” Damien says. “Giulio and I will join you in a moment.”

Slayer nods to him and leads her out. The stairwell door shuts behind them, leaving me and Damien alone.

“You worried?” I ask, smirking up at Damien. “Oh nooo, what is crazy Giulio going to do now?”

Damien kneels down in front of me and sets his hands on my thighs. “Giulio... When I was coming out of the office, I heard one of the girls’ doors slam shut. I didn’t see which one, but I’ll figure it out. Just tell me what you want to do if one of them did push Vanessa.”

“What do *you* want to do?” I ask.

He grimaces. “I... want to shoot her.”

“Isn’t that kind of boring?” I tap my fingers on Damien’s hand. “Almost kills our blob—”

“Baby,” Damien corrects.

“—and all you want to do is end her life? I think we can make it hurt more than that.” I smile at him. “Or do you want to be merciful? Is this whole white blob of cells turning you soft?”

Damien closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths. “Vanessa. She could have died. If she’d been near the top when she fell... She’s lucky she didn’t get a concussion or split her head open. I...”

I move to wrap my arms around his shoulders in an awkward embrace. “Yeah. Yeah. So we’re not going to kill whoever it was. We’ll make her hurt a lot worse. We’ll make her regret every single moment she’s still alive.”

Damien hugs me back for a few seconds before getting up. “I’ll check the rooms. You can join Slayer and Vanessa.”

“Don’t trip and fall on the way up,” I say. It’s not funny at all, but I laugh anyway. Damien doesn’t even react. He’s on the second floor and out the door before I’ve gotten up at all.

Fuck.

Fuck.

White blob. It really isn’t just a white blob.

Vanessa isn’t just my baby mama.

I clench my fists, and sit, trying to breathe, trying not to drown in these fucking emotions that want me to simply kill everybody on the second floor just in case they're the one who hurt her.

It takes me too long to stand up, and I stare at the second-floor landing, wondering if choking the first person I see will make the feelings go away.

This is why it's good Damien's around. *Managing* me. Making sure I don't fucking destroy something I'll regret.

Would I regret it?

I resist the urge to punch the wall. A bruised fist isn't going to help—and I do know that from experience.

Before I do something even I think is stupid, I head out to the main floor. Past Jenna and Paul at the bar, to the VIP room where Slayer and Vanessa are on the couch together, with Vanessa lying out across it and her head in Slayer's lap. He strokes her hair gently, and she has her eyes closed.

“What did I miss?” I ask cheerfully. “Did Vanessa tell you what really happened?”

“She just keeps insisting it was an accident,” he says, shrugging.

Vanessa doesn't open her eyes, doesn't look at me. She shrinks in on herself, curling up a little and burying her face against Slayer's thigh.

She must be really shaken from the whole thing if she's turning to him for comfort.

Or she's terrified of me. Whichever.

I take the armchair adjacent to them and reach for my phone again, only that's the pocket with the paper in it. I pull it out, staring again. Vanessa had wanted to deliver this to Damien. Why? An invoice, and...

I look at the numbers. It looks right to me, more expensive than when I was personally managing the club, but that's what inflation does.

“Walk me through this,” I say to Vanessa, putting on a cheerful voice. “You’re going upstairs with this invoice. Why this invoice?”

Slayer nudges her up until she’s sitting next to him, though she still won’t look at me.

After a long moment, she mumbles, “This doesn’t match the usual amount.”

“Yeah? What’s off about it?” I take out my phone to get a picture of the invoice, just in case.

Vanessa hesitates. Her eyes are red-rimmed when she looks up at me, and she says quietly, “It’s about a hundred dollars less than the ones I’ve been reviewing.”

“Wow. Classic skimming. If this has been going on for the past ten fucking months, that means somebody’s made themselves an extra... four thousand bucks?” I laugh. “Jesus, Slayer, can you imagine, risking my anger over a piddly four k?”

Vanessa squirms. “I... Giulio...” She looks at me, then down at the floor. “It really was an accident. All right? Please, just... It was an accident. I’ll tell you about this, just don’t...”

“That sounds like a confession to me,” Slayer comments. “So who pushed you?”

Vanessa shakes her head quickly. “No one pushed me! It was an accident. But I know about the money. Just...” She’s not making any sense, going from one topic to the other, but that just means they’re related somehow.

I make a *go on* gesture to her. “All right, so. Skimming from me at such a low amount that whoever it is probably thought they’d get away with it, but also, they’re a fucking idiot.”

Vanessa bites her bottom lip, her expression showing all of her indecision, her doubt. She knows something’s going to happen to whoever’s responsible, and she’s scared—it’s one of the things Damien likes about her so much, that she’s so gentle and caring.

But right now, it's just pissing me the fuck off.

"It's not just the beer," she says quietly. "I've noticed some other things seem to be more expensive, too. Some months, they fluctuate. I'm willing to bet that the difference is based on... on who's handling supplies." She cringes, like she thinks I'm going to lash out at her.

She seems to be forgetting that I actually know how my businesses operate. "So, that's a very short list of people. Donny, Paul, and Jenna. Which of them should I go terrorize, Vanessa?"

"Please leave them alone," she whispers.

"Now, I could say it's Donny, and he's been acting incompetent about this whole accounting business just to cover his tracks. But he'd be an idiot to keep doing it after we've been breathing down his neck about it, plus, I've known Donny from back when I was running the place myself." I tap on my chin, as if considering. "Paul's just enough of an idiot to try, but is he that much of an idiot? Fuck, maybe I should be asking, is he smart enough to know how to skim for months on end without anyone else at the club noticing? So that leaves..." I trail off, smirking at Vanessa. "Should I go wave a knife in Jenna's face, Vanessa?"

Just as I expected, Vanessa crumbles instantly. "No! No." She chokes back a sob. "It's not Jenna. It's not Donny. It's... It's Paul, and I don't know how he got the idea or managed to stay consistent, but... But please, don't hurt him. I can talk to him. Warn him that you're figuring it out. I'm sure he'll stop."

I burst out laughing. "Oh, Vanessa, that's cute." I pocket the invoice again and stand up. "You two stay here. I'll go grab some drinks for us."

Vanessa shakes her head desperately. "Giulio, please—"

I ignore her, heading out to the bar, where Jenna and Paul are looking grim.

"Hey!" I say, and it's hilarious how they both startle at my voice. "So, funny story." I pull out the invoice from my

pocket. “Vanessa was going upstairs to deliver this to Damien, and she fucking fell down the stairs. Clumsy bitches, amirite?”

Paul backs up a few steps. “Slayer... Slayer took Vanessa to the VIP room.”

“Yep, I know.” I motion Paul to come closer, and he reluctantly does. I wrap an arm around his shoulders. “Jenna, how much does the booze cost per crate, do you know?”

Jenna grimaces. “Uh... I don’t handle that. Paul’s the one who does the supply orders.”

“Right, right. Paul, you got the number memorized?”

Sweat trickles down Paul’s temple. I can feel him trembling. He must know I know.

“It’s...” Paul looks at the invoice and reads off the same number. “Hey, look at that. I negotiated for a cheaper rate, and it’s finally come through.”

I laugh, half-impressed at the fucking gall. The other part of me is wondering where Jenna keeps the knives.

“Which really calls for a celebration,” I say. “Jenna... oh, right, we don’t have champagne. Well, whatever’s the least shitty drink, get a round ready for everybody. Paul is gonna join me in the VIP room.”

There are a few seconds where I think Paul will play along, but apparently, he does have at least two brain cells. He whimpers—and elbows me hard enough that I drop my hold on him. Then he starts running toward the closest exit.

“Fucking really?” I yell after him. “Ben, don’t let Paul leave!”

Too bad for Paul that he chose to run toward the front entrance. Ben has no problem at all catching him and dragging him back. Paul is shouting, something about how he’s sorry, please let him go, blah blah blah.

“What’s going on, boss?” Ben asks, wincing when Paul’s protests get louder.

“Don’t worry about it. Just take him to the VIP room. Slayer’s got to have cuffs on him. And if Paul doesn’t shut up, you can gag him with your cock.”

I don’t think Ben is into men at all, but Paul immediately stops screaming, even while Ben drags him back to the VIP room.

Jenna’s gone completely pale.

“Okay, so there’s no champagne,” I say to her. “What if we mixed white wine with seltzer water and pretend it’s sparkling wine? Even watered down, it’s got to be stronger than whatever else we’re serving.”

She keeps staring at me, until I snap my fingers in front of her. She startles and nods quickly. “Yes, uh. Wine and seltzer. But I don’t have wine either.”

“Fuck, why is this place such a dump? Fine, just get me a fruity cocktail of some sort.” I sit down on one of the bar stools and wait for Jenna to mix up the drink for me.

While I’m waiting, Ben walks back to his post, and soon after, Dr. Savage arrives.

“Yo.” I wave to him. “Your patient is in the VIP room.”

Savage gives me an annoyed look. “You realize it’s my day off? Twice in one day...”

“Blame... eh, one of the girls. I’ll be sure to make your annoyance known to her. How’s Stef, by the way? Still crying all the time?”

“No,” he says, and that’s that. Savage doesn’t like to air his kinks in public, which is a shame because I bet it’d be hot. He goes to the VIP room—and I see Damien dragging Traci there as well.

I can’t say I’m surprised.

Jenna gets me my cocktail, and I sip on it, staring in the direction of the VIP room, trying to force back the blinding rage enough to plan out just how I’m going to destroy Traci and Paul.

VANESSA

“**Y**ou should just tell us what really happened,” Slayer says calmly, pulling me to him again. “You really think you can lie to the three of us? A detective, a consigliere, a mafia boss?”

I know he’s right, but in the end... Traci didn’t actually do anything wrong. I was the one who stepped wrong on the stairs, and it was my fault I’d fallen. Maybe if I just told them, I could get them to be...

To be what?

Merciful?

That’s laughable.

“It wasn’t anyone’s fault,” I say, shaking my head as he places a kiss to the top of my head. “I really did step wrong on the stairs.”

He sighs. “How does your head feel?” he asks, in lieu of answering me directly.

It hurts, but I shrug. “I’ll be okay.”

Paul won’t.

Traci won’t.

I can deal with a little bit of a headache, a bit of residual soreness. They’re going to deal with much worse, and it’s all my fault.

Slayer's quiet, and I try to convince myself that this isn't going to get a hell of a lot worse very quickly.

That is, of course, ruined by the door opening and Ben shoving a squirming Paul into the VIP room.

My mouth goes dry, and I stare at him.

He stares right back.

I want to tell him that I'm sorry, but there are no words to erase the horror he's about to be put through.

Ben forces Paul to his knees. "Boss says you've got cuffs for him?"

