



NICOLE YORK

DANCING WITH THE DEVIL

SELLING  
MY  
SOUL

# SELLING MY SOUL



NICOLE YORK

STAR KEY PRESS

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## DESCRIPTION



### **Elisa:**

All I've ever wanted was to measure up to my father's expectations.

But it's not that simple when he's the head of a brutal crime family.

The only girl in a world of monsters and the landscape keeps getting darker and darker.

One shift in power and my father is marrying into a worse family—one that wants our name for their own.

In return for the safety of his sons, I'm offered to the eldest in our new extended family.

But he's not looking for love or happy ever afters.

He needs a pawn. A bargaining chip. A hostage with a pretty face.

I hate myself for wanting him to see me. To need me. To love me.

Everything about my desire is wrong. Yet it blinds me to bend, then break every rule I've ever known.

Anything for him.

### **Daemon:**

The only way to survive in the dark is to become it.

I can't even remember what it's like to feel anything but vengeance.

But everything changes when my mother marries the leader of our bitter enemies.

Play nice was the request. Not a chance.

And in exchange, I get the honor of breaking his only daughter.

They think we're in this fight together. They're wrong.

We're here to tear them apart. One by one.

And we're starting with her. Little does she know, she won't survive the love she seeks.

I'm not her savior. I'm death at her door.

Naughty little thing has no clue just how deep I'm going to take her before I destroy everything she holds dear.

And there's one person that's going to help me do it—her.



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# PREQUEL

## DAEMON

“Get her drunk. Or drugged. Either way, bring her to me when she’s tipsy. I’m fucking her tonight.” I pointed to the beautiful, petite, white-haired beauty dancing with a tall blonde-haired friend on the dance floor.

Elisa.

She was perfect, everything I wanted bowing before me, and yet if she had any clue who I was or what we were up to, she’d die where she stood.

Lanny nodded. “Sure thing, boss.”

“I just have to take care of Diggs first,” I said. “Then I’ll be back.”

“Yell if you need anything.”

I smiled. “If you hear yelling all the way from the back alley, it won’t be me. It’ll be Diggs.”

Lanny laughed. “You think he’s got the money?”

“If he did, he wouldn’t have run.”

“Why do they always run?” Lanny grinned. “The hand of justice always finds them.”

I lifted my fist and laughed. “Goddamn right. Now go warm my girl up for me. I’m gonna collect blood from a stone.”

Lanny walked up to the bartender and pulled something out of his pocket. From the looks of it, it was taking quite a bit more effort and hundred-dollar bills than usual to bribe him.

There wasn't an entertainment establishment in downtown Chicago that didn't serve my syndicate in some way or another, but we weren't in Chicago. We were in Boston. Enemy territory where our biggest rivals, the La Rosas, ruled their little empire.

They didn't know we were here yet, and by the time they did, we would be gone. The only thing left behind would be fear and a reminder to never fuck with the Petrov family.

A lot of scores were being settled in Boston tonight.



Martin Diggs knelt in the alley behind the club, the knees of his expensive jeans soaked with grime. His eyes were rimmed red and snot dripped down his nose.

My younger brother Dezzy towered at his side, his pistol trained on the kneeling man's skull. Dez looked eager to pull the trigger, but he wouldn't without my say-so. The kid was almost ready to run his own crew, but until then, he took orders from me.

"Funny running into you in Boston." I came to a stop in front of Diggs. "Were you hoping the La Rosas would protect you?"

"Fuck the La Rosas and fuck the Petrovs," Diggs spat. "A plague on both your houses."

I nodded at Dezzy, who cracked Diggs in the back of the head with the butt of his pistol.

"You want to try starting over?" I asked.

Diggs touched the back of his head gently and winced. His fingers came back bloody. "I wasn't hiding from you, Daemon, I swear."

"See, just saying that makes me think you were. And Dezzy having to drag your ass out of a rundown motel room under a different name? That feels like hiding, too."

The man winced like I had hit him again. “It’s not like that. I would never try to avoid you guys.”

“Great, so you have my money then. Why didn’t you just say so?” I grinned at my brother, who laughed and tightened his grip on his pistol.

Diggs glanced nervously at him. “Well, no, hold on. I don’t have your money just yet.”

“Then it was smart of you to hide.” I slapped him across the face with an open palm. His head rocked to the side, and he spat blood from his busted lip. “You should have run farther.”