"Yep." Slayer reaches into his back pocket and tosses a pair of handcuffs in Ben's direction.

I'm surprised that Paul keeps his mouth shut, even though he's struggling and trying to run away. It isn't until his wrists are cuffed behind his back that he gives up attempting to escape.

"He's all yours," Ben says to Slayer before he leaves.

Paul glares at both of us. "I didn't fucking do anything. Tell Giulio. I really didn't."

Slayer barks out a laugh. "You want us to lie to Giulio Pavone? Man, if I thought you were stupid before, I'm sure of it now." He shakes his head. "Vanessa's not going to lie, either. Are you, Vanessa?"

I hesitate, swallowing hard around the lump in my throat.

Before I can figure out what I want to say, the door opens again. This time, it's Dr. Savage, who looks beyond annoyed.

He spares one look at Paul, eyebrows rising a bit, before turning to me. "Damien said you fell down the stairs?"

I nod. I'm honestly a little surprised he's talking directly to me, but I guess since Damien isn't here, he has to treat me like a person. "I... blacked out for a few seconds, but I didn't fall on my stomach or anything."

Savage nods. He sets his briefcase down on the table, flipping it open and pulling out a handheld device. “I’ll just listen to make sure the heartbeat is normal, but you and the fetus should be fine. Let Damien know at once if you notice unusual discharge or bleeding. Now, lie back on the couch and lift up your shirt.”

I glance over at Paul, my cheeks flushing, but I lie down and pull my shirt up until right beneath my breasts. Dr. Savage doesn’t even blink at the sight of the scars on my stomach, going right in to squirt some gel over my abdomen.

Before he can use the device, though, the door opens yet again, and Damien drags Traci inside.

My heart drops into my stomach.

“Please, Damien, please,” Traci begs. “I swear, nothing happened.”

Her hands are tied in front of her, with more rope around her ankles, with only just enough slack that she can walk.

I bite my lip, trying to sit up, but Dr. Savage pushes down on my stomach.

“Stay still,” he orders. “And try to be quiet so I can listen. I’d like to be home before this hellhole opens.”

Traci whimpers as Damien pulls her farther into the room. “Quiet,” he hisses at her. He shoves her to the floor next to Paul.

This whole thing is unbelievable. The entire day has left me off-balance, but in the past hour, everything has gone from bad to worse. I can’t even understand how a single delivery, a single piece of paper, has led to two people tied up in the VIP room while a doctor examines me.

Giulio isn’t even in here, and it should make me relieved that he’s letting Damien deal with this, but... I can’t help but think it’s not that simple.

Dr. Savage grunts after a few seconds. “Everything looks fine. Which I told you was going to be the case on the phone.”

“Thank you,” Damien answers, ignoring Dr. Savage’s annoyance. “It’ll bring Giulio some peace of mind.”

Right. Peace of mind. That’s never going to happen, not after everything that’s happened today. I almost laugh—almost—as Dr. Savage wipes my stomach clean of the gel.

Dr. Savage tucks the machine back into his briefcase and heads for the door without another word, only giving a slight grunt to indicate that he heard anything to begin with.

I sit up on the couch, looking from one of the men to the next, then finally to Traci’s face. I half-expect her to look pissed off, but instead, she just looks terrified. My heart aches. She might not be kind to me, but she didn’t actually push me down the stairs. They’re going to treat her like she did, and I don’t know that anything I say can make a difference.

“Well,” Slayer remarks after a moment, coming to sit down beside me again and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Looks like a fucking party in here. Just missing the man of the hour who, I suspect, is plotting to kill all of us.” He glances at me. “Except baby mama here.”

“Why is Paul here?” Damien asks, his arm pointed down at a strange angle.

Because he’s holding a gun. He’s waving a gun around. My head grows fuzzier.

“He’s been skimming from Giulio,” Slayer says casually, like it’s no big deal. Like it’s just another day at the office.

Well, for him, it probably is since he deals with corruption and bribery and who knows what else?

“According to *her*?” Paul asks, eyeing me. “Donny’s the one skimming!”

“No,” Damien answers immediately. He lifts the gun, but he aims it at Traci instead of Paul. “Did Giulio say where he was going?”

Traci cowers, shrinking back.

“He said he was going to go get drinks,” Slayer says, rubbing my shoulder. “But then—”

“It was an accident!” I interrupt, looking desperately at Damien. “Damien, it was an accident. We were talking on the stairs, and I went to take a step back, and I just tripped. It wasn’t Traci’s fault.”

But I know more than that. I know what she’s doing. If I don’t say it, Damien will be furious, but if I do... Traci really will end up dead.

Two potential deaths tonight, both resting on my shoulders. All I have to do is say the words, and they’ll both be dead and gone by the time the club even opens.

Fuck.

I don’t want to have that kind of power.

The door suddenly swings open, and Giulio walks in, carrying a stack of boxes. “Yo! I was out there, having a drink—Jenna’s running to a real store and grabbing something better for all of us—and I thought, what’s a party without some party games?”

He walks over and sets the three nondescript boxes on the table in front of the couches, grinning the entire time.

This... is not good.

“Giulio, wait. Please wait,” I beg.

Traci is looking at me with that same terrified look. The fact that Damien hasn’t responded, that he still has the gun trained on her, doesn’t make me feel any better.

“It was an *accident*,” I stress again, looking between Damien and Giulio. I want to get up, to go to Damien, but I’m afraid that if I approach him, he’ll just shoot her anyway. “Traci didn’t make me trip. I was just clumsy. Please don’t hurt her. Please just let her go.”

Giulio shakes his head, amusement on his face. “Traci, you’re just the luckiest bitch, huh. This is the second time Vanessa’s covering for you.”

Traci whimpers again. “Giulio, I swear, nothing happened.”

“Vanessa *fell down the stairs*,” Damien growls. “That isn’t nothing.”

“I’m not covering for her, because she didn’t do anything wrong!” I say quickly. All right, that’s not the whole truth, but hopefully they think the way I’m trembling is because of the situation overall. “Honestly, I tripped and fell.”

“Yep, and Paul definitely just negotiated a very sweet deal for our supplies and hasn’t been skimming for months.” Giulio picks up one of the boxes and shakes it. Something thuds inside.

Paul flinches. “Boss, I wasn’t.”

“He was!” Traci interjects suddenly. “He’s been shiftier the entire time! And sometimes he’ll take payment off the johns without giving us our cut!”

“Fuck you, bitch,” Paul shouts. “You’re the one who—”

“Shut up!” Giulio yells. Both Traci and Paul fall silent. “Jesus fucking Christ, you’re both on death row! Have some respect for the soon-to-be dead!”

“Giulio!” I beg, standing up. “Giulio, you can’t. You can’t kill everyone who does something wrong. Just fire Paul, leave Traci alone. Please. I’m begging you.”

“Man. You have one little white blob with somebody, and suddenly they think they know you!” Giulio passes the box to me. “Traci, which of the remaining boxes do you want? I’ll let you go first, since you’re a lady.” He holds up the remaining two, one slightly larger than the other.

Traci wets her lips with her tongue, looking between Giulio and me. There’s so much fear, and *anger*, in her expression. I can’t even make sense of what she must be feeling. She has to be expecting me to sell her out to Giulio as the mole, and honestly... Honestly, I *should*. But no. I can’t.

Traci looks at the boxes, taking a moment to make her decision. “The bigger one.”

Giulio snorts and hands the box to Slayer. “Size does seem to matter, Paul. Damien, you can put the gun down. We aren’t

animals around here.”

Damien waits a few seconds before he holsters the gun. When his hands are free, Giulio passes the remaining box to him.

“Inside each box, you will find...” Giulio starts in a serious voice, but he ends up laughing. “Nah, whatever. Just open them.”

I don’t want to. Whatever’s inside, it can’t be good.

Slayer and Damien don’t hesitate at all, though. Slayer opens his first, and he pulls out... a set of pliers from the unnecessarily large box.

I freeze, staring at the pliers. My mouth goes dry. I can’t even imagine the creative ways Slayer or Giulio could use them on someone.

Damien drops the box and holds up an electric hand-drill. He pulls the trigger once, and the tip whirrs loudly.

I can’t move. I can’t speak. I can’t do anything but dry heave, as what little I’ve eaten today threatens to come back up.

“Mama, you gotta open your box too,” Giulio prompts, bringing my hand to the flap on the box. “We’re doing a whole game show bit.”

Tears start rolling down my cheeks as I open the box, slowly coming out with a hammer. “Giulio,” I croak. “Please.”

Giulio ignores me and goes to sit next to Slayer on the couch. “Traci picked the pliers. What’re you thinking, Slayer? A tooth first? A fingernail?”

I’m going to be sick.

Even watching... and there are three boxes. Paul, Traci, and... Am I going to get into trouble, too? Is the hammer for me?

“No! Please, please, Giulio, I’m sorry, please, I didn’t mean for it to happen!” Traci sobs. “I swear, we were just talking.”

Giulio laughs again. “New story, huh. And we haven’t even gotten to the actual torture. Should we draw straws to see who goes first?”

“Well, Traci’s the reason Vanessa... *tripped* down the stairs,” Slayer says, his voice dark. “So I think we should start with her. Pry her teeth out. Not like she needs them to be a good whore. Hell, people would probably pay better for a toothless slut. Imagine the blowjobs she could give.”

I look at Slayer, unable to hide my horror. Everyone in this room has lost their fucking minds, and there’s not a damn thing I can do to stop this from happening.

Damien looks at his drill, almost with disappointment. “I don’t want to drill holes into Paul, Giulio.”

Paul looks at Damien like he’s an angel. “Yeah. Yeah, I don’t want that either.”

“You should!” Traci suddenly shouts. “He’s skimming money, and—and he’s selling info about you too. Spying. For. For the competition.”

No.

No.

I feel sick as she utters those words. With them, she really has sealed her own fate, because all three of these men have been keeping that part under wraps. There’s no reason for Traci to know someone’s selling secrets unless she’s involved. Even if I don’t speak up—and I’m not going to—the guys aren’t stupid. They’ll see right through that.

“Fucking whore liar!” Paul bellows. “You think I haven’t noticed you getting cozy with those regulars? Trying to pin this on me? Fuck you, bitch. I’m not going down for it.”

All three of them are silent for a moment. Then Giulio starts laughing and clapping. “Oh my fucking god. This is perfect. I get to empty my club of all the trash in one fucking go. Start with Paul’s hand, Damien, for all the pilfering. We’ll take Traci’s teeth out to make it harder for her to keep lying.”

“You want me to wait until after Damien gets a few holes in him before I start?” Slayer asks. He’s moved to stand beside Traci, the pliers gleaming menacingly in his hand as he holds them up.