Diggs glared at me with fury. “How dare you?”

I slapped him again. Harder. “No, how dare *you*? You made me a promise, Martin. You looked me in the eye, you shook my hand, and you promised to pay back that hundred grand I loaned you.”

“And I meant it. I *mean* it. I just need a few investments to pay out. Really, if you could just loan me another hundred, I could move some things around.”

“So, what? You can pay me back with my own money? Might as well take my own dick and fuck myself. Is that what you’re telling me to do? To go fuck myself?”

I drove my heel right into his chest and knocked the wind out of him. He crumpled to the slick asphalt, desperately trying to suck in air. I crouched by his face, careful not to kneel in the muck. His wide eyes looked at me like I was a speeding train barreling down on him.

Most people thought I was a heartless monster, an emotionless force of nature that drank blood like wine and snorted violence like coke. They were right. Death was my one true love and the only emotion I wanted from people was fear.

“Do you remember the promise I made to you that day?” I asked quietly.

Diggs nodded. “You promised me that no one escapes the Petrovs’ hand of justice.”

“Goddamn right.” I pulled brass knuckles from my pocket, and they slid comfortably into my fist. Emblazoned across their spiky front was the word, *JUSTICE*. “Now, Martin, here’s what happens when you break a promise to me and my family.”

In less than a minute, he was a bleeding, quivering mess. At least two of his teeth lay next to him. Any longer and I would have killed him, which was fine by me, but dead men couldn’t pay their debts.

I wiped my bloody hands off on his shirt. “You’ve got two more weeks. And since you like running, I won’t come looking for you next time. Dezzy here will pay a visit to your mother’s house on Grant Avenue. With the blue door.”

Diggs cried out through the mess of his face. “No, I’ll pay. Fuck me, I’ll pay.”

I nodded. “Just the money will suffice. But to be sure you never forget this lesson, you’re not allowed to fix those broken teeth.”

“What?”

“You heard me. If you get those fucking teeth fixed—if I ever see anything but a snaggle-toothed, Jack-o’-lantern smile in that ugly face of yours—I’ll come back and knock the rest of them out. Understood?”

His tears told me he did. I stood up and readjusted my clothes. Dezzy would clean up the mess back here.

With that done, energy roared through my veins. It was time to fuck.



Back in the club, I glanced down at my hands, feeling something sticky between my fingers. *Fucking Diggs.*

“Hi.” A pretty brunette stopped in front of me wearing a tight blue dress showing too much of her tits. “You need a drink?”

“I do.” I glanced over her shoulder to see Lanny with his arm around both my girl and the redhead’s shoulders. He was a pro. Always had been.

“What’ll it be, handsome?” She cocked her hip and gave me a *come eat my pussy* smile.

“Whiskey. On the rocks. Squirt of lime.” I slipped my hands into my slacks and turned my attention back to the bar.

One of the guys working under my brother Vin walked up. Terrance stood six seven and was built like a linebacker. “Boss.”

I gave him a quick nod but kept my eyes on my prize. Elisa La Rosa. The only daughter of Alex La Rosa, head of Boston’s La Rosa family. The bastard was only outdone by my own father in his vileness.

Their family ruled the underbelly of Boston like mine ruled Chicago. We were sworn enemies and tonight would seal that deal forever.

“Vin called. The old lady is dead.” He smiled.

I didn’t pay him an attention. “Good. Get lost.”

“Consider it done.” He walked away and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding on to.

It was Vin’s job to pull the trigger most days, and though I felt like something as important as tonight was mine to take care of, my father hadn’t agreed.

*“You will go to the club and you will fuck the La Rosa girl. I need her busy. Use your dick and help the family out. You got it?” My dad’s dark eyes bored into mine. “Your brother is our enforcer.”*

*“I’ll do as you say.” I bowed my head and let my eyes drop. There was no use in fighting him. He’d murder me in my sleep. I was sure of that. “I just wanted to give you my opinion.”*



*“Well, don’t,” he barked. “I don’t give a fuck what you or anyone else thinks. If I want to know how you feel, I’ll fucking ask you. Got it?”*

*It took everything inside of me to stand my ground and not shrink away into the darkness.*

*He’d beat all of us a million times and more. There was no one more terrifying than my father.*

*No one.*

“All done, boss.” Lanny moved to stand beside me. “You got blood on your hands.” He snorted with a short laugh. “Diggs was a bleeder?”