“Yeah. Oh, no, wait a second.” Giulio gets up and approaches me. I cringe, but he wraps his arms around my waist from behind. “You fucking lied to me, Mama. First there was no one there. Then suddenly Traci is added to the story, but she did nothing. Now it turns out she did, but it was an *accident*. Still not adding up.”

I’m trembling so hard that my teeth are almost chattering. “She didn’t do anything. The fall was an accident. And we were just... We were scared if you knew she was there, you’d...”

Well.

That he’d do something like this.

“What were you doing on the stairs?” Giulio asks. He runs one hand along my arm and to my hand—the one that’s still holding the hammer. “Having a friendly chat? Because you and Traci are such good friends?”

“I just ran into her when I was headed up to talk to Damien,” I say, tears flowing freely down my face. His near-intimate touch makes it even worse, and the attention he’s drawing to the hammer isn’t helping at all. “She was coming downstairs; I was going up.”

“And you’re both just so clumsy, you couldn’t figure out how to avoid each other without you taking a fall and endangering our little white blob?”

Traci doesn’t say anything, looking to me instead with a pleading look, like she thinks I can save her from this. I can’t. I can’t control Giulio. I can’t even affect Giulio. He’s like a force of nature, and he’s sweeping through the room and catching us all inside the storm.

“Giulio,” I whisper. “Please, it was all an accident. I just tripped.”

“Liar, liar,” Giulio says, kissing the side of my neck. “But we’re past me threatening your life, aren’t we? Because you’ve got a white blob inside you. Might make you think you’re safe from me, or something.”

I glance at Damien and Slayer, but they’re both transfixed on us. Damien even looks... He looks like he’s starting to get aroused.

“I’m gonna give you a choice,” Giulio says, loud enough for everyone to hear. “If Vanessa tells the truth, only one person has to die.” After a pause, he adds, “Well, I guess Traci and Paul could confess to their crimes too, but that’s less fun, so we’ll say it only counts if Vanessa’s the one to talk.”

Oh, god. I can’t handle the pressure. I look between Traci and Paul, helpless. I have to be honest. I have to save one of them.

“I have been telling you the truth,” I whisper. “But I’ll give you more details if you *promise* not to kill them.”

“I promise, if you tell me everything, at least one person will get to walk out of here alive.” Giulio laughs. “Well, five people.”

I’m so nauseated that I’m sure I’m going to throw up at any second. I don’t look at Traci and Paul, even though I know their attention is laser-focused on me. Death might be better than what Giulio will dream up for them, but I can’t consign them to death. I just can’t.

“I took the delivery because Paul wasn’t there,” I choke out, sobbing freely. “And it wasn’t right. Jenna said Paul always took that delivery. I was... I was going upstairs to show Damien, I’m sorry, I just had to, I couldn’t—” I don’t dare look at Paul as I try to get myself under control. “I ran into Traci. She asked me about the accounting... and the... the person who’s been giving information... and... I don’t know, she went to reach out to me, just to tap my chest, and I tried to step back out of her reach, and I tripped, and I fell, and I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” If it wasn’t for Giulio’s arms around me, I’d be on the floor, huddled up in a little ball.

“She’s fucking lying!” Traci shouts desperately. “I didn’t do that! Damien, please, I swear to god—”

“Hey!” Giulio snaps. His arms tighten around me. “Don’t look at Damien. Damien isn’t in charge.”

Slayer grabs her wrist, pulling her closer to him. His eyes are trained on me, though, instead of on Traci or Paul.

Traci sobs and hunches over herself.

“For which you should be glad,” Giulio continues, “Because Damien would probably have shot you in your room already if he were.”

“Yes,” Damien answers immediately. “There are plenty of whores. There’s only one Vanessa.”

“Giulio, please,” Traci begs. “I... I’m the best earner—”

“Second best!” Paul interjects desperately. “She’s not pulling the same numbers she used to.”

I sob loudly as they argue with each other, barely managing to stay upright. “Please,” I whimper again. “Giulio —” I choke on his name.

Everyone in here is insane. Logic has gone out the window, rational thinking not even having a place here. There’s nothing I can say to make this better.

“So!” Giulio says, interrupting the counter-accusations. “I’m still not clear, Vanessa, on why Traci was touching you at all. Right now, it sounds like I should still be killing two people.”

“Please don’t,” I get out, though my voice is strangled and foreign-sounding. “You said you wouldn’t!”

“I said I wouldn’t if you told the truth,” Giulio answers. He starts rubbing my hand with his thumb. I want to just drop the hammer but I’m so terrified of doing anything to set him off even more. “It sounds to me like I’m still missing a few pieces.”

“I don’t *know* any more!” I say, turning my head to try to look at him.

Giulio gives a disappointed sigh. “Fine. Let’s just do it at the same time. Damien, you drill through Paul’s fingernail; Slayer, you take one of Traci’s teeth. A front one? Give her a big gap that nobody can ignore.”

Slayer grins at that, and I can see that like Damien, he’s aroused by the whole scenario. He passes Damien the key to the cuffs.

Paul’s eyes are wide and he’s trembling and sweating. “Boss, please, I didn’t even take that much, I’m sorry, I won’t do it again, I...”

As soon as one of his hands is free, though, he gets up and makes a dash for it. I hear Damien sigh right before he unholsters his gun and shoots Paul in the leg.

The gunshot is loud, reverberating through my bones, and any attempts to keep calm fly out the window.

My sobbing is nothing compared to Paul’s screaming or Traci’s wails.

Damien grabs a collapsed Paul by the collar and drags him back to the center of the room. Blood smears the floor.

“Was that worth it, Paul?” Giulio asks, sounding wildly amused. “Now you’ve got a hole in your leg and you’re still going to lose a finger.”

My legs can’t support me anymore. I start to crumple to the floor, the hammer slipping from my fingers and hitting the floor with a dull thud. Giulio’s strong arms keep me upright, and I whimper.

Damien takes one of Paul’s hands and holds it flat against the floor. He reholsters his gun while Paul flops around, smearing blood all over. Then Damien picks up the drill again and turns it on.

The sound is drowned out under Paul’s screaming and sobbing.

“Just fucking tell him what he wants to know!” Paul shouts, looking directly at me. “Just fucking tell him!”

Slayer has Traci in a harsh grip, the pliers already around one of her front top teeth. She's crying and struggling against him, but he's so much larger than her that she can't do much more than Paul can.

I squeeze my eyes closed, sobbing so hard I can't even understand my own words, "I don't know what he wants to know! Giulio! Please stop!"

"I'm sure you do," Giulio sing-songs in my ear. "But I'll ask again after round one. I've really been blue-balling poor Slayer lately. When's the last time we really tortured somebody? Even Brad got off lightly."

"Months," Slayer says. "Entirely too long. You should let me take Paul to the cabin and work him over properly. He's been a real pain in my ass lately."

Traci lets out a muffled sound, not quite a scream, but I don't dare look to see what's going on.

"Please, please, Giulio—" Whatever else Paul was about to say, it's lost in another round of anguished screaming as Damien takes the drill to one of his fingers.

The whirr. The squelch. The knowledge that blood has to be going everywhere, that Damien has to be coated with it.

I want to vomit.

Don't look.

But when Traci makes another sound, it's a high-pitched scream, so pained and miserable that I know Slayer's made good on his role to take one of her teeth.

I can barely handle going to the dentist when they're gentle, and the mere idea of having one of my teeth pulled out with a pair of pliers by a psychopath like Slayer—who I had just started thinking of in a kinder light!—has me gagging all over again. The smell of blood in the air is so much, too much, and I will myself not to throw up.

The screams die down into sobbing and heaving. The drill shuts off.

I still don't dare look.

“That was just one tooth! Traci, if you can’t handle that, how’re you going to handle it when we take the rest?” Giulio mocks. “You’ve got another 30 of them, and since Vanessa’s just not interested in telling us why the fuck she’s tripping down stairs...”

But I have. I’ve told him over and over, and I don’t know what I’m missing. I sob, trying to think of what I haven’t said, and I just start babbling the whole story all over again.

“P-please, I told you. I... I went upstairs. Traci cornered me. She... She wanted me to frame Paul... She threatened... She jabbed my chest; I was just trying to... trying to evade...”

Fuck, I can’t stay up, but Giulio just won’t let me fall. I want to curl up on the floor and just make all of this go away, but I can’t. All of this is my fault, because there’s something I’m leaving out, and I don’t even know what it is.

“There we go,” Giulio says, turning me around in his arms. He kisses my lips, gentle despite how cruel he’s being. “Was that so hard?”

I look at him through tear-stained eyes. “What?”

“Traci threatened you. I knew there was more to this than just a simple little chat.” Giulio looks past me at the torture scene. “Why would you think threatening my baby mama was a good idea, Traci?”

Traci wails, and I don’t know what’s happening to make her make that sound. Slayer’s doing something, probably, and I don’t even want to know what. “I was... I was scared!” she yells, the words coming out slurred. “I’m sorry, Giulio, I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” she babbles, hiccuping through her sobs. “I’ll never do it again.”

“Well, duh.” Giulio laughs and pulls me closer. “Damien, the drill is for Paul, not Traci!”

I hear a grunt from Damien, but thankfully the drill stays off.

“Awesome. Good job, Vanessa, you win the prize of only one of these fucks dying.” He cups my face and forces me to

meet his eyes. “Do you want that? Do you want to spare one of their lives?”

“Y-yes,” I say, my voice strangled as I try to look at him, but his eyes... His eyes are so dark, so wild, so at odds with his calm demeanor. He’s not calm at all. There’s a storm beneath the surface, and he’s barely holding it at bay. It’s only now that I see it. He may be using Slayer and Damien to carry out his wrath, but he’s not immune to feeling it. “Please. Please spare them both.”

Giulio’s grip on my chin tightens. “What kind of message would I be sending if I did that? You steal from me, you try to kill somebody I care about, and you get away with it, zero consequences?”

I shudder, wanting to say something to convince him that they’ve had more than enough consequences, that they should’ve both learned their lessons, but there’s no point. He’s not listening to me, or anyone else. He’s made up his mind, and I... I whimper, because I don’t know what to do.

I can’t save both of them.

So who the fuck do I pick?

Paul, who’s a sleazebag who’s been stealing from Giulio? Petty theft, nothing worth losing his life over. Traci, who’d been telling people about what went on at Ntimacy, who had threatened me? Who had been the reason I could’ve lost my baby?

I’m more affected by what Traci has done, and part of me wants to blurt out her name. But I want to protect the women here. I’ve said I would.

“By the way. You haven’t asked me what the hammer is for.” Giulio grins wildly. “I didn’t bring it just for show.”

My heart skips a beat. He’d given it to me. He’d already tortured Paul and Traci.

It’s for me.