I shrugged. “Everyone is if you know what you’re doing.”

“Alright, sure,” he said. “Let me know how else I can help. I’d have taken out Diggs for you, by the way.”

“Mine to do. Keep an eye on the girls. I’ll be back.” I turned and walked to the restroom, needing to get my hands clean before Elisa was mine. I didn’t want to dirty her pale skin with anything but a few bruises and the scent of my cologne.

The phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and pressed it to my ear. Vin’s voice was throaty and he sounded out of breath.

“Diggs pay up?” he asked.

“What do you think?” I pushed the door open and moved to wash my hands.

“I think most people would do anything not to get shot in the face. Just my thoughts on the matter though.” He chuckled.

“I know your thoughts on the matter. You start with bullets. I try to get paid first. Don’t worry, he’ll be eating through a straw for a while.” I pressed the phone between my ear and shoulder and looked in the mirror. My eyes were darker than normal. Maybe the human soul did die little by little as it did things that were unworthy of its light.

If so, mine had died a long time ago.

“Did you take out the woman?” I dried my hands, being careful with the ring on my left hand. It was a family heirloom and the only thing my father had ever given any of us boys.

“She’s dead. And she’ll be delivered to her family so they can quickly understand who they fucked with. I’m headed home. Send the boys with me if you’re done with them.” He cleared his throat. “You fuck the girl yet?”

“No, but I will.” I turned to see a group of guys walk in, hanging on each other, clearly drunk. “I’ll send them home. See you there.”

“Not fair by the way,” my brother yelled as I moved the phone from my ear, uninterested in his rantings. “You get to fuck some girl and I—”

I clicked the button to turn the phone off. There might be pussy in my future, but that was a given anyway. It wasn’t as if I would choose to sleep with my family’s enemy. But my father had hidden knowledge of how everything would play out, and like many times before in my life, I was simply a pawn in his game.

We all were.

I made my way through the smoky room to the bar where Elisa and her friend were drinking with Lanny, but they were hitting their limit. Elisa wobbled a little as she turned to look at me. The smile on her face grew wider and I reached out to grab her as she fell toward me.

“Oh. I’m so sorry.” She pressed her hands to my chest. So small. Everything about her was tiny. Everything but her clear blue eyes and her pretty red mouth.

“All my fault. Here, let me help you to a table.” I nodded at Lanny to get the other girl away. And then called over my shoulder at him. “After you’re done, you guys get back home.”

“Got it, boss,” he called from somewhere behind me.

“How embarrassing.” She hiccupped and sat down at a table with my help. Her little black dress rode up her taut thighs almost to the edge of her mound. “It’s my high school

graduation. I'm headed to a big party and then after that, off to Chicago."

Her comment surprised me. "Chicago. For what?" I asked, trying my damndest to sound more interested than I was.

She hiccupped again. "College, then law school."

"Your family is going to let you go to school?" I reached down and tucked a long strand of her white-blond hair behind her ear. She looked like something out of a fairytale. I wanted to corrupt her purity and innocence, which I supposed made me a fairytale villain. If I was the big bad wolf, she was a lost girl in the woods, and I was going to sink my fangs into her tender flesh.

"My family isn't happy about it, but I'm sure my dad is expecting me to help with the family business once I'm a lawyer." She smiled at me, blissfully ignorant. The drugs were working. "What's your name? I'm Elisa."

"Call me Daemon." I took the hand she extended and pulled her up where she was flush against me. Her cheeks reddened and she giggled.

"Sorry about that."

"Don't be." I gripped her chin and forced her to look up at me. "My hotel is just next door. Come, let me fuck you until you can't walk home tonight."

"What?" Her eyes widened a little.

I reached down and grabbed her hand, sliding it between us so she could stroke my cock. "You heard me clearly."

Her breath caught and she tried to move back, but I held on tight. "It's not a request."

"Yes." She glanced down and ran her hand down my shaft, which bulged behind my slacks. "Whatever that means. Yes."

"Good girl." I gripped her hand tightly and walked toward the entrance to the bar. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone stand.

"Lanny?" I called over my shoulder.

“On it.” He moved out of the shadows toward the dark figure. Surely one of her many brothers would have been watching out for her at a bar in downtown Boston. Not my problem. Our soldiers wouldn’t have left the bar until I did, no matter what I said about them going home.

They were family.

We slipped out into the cold December night, and I pulled off my coat and wrapped it around her shoulders before taking her hand again. I didn’t do sweet and gentle, but I could play nice until I got her alone. Behind closed doors, I would make her my little slave.

She jogged with me across the street and into the warmth of the hotel lobby. We made it to the elevator before she spoke again.

“D. I don’t even know you. Why am I saying yes to this?” She wobbled and I picked her up and gripped her ass tightly as she wrapped her legs around my waist.

“Because as much as you want to believe you’re a good girl, you’re not, Elisa. You’re a whore.” I ran my fingers under her panties to find a swollen, soaked cunt. “You’re my whore.”

She cried out and moved against me as I slipped a finger inside of her ass. Her moans were loud and guttural. More innocent than any other woman I’d been with before.

I turned and pressed her to the back wall, pressing my lips against hers and fucking her tight hole while teasing her main entrance with my thumb.

“Please,” she whimpered against my mouth.

My body cried out for a long night of loving her, but it wasn’t in the cards. Maybe my father was far more cruel than I thought. Did he know how much I craved a woman’s touch? Not just her touch, but her love. It would never be mine. It was too dangerous.

I was too dangerous.

“Soon.” The door behind me opened and I carried her to my room, my finger still tucked inside of her as she rolled her

hips and fucked herself. I managed to get the door open and walked inside, dropping her on the edge of the bed.

She sat up and reached for me, tugging at my slacks as a hunger came over her. The drugs. They worked like a charm every time.

“On your knees, princess.” I swatted her hand away and stepped back. She got on her knees on the bed and pulled her dress over her head. Her breasts were small but perky, her nipples tight and a dusty pink color.

I pulled my zipper down and slipped my slacks over my hips before grabbing my cock. “Tell me you want it.”

“I want it.” She moved toward me on her hands and knees, grabbing me softly and slipping her mouth over the head of my cock. I stifled a moan. So tight and wet. Reaching down her back, I ran my hand over the curve of her ass and gripped the tiny pair of panties she wore before ripping them off of her. I slipped my fingers back into her ass and gripped a handful of her hair with my free hand.

She couldn't take my dick as good as she thought, but I worked myself deep into her throat and used her body to take myself over the edge. The world exploded and I let my head drop back as she drank me down.

The smell of her arousal rose up around me, and if it wasn't begging me to fuck her, the soft moans she made were. I was the big bad wolf again, and she was my prey. I would devour her.

I pushed her shoulder and she fell on her back. Roughly, I moved her to her stomach and gripped her hips, pulling her ass into the air. Every part of her was open to me, wet, pulsing, needy.

“I'm gonna fuck your ass then stretch your pussy good for you.” I pressed my dick into her ass and she moved up to her hands and knees, crying out. I ignored her and worked her body for the next few hours, using everything she had to give.

By the time I was done fucking her, I was out of breath. She was in the fetal position, moaning and shaking, her pretty

body covered in handprints and bruises from me gripping so tightly.

I dressed slowly and walked around the bed, sliding my fingers into her hair as I knelt beside her. She looked at me through heavy eyelids, drifting into twilight from the drugs and from the things I did to her body.

“Don’t go,” she whispered like a prayer. “I don’t want to be alone.”

Something like pity almost stirred in me, but I hadn’t felt anything but anger and hate since I was a child. I wasn’t about to go soft after a few hours with this little slut, as gorgeous and intoxicating as she might be.

What the hell was she complaining about anyway? If anyone knew what it was like to be alone, it was me. I had lots of brothers, but my father had pitted us against each other, forced us to fend for ourselves early. Elisa was daddy’s little fucking princess.

Besides, she was a La Rosa. That alone was reason enough to despise her. No one in that family had anything resembling a soul.

“I hope your daddy knows what a little whore you are.” I kissed the tip of her nose. “I’m sure all the boys at your new college in Chicago will help you get that naughty slut inside of you out.” I chuckled deep in my chest. “So tight and good. But soon, after you finish fucking all the rest of the boys, maybe come find me. Maybe then I’ll fit without you crying so much.”

Elisa had dozed off, looking small and fragile and in need of protection. The world was full of devils like me. She needed someone strong to keep her safe, but that person could never be me.