I choke back another stream of sobs, shaking my head. I can’t say anything. The words just won’t form, even though I

want to plead with him and make him *stop* this madness.

“You’re going to pick that hammer up, and you’re going to go join Damien and Slayer. They’ll have Traci and Paul’s hands on the floor for you. And you’re going to smash that hammer as hard as you can on the fingers of whichever one of those pathetic, useless little fucks you want to save.” Giulio grabs my hair and forces me to look up again. “Are we clear?”

I stare at him, unable to even comprehend what he’s telling me to do. “I can’t,” I whisper. “Giulio, you know I can’t.”

“Well.” Giulio suddenly lets go of me and backs off. “If *you* can’t. I guess I’ll just take the hammer and smash both their skulls in.”

I stagger, barely remaining upright, but I don’t turn to look behind me.

“Please!” Traci suddenly cries out. “Me! Just fucking do my hand!”

“N-no! Vanessa, m-my hand. Traci’s been bad-mouthing you since day one!”

Both of their voices are hoarse and interspersed with pained sobs.

“Let Paul die,” Slayer suggests, his voice a bit breathy, excited. “He’s been fucking up left and right for the past few months. He’s the reason that undercover cop had to die, Vanessa. It was all his fault.”

“No. Traci. She’s the one who *pushed you down the stairs*,” Damien says coldly. “Paul’s incompetent, but he didn’t hurt you.”

I squeeze my eyes closed, their words all meshing in my ears. They’re all talking at once, all telling me to do different things. Traci and Paul are *begging* for more torture. Slayer wants Paul dead; Damien wants Traci dead.

I try to think about it, but the truth is that neither of them deserves to die. No matter what they did, death is too severe.

But Giulio isn’t going to accept that, and I know it.

I slowly turn around, and bile rises in my throat as I survey the bloody scene before me. Traci is covered with blood, from her mouth down, and Slayer has her held to the floor with her hand stretched out. And Paul... Paul is bleeding from his leg and his hand, and there's so much blood that I don't know how he can even survive that bullet wound. I don't think it should be bleeding as much as it is.

"What happens to Traci... after? If I save her?" I ask Giulio, my voice raw and anguished as I try to make the hardest decision of my life.

"She's not staying here," Giulio says, lifting up the hammer. "You want me to sell you, Traci? You'd get away from *me*, at least."

"P-p-please," Traci sobs. "P-please sell me."

I realize I've already made up my mind as Giulio presses the hammer into my hand and closes my fingers around it. I can't look at Paul. I can only think about the fact that I can save one of them, even though Traci might end up with a fate worse than Ntimacy. If Damien has anything to say about it, her future will be hell... but she'd be alive.

"Traci," I say. "This could be so bad for you." I can't even see her through the tears blurring my vision. "Worse."

"Just do it," Traci sobs. "Please, just do it."

I can't handle this any longer. I can't. I just... can't.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, going to kneel beside her.

Behind me, Paul screams my name, and Damien hisses it as they both condemn my choice to save Traci. I can't listen to them. I can't.

Slayer's fingers tighten around Traci's wrist, holding her in place. "Do it," he encourages me. "Paul's a piece of trash anyway, and Traci will get what's coming to her."

That's what I'm afraid of. Maybe I'd want to die, if I was in her place.

But she hasn't given up. No matter what's happened, she's able to look me squarely in the eye despite her pain, her tears,

and she nods to me.

I whimper, trying not to think about what I'm about to do.

And I bring the hammer down as hard as I can onto her splayed fingers.

VANESSA

I'm numb all over. I can barely get myself through the door to Giulio's condo.

There's a bloodstain underneath my fingernail. Damien had scrubbed my hands clean, but he'd missed that one spot under my nail.

Out, damned spot.

I want to laugh. I want to cry.

Giulio's laughing. I look up, and Giulio is putting the takeout bags of Chinese food on the kitchen island and saying something to Slayer.

If I hadn't seen him earlier today, I would have said Giulio was in a good mood. That he was being his nice self.

But I had seen him.

Damien closes the door behind us, wraps an arm around my shoulder, and sets his other hand on my belly. "Come on. Let's have dinner. You're eating for two."

I blink at him, having a hard time being cognizant of my surroundings. "I'm not hungry," I manage to get out, my voice still rough from all of the sobbing from only a few hours earlier.

The image of Traci's hand... I shudder, wanting to run to the bathroom and let what little I do have in my stomach come back up. As hard as I try to convince myself that it was

necessary to save her life, I still hate myself for what I've done.

"I just want to go to sleep," I add quietly.

Not that I think I will be able to sleep, not without nightmares of blood and screaming. The only mercy was that Giulio had waited until I was out of the room to... *deal with Paul*, as he'd put it.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Damien answers in a whisper. "You really need to play along now."

I look at Damien, unsure of what he means. "Play along...? I thought..." I thought it was all over. I thought the danger had passed.

"What's the holdup?" Giulio asks loudly. "If you don't hurry, Slayer and I will eat it all."

I flinch at the sound of his voice.

I can't go over to him. I still remember that look in his eyes.

"I don't mind if you eat mine," Damien answers, slowly guiding me to the kitchen.

I don't fight him, letting him bring me closer to Giulio and Slayer. I can't look at them. I can't look at *any* of them without wanting to flee. I knew they were hardened mafia men, but this was beyond anything I could've comprehended.

And they'd made me be a part of it.

Giulio laughs. "Okay, fair enough, I don't want your ultra mega death spicy mapo tofu."

"No one does. Except maybe Vanessa," Slayer says, coming around to kiss the top of my head. "Now that she's got the taste for it with the baby and all."

I flinch, but he either doesn't notice or doesn't care.

Between the two of them, Slayer and Giulio had set out tableware for everybody on the kitchen island. The different dishes have been transferred to nicer containers, and there are even champagne glasses.

It looks like a formal family dinner.

Slayer stays standing, grabbing a fork and digging into his food. “Man, nothing like a good torture scene to get me hungry and horny,” he says. “I just wish you hadn’t ended Paul so quick. I could’ve had some real fun with him.”

“Look, his screaming was starting to get repetitive.” Giulio serves himself a little bit of everything, even Damien’s dish. “Plus, with Damien having shot him, he was already bleeding out. There wasn’t that much life left in him anyway.”

That should make me feel a little better about having picked Traci to live—not much better, but at least knowing Paul would’ve died anyway makes me feel like I’d done something right.

Damien pushes me toward the stool next to Giulio.

I reluctantly go to the seat, sliding onto it, but even the smell of food makes me feel more than a little nauseated.

“I’m not sorry I shot him,” Damien says as he takes the seat on Giulio’s other side. “I told you when you hired him he wasn’t going to be useful.”

Giulio groans loudly. “Man, his brother was a good guy though. I was trying to do him a solid. I figured Donny could handle whatever messes Paul made.”

“He tried, during that whole cop thing,” Slayer says between bites of food. “Donny seems like a pretty good manager when he doesn’t have his back against the wall. You like him, don’t you, Vanessa?”

When I don’t put food on my own plate, Damien frowns and reaches across the table so he can dish some out to me, giving me a little of everything like Giulio had taken. I stare down at it, my stomach churning, and I half-heartedly stick my fork into a piece of chicken. “Yeah,” I say. “He’s nice.”

“Fun fact,” Giulio says after skewering a piece of chicken, “Donny is completely gay. He actually tried to hit on me when we first met. He thought I was a twink looking for a sugar daddy.”

Slayer nearly chokes on his food. He covers his mouth as he coughs, then begins to laugh. “Well... He wasn’t completely wrong.”

Giulio chuckles and motions to himself. “Yeah? You think I can pull off twink?”

“Maybe. Well, I definitely know you can pull off douche,” Slayer retorts. “You’re getting too old for twinkdom, though.”

Giulio gets an arm around me and pats my shoulder. “Do you hear this, Vanessa? Slayer says he’s perfectly straight, but he knows what makes a good twink. What clubs has he been visiting, I wonder.”

I don’t like being dragged into this conversation, and I like his arm around me even less. It feels menacing, even more so than usual, and I can’t help but think about the fact that it’s been all of two hours—if even—since he murdered someone and decided to put someone else up for sale. I go still, not even bothering to pretend to eat.

Damien coughs, drawing attention to him. “You were almost a twink in college, Giulio. Which I know, because you kept telling me about your escapades.”

“I don’t even want to know,” Slayer says instantly, around a mouthful of noodles.

There’s a tiny part of me that’s curious about what Giulio was like in college, but I’m too sick to my stomach and heartsick all at once, and I don’t really want to hear about it right now.

“I was *equal opportunity*,” Giulio jokes. “A twink for the men and the ladies both. It somehow worked out. Well, aside from the fact that I was too jacked for it, and do you know how very real biphobia is, man? There was a dude who told me he’d never sleep with somebody who also ate pussy.”

Damien pauses with his food halfway to his mouth. “Was that... Was that the night I had to pick you up from lock-up?”

“Uh... maybe? I loved the look on my old man’s face when you dragged me back to the townhouse, though.” Giulio leans closer to me and brings his fork to my mouth. “Vanessa,

I don't know why you aren't eating. There's a little white blob inside you. I think it wants food, too."

I glance helplessly at Damien. *Play along*, he'd told me. Does that mean acting like nothing happened earlier? "I'm... a little sick to my stomach. The baby does that to me sometimes," I say. "Not just in the mornings."

Slayer eyes me, not looking convinced. "Maybe she just wants you to feed her," he suggests.

"Food play. I like it." Giulio rubs the skewered piece of chicken along my lips. "Is that what you want, Mama? To be hand fed like a pampered queen or a beloved pet?"

My stomach churns uncomfortably. I don't know if I can keep food down. But I obediently open my mouth, taking the bite and chewing it. It's tasteless on my tongue, but I swallow it anyway. "I can feed myself," I mumble.

"Sure. As long as you *do* feed yourself," Giulio answers with a lazy, terrifying grin. "We want the blob to get all the nutrients it needs, after all."

I shudder, then force myself to take a bite of my own food. It's all I can do to chew and swallow; I feel like I'm going to choke on the long noodles while I'm trying to force them down. I go for the dish Damien had picked, and the spice that explodes across my tongue awakens the hunger beneath the nausea.

I've eaten most of Damien's dish before I realize what I'm doing. I can't believe I'm suddenly hungry. I can't believe I'm eating, when I'd just witnessed brutal torture.

At least it gets Giulio's attention off me, though, because he's back to sharing some anecdote from his college days. Slayer laughs about it, and Damien adds his own two cents and it's all so, so normal while they're anything but.

I slip into a daze, trying not to think about earlier. I find myself thinking of my sister instead. I wonder what she's doing right now. Is she attending Victor Corvi and his men? Has she escaped them for a second time?