There was nothing I wanted more than to lie down beside her and show her what making love looked like when she woke up, but I wasn’t sure I knew what that was myself anymore.

I pulled the covers up over her naked body, spat in her face, and walked out.

It wasn't her that was a whore with no soul.

It was me.

# CHAPTER 1





5 years later

Although Mom had died five years before, her absence stung like a fresh wound on days like today. No day, no matter how great it should be, would ever be the same. Not even graduation day.

It was her dream for me to be a lawyer, maybe a way for me to eventually find a way out of the family business. I'd worked extra hard to finish college and law school early, hoping to finally be free of my father and brothers. My only real defender from the monsters that surrounded me was gone.

Murdered.

Whoever had done it covered their tracks well. Even the master villain, my father, Alexander La Rosa, couldn't figure it out. Or if he had, he hadn't shared that information with me. When the trail grew cold and the vultures came in, he moved back to his first love. The family business.

Normally, I stayed far away from my family. They were in Boston and I was in Chicago, a city they weren't welcome in. For some reason, no one here ever hassled me about my family. Maybe because I wasn't involved in their business. Maybe because no one cared about me enough to know where I was.

However, the La Rosas had come to Chicago in full force this week. They said it was for my graduation, but I had a

feeling something else was going on. My father never cared for my choice of profession, and milestones like graduation didn't make him weepy and sentimental. And bringing the whole family like this was liable to start a war with the Petrovs.

So far, there hadn't been any static between the two families. Me and mine were all staying in an enormous house my father had bought a while back, and none of them had really ventured out yet to cause any trouble.

Just then, my father walked by my room and paused. I stood with my back to him and stared back in a full-length mirror as his dark eyes searched my face.

"The black dress is more befitting of a lawyer." He showed no emotion and his voice held little warmth. "Change into it."

He walked away and I held back a sigh. There was no way to become a woman when I was constantly treated like a small girl. I wished they would have stayed back in Boston.

My phone buzzed from the bed next to me, pulling me out of my oncoming depression. Why had I agreed to stay at the new house with him and my brothers? I should have stayed at my own apartment where the sun shone through the windows.

Here it felt as if it were too scared to even shine.

My phone was insistent. Grabbing it, I plopped down on the bed, still fully dressed in a light blue dress. Mom would have loved it. But Mom wasn't here.

My roommate, Sara, jumped in before I could say anything. "Are you just crazy excited? Today is our day!" She let out a whoop.

I smiled and stood, moving back in front of the mirror. "I wish I were there with you."

"Oh no. Is your family being a drag again?"

If she only knew. "Something like that. It feels weird in this big house that isn't ours. I don't know why my father didn't just send a card from Boston. Chicago is where my life is, not his." I felt whiny. Hell, I sounded whiny.

“I get it. My mom and dad have called ten times this morning. Having older parents that won’t use technology is harder than you think.” Her voice changed to that of an old man. “*Sara, dear, how do you get this map thing-a-ma-gilly to work on the phone? We’re trying to get to the school early.*”

We shared a laugh. I glanced at my watch. “It’s still three hours until the graduation. There’s no way they’re getting there that early, right?”

“Wrong.” She snort-laughed. “They want good seats.”

“They’re assigned seats.” I turned and let my eyes move down my figure. I had my mom’s height and her curves, though they were mostly hidden. I looked all of fifteen. Maybe dying my hair from the unnatural white-blonde that it was would help.

*At least I’d fit into the family a little better.*

“I know. They’ll figure that out.” She paused. “So... are your sexy-hot brothers coming today?”

“Gag.” I walked away from the mirror and closed the door before taking a seat back on my bed. “I know Drake will be there. He’s the only one I want there anyway.” I glanced down at my manicured nails. Soon I’d be off my father’s payroll and able to do my nails with my own money.

“He’s so laid back. I really was hoping that Jace would be there. Make him come for me. I’m your best friend in the whole world.”

“My only friend.” I smiled. “Jace would wreck your life. He’s a gangster and he doesn’t care about anyone or anything but himself. If he could sleep, work out, eat, and fuck random women only to never see them again, he’d be thrilled.”

“Hot.”

“You’re sick in the head.” I lay back on the bed. “What are you wearing today?”

“Something blue. It just feels professional and yet still feminine. You?”