What kind of aunt would she be? She doesn't like children, but surely, she'd like her own niece or nephew.

"Vanessa?"

I jerk at the sound of Slayer's voice, blinking at him. He's holding out a hand to me. "C'mon. Let's go celebrate properly."

I take it, even though I have a feeling I know what he means by celebrating properly, and I don't like it. I don't *want* it.

But Giulio and Damien are both watching me expectantly, all of their attention focused on me, and I swallow hard.

I don't know if I can do this.

I don't know if I have a choice.

Scratch that. I *know* I don't have a choice.

"S-sure," I say, fear lacing my voice. I let Slayer guide me to Giulio's bedroom, the other two only a few steps behind.

The big open windows look out onto the city, which sparkles in the darkness like the stars it's drowning out. I wonder if anybody has ever fallen out of one of the windows in this building.

Or if maybe Giulio helped them fall.

I flinch when Slayer puts both hands on my shoulders. "Let's get you out of those clothes. We probably need to burn all of today's wardrobe."

He's right. Not only is it "safer" for everyone, but I also never, ever want to see a reminder of today again.

Damien murmurs something to Giulio, and when I glance over, Damien kisses Giulio. Giulio leans into it, gripping Damien's shirt and somehow leading the kiss despite being the shorter of the two.

Why can't Giulio just focus on Damien forever?

Giulio breaks the kiss and, still holding on to Damien's shirt, grins at me. "That get you revved up, Mama?"

Slayer pulls the shirt over my head and tosses it to the side, sliding his hand down to cup one of my breasts. “Her nipples are getting hard,” he says, kissing my neck. “She’d probably get off just watching the two of you fuck.” He grimaces, though. “But I’ll pass on seeing that again.”

“He’s just jealous it wasn’t him,” Giulio says to me, winking. He lets go of Damien to start pulling his own clothes off. “Hey, Damien, did I tell you about that time Slayer and I —”

“No, we’re not telling that story,” Slayer interrupts immediately.

“You don’t even know what story I’m talking about!” Giulio protests.

“*Any* story,” Slayer says firmly. “We have Vanessa. Stop making this weird.”

All I do is stand there, watching them as they kiss and touch and banter. That strange feeling descends upon me again, like I’m in another place, another time.

If only.

“I think Vanessa was so good today,” Giulio declares, tossing his underwear toward the hamper. He turns so he’s facing me fully, and I can see his naked cock. Not hard yet, but —

It won’t take long.

“And since Vanessa was so good, giving us this wonderful little blob, I thought we could give her a reward. Would you like a reward, Vanessa?”

No. Not from them.

I nod despite my thoughts. Slayer has both hands on my breasts now, squeezing my nipples into hardness, and I wince a little. He’s not touching me any harder than usual, but everything feels so tender. He keeps kissing my jaw, my neck, my earlobes, making me shiver.

“I’ll let you pick who fucks you first,” Giulio says, stroking his cock slowly. “But give me a story to go with it.”

I look at him blankly. “What kind of story?” I ask as Slayer grabs the waistband of my skirt and pulls it off of me. He takes my tights off next, leaving me in just my panties.

“A porny one, duh.” Giulio goes to sit on the bed, legs apart. “Or we can go with my version, where we just got back from torturing some people, blood everywhere—”

“No!” I say quickly, feeling the color drain from my cheeks. “I... I’ll...”

Slayer slides his hand into my panties, finding my clit with his fingers.

I’m not wet. I don’t want to get wet. I don’t want to have anything to do with this.

How had I started to lose myself to them? How had I thought of them as more than monsters?

I glance at Damien, desperate for a reprieve. He manages Giulio all the time. Surely he can help me.

“A cocktail hour,” Damien says slowly. He’s down to his underwear. “Vanessa came alone but left with the three of us.”

“I liked the three of you,” I whisper, trying desperately to turn this in my favor. “You were so sweet, so flattering. You seduced me, urging me to return home with you, and I agreed.”

Slayer stops touching me and steps back, starting to undress. “Yeah? Sweet, huh?” He laughs.

Giulio snickers into his hand. “Sure. Who gets the honor of fucking you first? How did that play out?” He slides the rest of the way onto the bed and props himself against the headboard. He’s still stroking himself, getting himself harder. “Really sell it to me, Mama.”

As soon as Slayer’s done stripping, he’s back up on me, pulling my underwear down and nudging my legs apart so he can get back to my clit. I fight back a whimper.

“I...” I don’t want Giulio near me. Even more so than Damien and Slayer, I don’t want Giulio to touch me. I don’t trust him. I had started to, somehow...

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

“You told me you’d put on a show,” I say hoarsely. “So Damien... Damien started to suck your cock.”

Giulio’s eyebrows go up, but Damien circles around to sit at the foot of the bed. He puts a hand on Giulio’s thigh, nodding.

“Because Vanessa gets off on two men being together,” Damien says. “And you don’t mind giving a show.”

For some reason, that makes Giulio laugh. “That’s cute. Okay. Damien can blow me. But get over here, Mama, so I can at least make out with you while he does.”

Slayer lets go of me, but he asks, “Where do I fit in in this fantasy?”

I reluctantly start to walk toward the bed, not wanting to be near Giulio at all, let alone kissing him. But if I can tame him, even just a little...

“You get to fuck me first,” I tell Slayer. I’d rather Damien, but I need Damien to keep Giulio occupied. I wipe at my tears, feeling more determined as I approach Giulio.

Giulio spreads one arm out, making it clear where he wants me. But at least Damien is also there, kissing Giulio’s jaw, and that means Giulio can’t get his mouth on me just yet.

“Why Slayer?” Giulio asks. “Too intimidated by Damien’s monster cock?”

“Yes,” I say, going to sit next to Giulio.

Slayer follows close behind me, the bed dipping beneath his weight. Even as Giulio turns his head expectantly, leaning in for a kiss, Slayer grabs my legs and pulls me down a little. He spreads my legs just as my lips meet Giulio’s, and I whimper into the kiss.

I don’t want to be here. I just want to go hide somewhere.

Giulio has to twist a little awkwardly to keep kissing me while Damien’s half on his legs, and I hope he *is*

uncomfortable... even if that discomfort doesn't make up for all the rest of what he's done today.

"So this cocktail party," Giulio starts, but he ends up groaning loudly and rolling his hips. "Fuck, not fair that you do this so rarely." He gets one hand into Damien's hair and urges him down.

"It was boring," I say against Giulio's lips. "You were so much more interesting. *Charming*." I nearly choke on the word. He can have all the charisma in the world and still be a loathsome creature in my eyes.

Slayer gets between my legs, spreading them wider. It's all a little weird, but somehow, he manages to push the head of his cock against my cunt. "Hey, she's wet," he announces. "I guess she really does like this whole thing. Us being sweet and seducing her, the two of you getting it on." He laughs, a little breathless, as he starts pushing inside of me.

Giulio smiles and kisses me again, running his tongue along the seam of my lips. I part them, letting him slide his tongue inside to caress mine. It shouldn't feel good, especially not coming from him, but the way he's kissing me, the way Slayer is slowly thrusting into me... I can't help but shudder. I grab for the blankets, gripping them tightly as I break the kiss to watch Damien's mouth work on Giulio's cock.

He does it effortlessly and doesn't choke even when Giulio forces his head down farther. His scruff must be scratching against Giulio's thighs, the way it had when he'd put his mouth on my cunt.

He also keeps his hands on Giulio's legs the entire time. To hold him down, to... keep Giulio from moving away?

Giulio bites down on my shoulder. "Why'd you pick up Slayer? At this cocktail party? Keep talking, Mama. I want to hear your voice."

I want to whine in frustration. I don't want to have to keep adding to this fantasy. I'm not in the mood for his fucking role play kink, even if my body is reacting to Slayer's cock and the way he keeps pinching my nipples.

“Because he was handsome,” I mumble, because objectively, he is. A little scary-looking, especially when you find out he’s a cop, but he’s still attractive. “All three of you are. And I couldn’t decide...”

I’m running out of things to say. This nonexistent cocktail party barely exists in my brain. I keep hearing screaming, keep seeing blood...

Traci’s shattered hand.

Yet I’m somehow aroused, and I shudder beneath Slayer’s heavy body.

Giulio laughs, twisting so he can get one hand on my breast. Even that light touch makes my nipples ache with how sensitive my breasts are.

“You’re losing the thread. Slayer’s cock is inside you, Damien’s blowing me, I’m holding you... How did you convince three macho men to do this for you?”

My mouth is dry. I don’t know what to say. I don’t want to do this, but Damien’s words echo in my ears again: *play along*. I don’t know how long I have to keep doing it, but Giulio’s laughter keeps bringing me back to that room and reminding me how precarious all of this is.

“I don’t know,” I whimper, biting my lip as Slayer bottoms out inside of me and leans down to kiss my collarbone. “Lucky, I guess?”

Giulio laughs again, then he grabs Slayer’s hair and tugs him close enough for a kiss. “You think Vanessa is lucky, Slayer?”

Slayer growls but kisses him hard as his thrusts inside of me pick up speed. “Yeah, I think she’s really fucking lucky. Three men, doting on her, doing anything she wants... What else could she ask for?”

So much.

So, so very much.

Because if they really did what I wanted, they’d be far away from me, and I’d never see them again.

The thought brings a surprising pang forth, but I shove it away. I wouldn't miss them. All I'd have to do is remind myself of today, and it would all be forgotten.

Giulio suddenly pulls away, groaning loudly, and his hand is back on Damien's head. "Fuck, Damien, you're gonna make me..."

Damien meets my eyes, and I realize he's doing this on purpose. For me.

Or maybe just for the baby.

Either way, I'm almost grateful for Damien—until I remember how badly he wanted to murder Traci, how he'd shot Paul in front of me.

And the sound of the drill whirring, along with the screams...

I spasm, not in pleasure, but Slayer groans anyway. "Fuck yeah," Slayer says breathlessly, driving into me harder. "Maybe I can make her come while you're coming."

Giulio's eyes shoot open. "No. Damien, stop."

And unlike when I ask for something, Damien listens. He pulls off Giulio's cock with a wet sound. His chin glistens with spit. "Giulio—"

Giulio pushes him away, then pushes at Slayer, too. "My turn," Giulio growls. "I'm going to come inside her."

Slayer scowls at him. "I'll only be a minute, man. She's going to come if I keep fucking her, then you can shove into her while she's still pulsing and fluttering around your cock." He keeps thrusting, picking up his pace even more.

"No," Giulio repeats, darkly. "You two can shoot all over her chest. Mark her up. I want to see that while I fuck her." He meets my eyes. "That's what you want too, right, Vanessa?"

I shudder at what I see in his gaze, and I don't dare say otherwise. "Yes," I croak out, though the word is weak at best.

Slayer looks at Giulio, and he recognizes the look, too, because he groans and reluctantly pulls out of me without a

word. He rolls over on the bed, but he's soon propping himself back up, his hand stroking his cock.

I spread my legs a little more for Giulio, trembling. I'm scared of what's going to happen when he starts to fuck me.

He grips my thighs and kisses the inside of one. "You were so hot today, Mama," Giulio murmurs. "At the... cocktail party. And the afterparty, too."

He's not thinking of some fictional cocktail party, and I know it. He's thinking of what happened at Ntimacy, and just like then, he's getting off on it. The three of them are all getting off on those memories, and the knowledge hits me like a stab to the gut.

I can't help it; I sob, tears rolling down my cheeks as the thought hits me.

Giulio drives into me, much rougher than he usually does. I slide a few inches up the bed until Damien grips my shoulder to keep me in place.

I want to appeal to Damien, but his gaze is between my legs, watching Giulio thrusting in and out. Damien's cock is fully erect too, and he grips it to slowly pump himself while he watches us.

He'll manage Giulio for me... to a point.

But I have to remember that now, and always, he'll put Giulio first.

Slayer shifts so that he's closer. He strokes his own cock, already situated so that his cum will splash across my chest when he comes.

"Want me to tell you all the ways I find you hot?" Giulio asks me, grinning wildly. He moans on his next thrust. "All the stuff you've done that drives me wild?"

My eyes are wet with tears. I don't want to hear anything from him. But I don't think I have a choice. "Y-yes," I answer feebly.

"You're afraid I'm gonna say something nasty," Giulio answers, chuckling. "Am I the kind to do that, Damien,

Slayer?”

Damien and Slayer meet each other’s eyes. Clearly, they think he is that type.

“Say whatever you want,” Damien answers, increasing the speed of his hand on his cock. “So I can see you and Vanessa come.”

I’m not going to come if Giulio is being cruel.

Or am I?

There’s a sick feeling in my stomach, because it feels so good to have him thrusting inside of me, and my body is confused. My brain wants to rebel, but the ache between my thighs is getting to be too much.

“I could talk about how great you looked splattered in blood,” Giulio says. After a beat, he adds, “At the *cocktail party*. But I really liked—” He bottoms out in me and closes his eyes. “You still fucking tried to save them. Fuck, you’re so naive. But really fucking sweet. Covering for people who don’t deserve it.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Please don’t,” I whisper. “I can’t... I can’t come with you talking about that.”

At least, I don’t think I can.

“Love your body, too. Damien knew I would.” Giulio lets go of my thigh briefly to tap Damien’s shoulder.

Damien nods. “Yes. Not un-feminine, but... just perfect. And I knew she was a good person. Taking care of others. Even when it’s not in her best interest.”

I don’t like the way they’re talking about me. They’re being... nice, in a way, but it’s just not comfortable.

Slayer strokes himself a little harder, a little faster. “Beautiful, smart, and brave.” He laughs. “Even when that bravery is pretty stupid, huh, Vanessa?” I know he’s thinking about my trip to the police station, and I blush.

“You won us over, Mama,” Giulio says, smiling. “What a lucky woman you are. And—” He lets out a harsh gasp.

“Fuck, yeah, squeeze like that again.”

I look up at him in doubt, in disbelief. Won them over? If this is what it means to have won them over, I don't want to see the opposite...

Well.

I already have.

Giulio keeps fucking me, hard, fast, rough—and my body is threatening to succumb to pleasure I don't want to feel. But I look up at him, at a smile that's almost gentle now, at eyes that have somehow softened, and I can't help it.

I clench around him, right as Slayer's seed spills across my chest. He hisses out a breath, grunting, and the sound outweighs my quiet whimpers. Again. Yet again, my body has betrayed me, and there's no real pleasure in the aftermath of my climax.

Giulio is next, throwing his head back as his own satisfaction sweeps over him, and I can feel his heat filling me up as he comes.

Only then, with his eyes on where Giulio's cock is thrusting wildly into me, does Damien follow, and his cum ends up half across my face and half across my chest.

I whimper, tasting his cum on my lips, and I'm unable to stop myself from licking it away.

The only sound in the aftermath of so much pleasure is heavy breathing. For a long time, there's nothing else, and I stay still, wishing I could just fall asleep before they think of anything else to do with me, anything else to say.

Giulio is slow to pull out, but once he does, he lowers himself to kiss my belly. He stays like that for a few seconds, lips just under my belly button.

Then he gets up, smiling again. “Don't fall asleep just yet. I'll be right back.” He stops by the dresser to wipe off his cock but leaves the room completely naked.

Slayer flops onto the bed beside me, leaning in to nuzzle my throat. “You're so sexy with our cum on you, Vanessa.”

I don't say anything to that. My body is still pulsing with pleasure, and I can feel Giulio's hot seed inside of me. It's too late to stop it from doing anything, though; I'm already pregnant, and the thought hits me all over again.

Damien lays down on my other side, dropping his hand to my belly. "You're so beautiful. I was... When I saw you at the bottom of the stairs, I was so afraid. Not just because of the baby. It's *you*, Vanessa. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Tears prick the corners of my eyes as I look up at him. I don't know what to make of his words. They're claiming to care about me, all three of them, like that excuses their insane behavior. Like it makes things *better*.

I want to tell him he went too far, that I can't handle those words right now.

Slayer strokes my hair and leans in to kiss my forehead. He doesn't speak, but his soft touch is so counter to the man who'd pulled Traci's tooth out.

I nod at Damien, not sure what he expects me to say. I want to tell him not to sell Traci, but... it may be better for her. If she's around, she'll be a constant reminder for Giulio and Damien. All it would take was one more mistake, and she would be dead.

Giulio walks back into the bedroom, carrying a tray with two bottles and some empty champagne glasses on it. "I think we were meeting up today for a reason. To celebrate!" He sets the tray down on the dresser and opens the bottle of champagne. "Don't worry, Mama. I picked up some sparkling cider for you too. Almost as good as the alcoholic stuff."

I don't want the cider. I don't want any of it.

"Okay," I say with a tiny nod, grabbing the sheet to surreptitiously wipe at the cum to get it off my face, at least.

Damien gets up to help Giulio with the drinks, opening the second bottle and pouring it for me. He hands me the glass before taking one of the alcoholic ones for himself, while Giulio passes the remaining glass to Slayer.

Slayer sits up to take it, getting comfortable against the backboard of the bed.

Giulio lifts up his champagne glass. “So! It’s been a long-ass day, and let’s be real, at least three people wish it had gone completely differently. But let’s not let that distract us from why we got together in the first place.”

He picks up a paper from the tray and holds it up for us to see. It’s the picture from the ultrasound.

Giulio grins widely. “Here it is! Our cause for celebration. A little white blob that’s fifty percent Vanessa, and fifty percent one of us crazy fuckers she wishes she’d never met.”

Truer words have never been spoken.

“It’s not a blob,” Damien interrupts. “It’s... It’s a tadpole.”

Slayer barks out a laugh. “Dude, the two of you are fucked in the head. A blob, a tadpole... It’s a baby, guys. Well, the start of one.”

Giulio ignores Slayer to rotate the photo a bit. “Huh, y’know, I could see it. There’s the tail, there’s the rest of the body. Frogs aren’t quite as cool as reptiles, but I do like me a good giant African bullfrog.”

Of course Giulio would compare the baby to his creatures—though he loves his reptiles, so it’s a little strange. After today, I have no doubts at all that he cares about the *white blob*, the tadpole, whatever they want to call it, but the thought makes me sick instead of feeling sweet.

“Anyway.” Giulio raises his glass again. “The point is, congrats to us for knocking up Vanessa despite all the... obstacles in our way. I look forward to meeting the frog when it’s born.”

Damien snorts, but he lifts his glass too. “To our little tadpole.”

Slayer dutifully follows suit, raising his own glass and elbowing me so I do the same. “To the tadpole!” he says cheerfully. “And many more.”

I stare up at him, wide-eyed, and give a quick shake of my head. The thought of one is bad enough; the idea of more... No. Just no.

But I see how expectantly Damien is looking at me, so I force a smile onto my lips.

“To the tadpole,” I say, as though this is utterly normal.

To the baby.

Thank you for reading Ruining Vanessa! We hope you'll take a moment to leave a review at [Amazon](#), [Bookbub](#), and/or [Goodreads](#)!



Set approximately 2 months after Ruining Vanessa and 5 months before Keeping Vanessa, Vanessa celebrates her first Christmas with the guys in [Treating Vanessa](#).

This novella contains ridiculous gifts, double vaginal penetration, breastfeeding kink (talk), mention of violence.



Vanessa's story concludes up in [Keeping Vanessa \(Breeding Contempt #3\)](#). Keep reading for an excerpt from the first chapter and pre-order now!



Ready to experience Lucia's story? You can get the [Spoils of Victory trilogy](#) here! Please check the [authors' websites](#) for triggers and warnings, which include dark scenes of noncon.

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**KEEPING VANESSA (BREEDING
CONTEMPT #3)**

CHAPTER 1: VANESSA

The condo is fairly bare now, with most of the furniture and Giulio's belongings packed away. Even the reptile room is all gone. Only the bed remains.

It's our last night here. We move into the townhouse tomorrow.

Giulio approaches me from behind and wraps his arms around my big belly, nuzzling my bare shoulder. "What're you thinking, Mama? You ready for a new and exciting stage in your life?"

I'm not sure whether I'm ready or not. I've made memories here — some good, some bad, and more than a few in the middle. It's become my home, shared with Damien and often Slayer.

I nod anyway, resting a hand atop his. I'm surprised the baby isn't kicking. It's usually active this time of day.

I grimace, hating that I have to think about my baby as an *it*, but Giulio had decided that the gender of the baby would be a surprise to everyone. Damien has clearly been itching to find out, but like always, Damien has gone along with Giulio's wishes. The doctor wouldn't even tell me when I'd asked.

"I can't believe the townhouse is finally ready," I say. I haven't been there yet, but Giulio has described it to me. The renovations have taken months, and I'd started to think I'd have the baby before we moved.

“Fucking finally.” Giulio moves one hand up to rest on my breast, which is definitely larger than before this whole pregnancy started. It’s also a lot more sensitive, and I swallow a gasp. “I got a custom made bed for the new primary bedroom. Big enough for all the orgies we’re going to be having.”

“Isn’t this one already big enough?” I ask, though I’m distracted by the feeling of his hand on my breast — especially when he tweaks my nipple. I fight back a moan, leaning back against him. I find myself rubbing back against him before I can catch myself, and I go still. For the past few months, my own sex drive has been out of control, something that Giulio, Damien, and Slayer have been enjoying.