“I was going to wear blue.” I lifted my head and glanced down the length of my body. “But my father said to change into something black.”

“Um. Excuse me?”

“You don’t know him. Nor do you want to. He’s like Jace but meaner.” I sat up. “Let me let you go. I need to finish getting dressed. I have pictures before we head out of here.”

“Alright. It’s still dumb.”

“I agree.”

“Get Jace to come. See you there. Bye!” She rushed through her words and hung up on me.

All I could do was chuckle. Jace would most likely *not* be there, and it was to the benefit of humankind. Besides, he was probably lost to a warehouse in the middle of the city.

Chicago had so many more ways to get into trouble than Boston. I could see why my father wanted a house in the middle of the city. It was a safe haven in enemy territory.

He had enemies everywhere, but his favorite one was in Chicago—or had been. The patriarch of the Petrov family was recently dead. Made me wonder if Dad had anything to do with it. That was family business. Not my problem. And if I made it so, I would come to regret it for sure.

Voices and laughter sounded from somewhere down the hall, and I couldn’t help but find out who had arrived at the house. There was warmth in the middle of the cold winter that was my father. My four brothers made sure of that.

“Dad didn’t pay for your fucking ticket? That’s hilarious.” My brother Jace’s voice lifted above the others.

“No, and he didn’t let me fly on the private jet. Said he needed it for something. It’s not a big deal. Shut the fuck up about it.” The anger in Decan’s voice caused me to stop in my tracks.

“Boo!” someone shouted from behind me.

I yelled and spun around, my heart racing a million miles an hour.

Drake, my youngest brother, had a warm smile on his face. His light brown eyes were filled with excitement and love. He reminded me most of Mom. The rest of the pack was my father in different skin-suits.

I slapped Drake in the chest. “Don’t do that. Jeez.”

He pulled me into a tight hug, his hospital scrubs soft but smelling like moth balls and Clorox. “Oh come on, I was just teasing. What are you worried about anyway? No one is going to let anything happen to you. You’re the only daughter of the most revered mafia boss in all of Boston.”

“We’re not in Boston.” I snuggled against him, wanting to stay there for forever. “Besides, it’s not the people outside of the house I’m worried about. It’s the monsters in it.”

He kissed the top of my head and squeezed one more time before moving back and taking my upper arms into his hands. His gaze was kind. “No one in here would hurt you, Elisa. They’re all wild bastards, but they’re your brothers, your blood.”

Were they? From what I knew, they all were, but I looked like the day and they all looked like the night. We couldn’t have looked more different. I didn’t even look like Mom. It was like I was adopted or my father was the milkman from the North Pole.

I didn’t question it. It would do me no good to do so. Plus, there was no need to plant a seed in my father’s head. He was full of paranoia as it was.

I moved back and reached for Drake’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go see what everyone is up to.”

He pulled from my grasp. “You go see. I already saw them this morning. Plus, I gotta get ready for your big day. Need to look my best.” He ran his hands down the front of his chest and lifted an eyebrow. “That hot chick you room with coming?”

I rolled my eyes. “Sara. Yes. She’s graduating too, you buffoon.”

He made a money sound, turned, and moved down the hall like an overgrown ape. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s funny?” Decan’s voice was too close for comfort.

I jumped and turned around again. No slapping him in the chest though. He’d most likely slap me back. “You scared me.” I took a shaky breath and nodded to my right. “Drake was being silly.”

Nothing. Not a response or a word. His dark eyes bored into me. Something was wrong with him. As the enforcer of our family mafia, I figured there needed to be.

He murdered people in cold blood and didn’t think twice about it. He reveled in it.

“I’m glad you’re here.” I moved around him and walked toward the sound of Jace talking to someone else. His tone was bright and airy. He must have gotten laid last night. That was the *only* thing that made my brother less broody and grumpy.

“Hey.” He smiled and walked over to pull me into a bear hug. “You look amazing. Just like Momma in that blue dress.” He stepped back and for a moment I saw the brother I grew up with. The one that wanted Dad’s approval but instead got Mom’s love. A good exchange in my opinion.

“Hey.” I offered him a smile. “Maybe that’s why Dad wants me to change into something black instead.”

“Probably. Plus, black is a power color.” Alex stood from behind our father’s desk. My oldest brother, Dad’s namesake, was the exact replica of a younger version of my dad. He was as demanding and cold-hearted as a person could be. With the family, there were moments that you could glimpse Mom coming out in him, but it was rare.

Rare and fleeting.

Decan walked back into the office, and Jace turned to talk to him.

Alex moved from behind the desk and came to stand in front of me. “I heard you yelp in the hallway. You need to learn to protect yourself. You’re more than old enough to defend yourself from anyone that tries to hurt you. Got it?”

“I’ve been taking martial arts classes.” I crossed my arms over my chest. I couldn’t defy my father, but giving my oldest brother attitude was pretty close to it.

“It’s not giving you confidence. Did you just start or are you no good at it?” Alex ignored my tone. Nothing affected him, or if it did no one would know the difference.

“She just started. Lay off, brother.” Jace wrapped an arm around my shoulder and smiled down at me. “Look how tiny she is? I’d be scared as shit if I were this small too.”

“I’m not that small.” I pulled away from him, feeling incredibly miniature all of a sudden. Three of my brothers gathered around, each of them so familiar and yet strangers. Whatever warmth there had been between us died with Mom. Or so it felt like it had.

“Excuse me,” a soft voice said from the doorway behind us. Lisa, our maid and housekeeper from Boston, had traveled with Dad. “Time to get ready. The cars will be here to take us to take pictures and lunch in thirty minutes.”

“Lisa.” I turned fully and walked over to hug her. She’d been with my family since Alex was born. If anyone knew Mom, it was her. “So good to see you.”

She smiled and pulled me into a warm hug. The smell of roses wrapped around me. “You too, my sweet. If you’d visit the house, you’d see me more.”

I pulled back and tried not to let any of the tears that filled my eyes drop. “I agree.”

“Aww, honey.” She reached up and wiped at my eyes. “Your mother would be so proud of you. This blue dress would make her heart sing.”

“Father told me to wear black.” I let out a short sigh and reached up to brush away the rest of the unshed tears. There was no room for weakness in my family. And like blood in the

water around sharks, my softness would wake up the monsters faster. No reason to let them think I was weaker than I was.

“Not at all. I’ll talk to him. Wear the blue.” She cupped my cheeks. “He’s just lonely and you look like your mother in the blue. Keep it on. It’s better.”

“Thank you.” I walked around her as the doorbell rang. With all of my brothers in the house, it could be only one person at the door.

Dave.

Part of me wanted to leave him out there, but I knew better. He couldn’t help the fact that he thought we were perfect for each other, and I felt like I was dating an old junior high mascot.

He smiled and reached for me the minute I opened the door. His brown, curly hair flopped around on his head. “Wow. You look amazing.”

“Thanks.” I moved into his arms, giving the hug that was expected of me. “Drake is in his room getting ready if you want to go poke him to hurry up.” I glanced up in time to receive a kiss from him. It was soft and sweet. And it did absolutely nothing for me.

Nothing had since I met the dark angel that stole my thoughts, my longings, my soul.

It was something I didn’t think about often, but every once in a while it would pop up. Guilt and shame would beat it back.

Dave broke my concentration. “Okay. I’ll go get him. I’m excited for you. Big day. You should be so proud of yourself, baby.” He moved around me and I walked out on the front porch and closed the door behind me.

Baby. *Eck*. I needed to break things off with him. It was never going to work. I’d started dating him on a whim. Really to shut my brother and Sara up. Everyone felt like I needed someone in my life.



And I did. The sexy, dangerous asshole who took advantage of me a few years before at the club in Boston. That was who I needed in my life. He had done things to me that I could only beg another man to do. And with no regard for me or who I was.

For a few blissful, depraved moments, I could be the Elisa La Rosa that my father would have been proud to call his own. Naughty. Ugly. Desperate for power—power over my dark angel.

“The things I would let you do to me.” I bit my lip as my body woke up and pulsed. Dropping down on a bench, I closed my eyes and let that night rise up again.

His rough hands pulling at my hips. Lost in my hair. His breath hot and smelling of the best bourbon. His eyes filled with pain and passion. Dark hair wet with sweat and his muscles clenched as he fucked me over and over again.

The sound of the door opening caused me to jump. My dirty dreams would have to happen another time.

“Dad wants to announce something to all of us. Get in here.” Alex moved back and held the door open for me. “You good? Your cheeks are flushed. Surely it’s not from your wussy-ass boyfriend.” He snorted.