“There’s no risk of accidentally cuddling with somebody you don’t like in the new bed,” Giulio says, snickering. He gets one hand under my dress and into my panties. I’m starting to wish I’d worn leggings, but I’ve been so sore that I didn’t want to bother, not when it was just the two of us in the apartment anyway.

He rolls his hips against my ass, and I can feel the beginning swell of an erection. “So, I’m thinking... My favorite concubine is knocked up with my baby. And you’re so pregnant, but you still want to please your emperor, especially since you know you won’t be able to for a while after the baby is born...”

I mentally groan, but it’s always easier to play along with Giulio. I’ve certainly gotten enough practice over the past several months. He’s always in charge, in one way or another, whether it’s an emperor or someone who picked me up off the street — a scenario that hadn’t been my favorite.

“So I come to your room every night,” I say, knowing what he expects, “begging to get to pleasure you. What does my emperor prefer tonight? My mouth?” I’d prefer my mouth, but no position is *easy* anymore. I can’t lie down on my stomach, and how we have to position ourselves to accommodate their cocks in me is ridiculous.

Giulio rubs my clit for a few moments, nibbling at my neck long enough that I think he might leave a mark behind. “On the bed.” He inhales loudly. “On your back. I’ll take your cunt. Gotta remind you how good my cock is, after all.”

“It would be impossible to forget,” I say, shivering. I’m torn between wanting him to keep touching me and letting me go, but he makes the decision for me. He releases me, and I go to the bed, silently thankful that he’s chosen this position. It’s the most comfortable for me. “But your loyal concubine does appreciate the constant reminders.”

Giulio snickers again while he strips off his own clothes. He’s let his hair grow out a little, and neglected to get the frosted tips redone. The brown hair suits him more. It isn’t fair that he can look so good when he’s smiling, but as soon as he opens his mouth...

“Does it kill you to say that?” Giulio asks with open amusement. “I’m sure my loyal concubine wishes I’d never picked her up from the streets that day. But what would her prospects have been otherwise? A drab existence. Boring. Falling into the arms of petty men who wouldn’t have respected her.”

I’m nodding along with what he’s saying, because it’s par for the course. No matter how reluctant I’d been in his role plays, he’d still rescued me in almost all of them, and the life that supposedly follows is always positioned as *better*.

Whether that’s true of real life, I’m not so sure.

But I think this is the first time he’s mentioned *respect*, and I burst out laughing. I lift my head to stare at him. “Did it kill *you* to say *that*?”

“I’ve never said anything I didn’t want to in my life,” Giulio answers, still grinning. He gets his pants and boxer briefs off and stretches to show off his naked body. “It’s like you don’t know me, Mama! Should I be hurt?”

I watch him, biting my bottom lip as my eyes rake over him.

I'd laughed the three of them off, dismissing them when they'd teased me about being perpetually horny when I got pregnant, but this is absolutely ridiculous. Even with him running his mouth, reminding me of things I don't want to think about, I still want him.

"If I hurt you, you'd just get off on it," I grumble.

Giulio follows me onto the bed and settles in between my legs. The first thing he does is push my dress up, exposing my belly. I hold my breath while he touches me there, because sometimes Giulio gets very, very strange when confronted with just how real this pregnancy is.

His features soften this time though, and he bends down to kiss my rounded stomach. He runs his hands along the bottom curve, and even a touch as simple as that makes my clit throb. "Just a little longer," Giulio whispers. "You're almost done baking, tadpole."

"Baking?" I ask with a little laugh. "That just sounds wrong." But I stroke Giulio's hair, keeping him close to me.

"A metamorphosis, then. The tadpole has already sprouted arms and legs. The frog is almost complete and ready to join the world." Giulio pulls a weird face. "We really should have gone with a snake metaphor. Did you know there are viviparous snakes? I should get one of those. A nice, big boa constrictor."

I shudder at the mention of it. "What's viviparous mean?" I ask, trying not to think about him getting an even bigger snake than the one he already has.

At least, I assume it's bigger. Giulio doesn't do anything by halves.

"That they give birth to live young. Like a mammal." Giulio slides down a little and noses along the inside of my thigh. "Or I should find a boyfriend for Antonia, and we can just enjoy the miracle of snake eggs."

I shake my head fervently, though it's getting harder to focus as he gets closer to my already aching cunt. "No. No snake eggs. No live birth from reptiles. No. No, no, and no." I

twist my fingers a little in his hair and try to urge him between my legs instead of along my thighs.

He plays with my panties for a bit, rubbing my clit through the fabric, trailing feather light touches over my folds.

I whine and shift, hoping he'd get the hint.

"You just want my mouth occupied so I can't speak," Giulio says, the smile evident in his voice. "Do emperors do this for their concubines? Isn't eating pussy a bit *gay*? I read that somewhere online."

"How can eating pussy be gay?" I ask. Once, I'd have stumbled over the words, but after so much time with Giulio and the others, it's hard to bat an eye. "You have to be... with a woman to do it?"

"It's demeaning, or something. Not *manly*." Giulio pulls my panties down just enough that he can caress the skin. "What kind of a manly man makes sure his lady is satisfied? Only gay men would do that." His shoulders shake from his suppressed laughter. "Fuck, imagine if I actually cared what people thought of me, Mama."

I shiver as he touches me, and it's hard to focus on the conversation — but at least we've moved away from the role play. "I'm glad you're gay then," I say dryly. "Because I really enjoy your mouth... when it's not running." I can't help but smile at him.

The past several months have been so strange, to the point where this banter isn't out of the ordinary, and it's just as troublesome as it is welcome.

Giulio snorts, but he also pulls my panties halfway down my thighs and places a kiss on my clit. "Yep. I'm so gay, wouldn't know what to do with a cunt if it was staring me right in the face. You'll have to remind me."

I run my fingers through his hair, then gently nudge him forward again. "It's okay. I can teach you." My cheeks are flushing, though. It's one thing to do a little dirty talk, but it's another to think about walking him through eating me out. "Just... use your tongue," I say.

It's hard to see Giulio with my enormous belly in the way, but I feel the first lick, and he uses his tongue to circle my clit in small, teasing patterns.

“Like that?” Giulio says, amusement lacing his voice as I whimper. “I’m an emperor, I don’t ever do this. You’re so lucky you’re my *favorite* concubine.”

In moments like this, it's almost easy for me to forget that I'm not here of my own free will. Laughing with Giulio while he teases and touches... I can *almost* pretend that this is something I chose.

But then I have flashbacks to the day they stole me away from my family — the day my mother *gave* me to them with her blessing, so she could escape. I remember all the times they terrorized me before I got pregnant.

I think of all of the times they've cooed to me that I'm the prettiest broodmare, the best incubator, the most perfect pregnant captive they've ever seen. It's like they can't let me forget, even for a week, what I am to them.

Yet here I am, begging for Giulio's touch.

It's bittersweet.

It's pathetic.

Giulio puts his mouth to work for real, laving my clit while he penetrates me with two fingers. He knows me well enough by now to know that I'm unlikely to come without any penetration at all, but his fingers are nothing but a tease.

I lose myself to his deft touches, groaning and doing my best to encourage him to do more. The pleasure slowly builds up, cutting through some of the discomfort from my pregnancy.

Predictably, just as I think I might actually come, Giulio pulls away.

“You smell different,” Giulio murmurs. “This whole baby thing. Pregnant pussy is...” He pauses to sit up and wipe at his mouth. “Pregnant pussy is better.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re going to try to keep me pregnant, are you?” I ask, though I’m more resigned than alarmed. Damien has made it clear he wants *babies*, not *a* baby, and Slayer has been just as clear that there should be multiple pregnancies in the crudest ways possible. But in the end, it’s Giulio who makes the final decision.

It always is.

Giulio’s smile drops and he meets my eyes. I almost reflexively apologize, although I don’t know for what.

He puts both of his hands on my belly, following the curve of my stomach. I almost wish the baby would kick, just to distract Giulio.

“We’ll see,” Giulio finally says. He grins again and hooks his hands under my knees. “You ready for me, Mama?”

I’m glad he doesn’t press, but I’m even more glad when he finally asks if I’m ready. I breathe out a sigh of relief, glad this isn’t going to turn into an argument, or a denial, or something else. “More than ready,” I say. I’m going to come the second he’s in me.

I do my best to angle my hips upward for him, but it’s awkward. Despite that, Giulio manages to slide inside, hot and hard. I’d half expected not to be able to feel them as much once the baby got larger, but if anything, sex has gotten even more intense.

These stupid hormones.

“Fuck. You’re so loose now,” Giulio says as he bottoms out in me. “Sloppy and wet. You really do need somebody Damien’s size inside you.”

I whine, trying to fuck back against him to encourage him to start thrusting even as I blush from the words that are so close to being an insult. “You’re just fine,” I say breathlessly. “Slayer’s fine. As long as one of you is fucking me, it’s all... it’s all good. Better than good. Please fuck me, Giulio.” I hate that I’m begging, but I just can’t help myself.

Giulio laughs and starts moving. “This is why you’re my concubine. Can’t get enough of my cock. I have to keep you

locked up, to make sure it's only *my* baby inside you..." After a pause, Giulio shakes his head. "Damien's. It really should be Damien's, man."

I go quiet at that, for all that I want to whimper and moan. "Maybe... maybe he's not really sterile," I offer, closing my eyes as I focus on Giulio inside of me and not Damien's lack of ability to father a child.

"Let's hope you pop out a hairy beast of a baby, then. A total newborn but already covered in fur." Giulio moans, stopping to kiss the closest part of my leg. "Just any baby. I really don't care, Mama."

"I know," I say, and I have to fight not to sound bitter at that. I know they just want *any* baby at all, no matter who the father is. In a way, I feel like I'm lucky they didn't just hand me over to Ntimacy's patrons to try to get me pregnant as fast as possible. I shudder at the thought, but even that can't dampen my arousal.

Fucking hormones.

"Can't wait to meet the tadpole," Giulio says. He keeps thrusting, getting so sloppy with my neverending wetness that he even slips out entirely a few times. "I'll miss how good you look like this though. Your tiny tits all swollen. Your huge belly. How easily your skin gets red. That fucking pregnancy glow that I really did think was a myth."

"Is there really a glow?" I ask, grasping at something to make all of this better somehow. I don't want to think about... other things.

"Yeah. Maybe it's just sweat. Or maybe it's how you can't contain your joy. I've seen you smile, Mama, when you're touching your belly." He winks at me, like he thinks he's actually being charming. "Bet we've made you the happiest woman on earth."

I stare at him, unsure of whether he's delusional or just that determined to try to get me to believe something that just isn't true. No, I'm not the happiest woman on earth. I've grown accustomed to the baby growing inside of me, and I'd be

devastated if anything happened to it... but it doesn't make me truly happy. "Yeah," I say, though my voice is a little hollow.

"Make sure to be this happy tomorrow during the move. Damien's so excited." Giulio's face scrunches up, indicating he's getting close. "Be nice to Slayer, too. He's going through a lot."

Be nice to *them*.

Because *they* are going through a lot.

I'm the one with the baby growing inside of me, the one who has to be the mother of a child of men who took me against my will.

It's a polite way of saying it, but I can't bring myself to even *think* the harsher words that come with that.

"Yeah," I say, trying to focus instead on my own impending orgasm. It's so hard to fight the pleasure, even during conversations like this that should have me utterly dry.

"Be nice to..." Giulio trails off, and his next thrust is even harder, sending me scooting back a few inches. "Fuck, why are you so hot, Mama?"

I wish he didn't think I was hot. I wish he was repulsed by me.

Then again, I might've found myself on the floor of one of his clubs if he wasn't attracted to me.

I shudder, but the thoughts all abandon me as the orgasm crashes into me. I'm grateful for the pleasure, grateful for the reprieve from my own thoughts, and I do my best to clutch at him. It's so hard to do this around my pregnant belly, but I need him close right now.

He comes only seconds behind me, flooding me with his seed, and I close my eyes, shivering as the last vestiges of my climax subside.

Giulio pulls out, but that doesn't give me the reprieve I want. He crawls up next to me and kisses me almost violently, pulling me as close to him as he can with my pregnant belly in the way. His tongue invades my mouth.

I think I can taste a hint of myself on his lips.

Despite everything, I find myself kissing back. I wrap one arm around his back and meet his tongue with my own, trying to find some sort of peace here, trying to calm Giulio from whatever thoughts he has running through his head.

Suddenly, I feel a thud against my stomach—from the inside. I groan and turn my head away from Giulio.

“The... the tadpole...” I mumble. “It’s kicking.”

Giulio drops his head to my shoulder, not reaching down to touch. “With how disagreeable the tadpole is, it’s gotta be mine.”

“Gotta be,” I agree. “Even Slayer’s would be more well-behaved than this.” I close my eyes, not wanting to think about who the father of my baby is. “I’m tired.” I sigh, reaching up to stroke Giulio’s hair despite myself as I pretend this is all something I wanted.

It’s better that way.

ABOUT ADDISON WOLF

Addison Wolf is the pen name of Adara Wolf, for writing dark (MM)M/f romances. Under either name, she enjoys writing dark situations and characters finding themselves in very dubiously consensual situations. Please [check her website](#) for a full list of works and detailed content notes for them.

You can also receive a free short story by [signing up to Adara's mailing list](#).

Other stalking links: <http://adarawolf.com> || [Patreon](#) || [Facebook](#) || [Twitter](#)



ABOUT RAISSA DONOVAN

Raissa Donovan is the pen name for M/M writer R. Phoenix. Raissa has ventured into writing dark (MM+)M/f romances.

As R. Phoenix, she writes anything from pretty pink fluff to dark noncon twincest. She prefers to write dark — the darker, the better — but sometimes her muse takes her to some pretty strange places. Her books are primarily available on [Amazon](#), but the especially taboo works are only at [Smashwords](#).

[Website](#) | [Facebook Page](#) | [Facebook Profile](#) | [Facebook Group \(MM\)](#) |
[Facebook Group \(MF\)](#) | [Newsletter](#)



ALSO BY ADDISON WOLF (AS ADARA WOLF)

Other Works by Addison Wolf, under the name Adara Wolf, her m/m pen name.

Under His Heel series

Sci-fi D/s romance featuring humiliation, bondage, and many, many more kinks.

- [Under His Heel](#)
- [Under His Heel: A Kidnapping](#)
 - [Under His Control](#)
 - [Under His Skin](#)
- [Under His... Shorts](#) (short story collection set in the Under His Heel universe)

Leashing His Heart

Spin-off featuring Tracht's nephew Johan and the bondservant forced on him. Petplay, praise kink, dubcon, some unhealthy relationships. Coming in 2022!

Standalones

- [Flesh & Blood](#) (Monster-on-a-leash, enemies-to-lovers, extreme gore/violence)
 - [Bruising Love](#) (yakuza, extreme masochism, promiscuity)
 - [False Feathers \(Dark fairy tale, humiliation, bondage\)](#)
 - [Blue Storm](#) (M/M/m, fantasy, slavery)
 - [Binding Breath](#) (Historical, urban fantasy, mafia, mind control)
- [Hunger and Other Tales of Erotic Horror](#) (anthology of erotic short stories)

Saga of the City by the Flowers

A Mesoamerican-inspired fantasy series, following different men who are trying survive in a world that seems to have it out for them. The gods tend to meddle in the affairs of mortals, and that's not always good for the humans...

- [In Life, In Death](#)
- [A Coward, A Warrior](#)
- [In Pain, In Pleasure](#)

ALSO BY RAISSA DONOVAN (AS R. PHOENIX)

For a complete, up to date list of books by R. Phoenix (including related kinks, taboo content, and warnings), check out her website!

Cages Duo

Gilded Cages: age play, ABDL, puppy play, Stockholm Syndrome, kidnapping, enemas, humiliation, dubcon, noncon, and more.

Tarnished Cages: *Daddy, Cammy, and Zay's journey concludes.*

The Beauty and the Beast Duo

The Beast's Beauty: Stockholm Syndrome, puppy play, kidnapping, humiliation, enemas, scarred MC. Psychological thriller.

The Beauty's Beast: Stockholm Syndrome, kitty play, humiliation, etc. Dark romance.

Contemporary Romance

Almost Strangers [w/MA Innes]: Incest, puppy play. Only available on Smashwords due to taboo content (incest).

It's Just Us [w/Chris McHart]: *(also available in German and available in audio) & its sequel It's Still Just Us [w/Chris McHart]: (also available in German.)*

It's Just You [w/Chris McHart]: Panties and lingerie. Hot tattooed muscled demisexual dude. Sweet as sugar.

Too Close: Domestic Violence, puns, age difference. *(also available in Italian and available in audio)*

Don't Let Go (Broken Boys #1) [w/T.N. Nova]: Angst, rock star, graphic designer, mental illness, BDSM & *its sequel Trust Me (Broken Boys #1.5)* [w/T.N. Nova]: BDSM, mental illness, Halloween, angst.

Urban Fantasy

Undone [w/Morgan Noel]: Dark UF. Fae, incubus, nephilim, emotional abuse and manipulation, corrupt cop, dinosaur donut *(also available in audio) & its prequel Come [w/Morgan Noel]: Even though this is the prequel to Undone, it's best enjoyed after reading Undone. Leandro and Kolt first meet.*

Of All the Odds: Dark UF. Fae, Master/slave dynamics, consensual BDSM, D/s, toys, breath play, asphyxiation, Grimm fairy tale style, non-traditional love story.

Shards of Ice: an M/M retelling of The Snow Queen fairy tale. Friends to lovers, abuse, urban fantasy, blood play, knife play.

The Fate of the Fallen World (19 Books)

The Fate of the Fallen Series (7 Books)

Bought (#1): Dark erotica. Witch, Werewolf, dubcon, blackmail, puppy play, slavery, psychological manipulation

Ravel (#2): Dark romance. Werewolf, billionaire, thief, entitled male, reality check.

Recoil (#3): Dark erotic romance. Vampire, rebellion, enemies to lovers, first time, slave

Owned (#4): Dark. Sexual violence, dubcon/blackmail, sire/childe relationship. The characters from Bought, Ravel, and Recoil start to come together.

Temper (#5): Dark. Non-graphic gang rape, noncon. The characters from Bought, Ravel, and Recoil continue to come together.

Refraction (#6): Dark. Culmination of books 1-5.

Sanguine (#7): Dark. Series finale.

*Get the series discounted with the [Fate of the Fallen Omnibus \(#1-4\)](#) and the [Fate of the Fallen Omnibus \(#5-7\)](#). **They are also available in audio, including in box set editions!***

The Need Trilogy (A Fate of the Fallen Trilogy)

Want (#1): Twincest, dubcon/noncon, drugging, age play, ABDL, humiliation, kinky, taboo

Take (#2): Twincest, dubcon, age play, ABDL, spanking, dildo pony

Have (#3): Twincest, age play, ABDL

Need (Short Story Collection): short stories about Rex and Tavi

Because of the taboo content (incest), the ebooks of this series are only available on Smashwords. You can also get the series discounted with the [Need Trilogy Box Set \(#1-3\)](#). The first three books in the series are also [available in audio](#).

The Tamed & Trained Trilogy (A Fate of the Fallen Trilogy)

Puppy (#1) Playful dark erotica, puppy play, dubcon, vampire, body modification, kinky

Alpha (#2) [w/M.A. Innes]: MMM, menage, puppy play, body modification, vampire, werewolf

Master (#3) [w/M.A. Innes]: MMM, puppy play, vampire, werewolf

This trilogy is also [available in audio](#).

Standalone & Other Fate of the Fallen Books

Prequel: Day Zero (*Werewolf Kevin only wants to protect his little brother. Set the day of the Takeover. Incest*)

Prequel: Daddy (*Vampire Darius wants witch Rowan to submit to him in exchange for protection for his family. Set shortly after the Takeover. Daddy kink with no age play, spanking & discipline,.*)

Asymmetry: Fluffy, cute, sweet, vampire and witch meeting and getting along despite the odds. ([available in audio](#) and [also available in German](#))

Spoiled [w/Morgan Noel] & its sequel **Anticipation** [w/Morgan Noel]: BDSM (heavy BDSM and MMM in *Anticipation*), betrayal, hot sex (The duo is available [as a box set](#) at a discount. *Spoiled* is [also available in Italian](#))

Gifts (Status Quo #1) [MF/MMF; as Raissa Donovan]

Other Books

Henry the HuCow Trilogy

Henry the HuCow: A Gay Lactation Fantasy: Milking, body modifications, piercings, tattoos, a touch of humiliation and plenty of moos. @ [Amazon](#) & [Smashwords](#)

Henry the HuCow 2: Milking, body modifications, piercing, double penetration. @ [Amazon](#) & [Smashwords](#)

Henry the HuCow 3: Milking/lactation, sounding, breeding kink (no mpreg), eating healthy, med kink, mild watersports @ [Amazon](#) & [Smashwords](#)

The Omega's Alpha Duo

Salvus (The Omega's Alpha #1): Non-shifter ABO (alpha/beta/omega) aka omegaverse, mpreg.

Escape (The Omega's Alpha #2): *Conclusion of Salvus's story.*