I ignored him and walked past him into the large, elaborately decorated living room where my father stood in his black suit. Crimson and dark wood stained every inch of the room. It was fitting. Blood and black souls. I shivered. I’d be out of there shortly.

If not, I would suffocate.

“Sit down.” He glanced around at each of us, his eyes lingering on me, as if he’d noticed that I was still in the light blue gown Lisa said was fine. I’d let her take that up with him. It was a losing battle otherwise.

We all took a seat. I squeezed in between Drake and Dave. It was surprising that Dave was even there. But maybe my father’s announcement had nothing to do with our family business. I leaned back and crossed my arms over my chest.

Everyone seemed to be mesmerized by my father. I could be too, if I let myself. No thanks. He'd have me dressed in skintight black leather on a roof with a sniper rifle, killing people with no thought about it.

Clinging to the light within me was the only way I knew to honor my mother.

Dad's voice was clear and strong. "I'm dating a beautiful woman here in Chicago. She won't be at the graduation today, but you're all expected at a family dinner on Tuesday night. I will be marrying this woman then. And you will all be there. And you'll make her feel completely welcome. Got it?"

Everyone nodded but me. Marrying someone? Who?

I blinked a few times to realize everyone had their eyes trained on me. "What?" I mumbled.

"Answer Father," Alex barked.

"Of course, sure." I leaned further back in the couch, wishing I could disappear. He knew how badly I missed Mom right now. Why would he feel the need to bring up marrying someone else?

*To remind us all that he was a cold-hearted bastard and that we should expect nothing less of him.*

As if we didn't already know and remember.

"Good. I will see you at the graduation. We have reserved seats. Do not be late." He turned, let Lisa help slip on his overcoat, and walked out.

"Let's go?" Drake jumped up and offered me a hand. "Come on. Today's your big day."

I forced a smile and got up, going through the motions as we loaded up and headed to my graduation. After taking the bar exam, I would officially be a lawyer, but my law degree was a start.

Not that my father had given any thought to it.

If you weren't in the family business, then you really didn't matter. Unless you could serve outside of the family.

Then, and only then, were you worthy of any of his attention.  
I'd yet to do any of those things.

## CHAPTER 2



## DAEMON

“Get out,” I barked as I pushed at the bodies lying across me. Three beautiful women mumbled and complained but got out of my bed.

The night had been a long one of having my fill of every carnality other than bloodshed. That was today’s delight.

I lifted my chin, still flat on my back, and stared at the ceiling as they moved around.

A soft voice asked, “Will I see you again?”

“No.” I rolled over, pressing my front side to the bed and allowing my left arm to hang over the side of the mattress. Silk sheets fit for a king lay beneath me, covered in sweat and come.

Try as I may, I couldn’t think of anything but Elisa La Rosa.

Even her name caused my dick to harden. What was it about her? She was nothing special. It had been years since I had even seen her. Something about her left its hooks in me, and I couldn’t shake her loose.

Fuck me. She was our enemy and there I lay dreaming about her each night.

*Someone should put a bullet between my eyes. Put me out of my misery.*

And yet, it wasn’t misery. It was bliss. An even more dangerous place to play for a man like me.

I waited until the door clicked closed to sit up. A loud groan filled the room and I smiled. What would it be like to bring her into my world?

Surely she'd seen all of the horrors of a mafia life. Her father, Alexander La Rosa, was the biggest bastard in the United States—at least now that my old man was in the grave.

“Good riddance,” I muttered and stood up. After a long stretch, I got in the shower and let the hot water run over my head for a while.

The women from the night before were docile and easy to manipulate. So was Elisa. But she was drugged at the club that night.

If she were sober, would she willingly take my cock down her throat so deep that her eyes watered?

My body ached to know. I reached down, and though I'd fucked all night, I'd never let myself release. I needed it. Needed her. Wanted to know all of her secrets.

So I could use them against her.

I pulled at my dick and arched my back as visions of her spread across my bed filled my mind. Her white angelic hair splayed out. Her body fully open to me.

I'd hurt her. Make her cry. Use her like a whore.

She would never survive it. But if she did, then maybe, just maybe she'd have a place in my life. At least in my bed. Certainly not in my heart.

If I still had a heart, it was cold and black and incapable of anything like affection.

“Suicide,” I said to no one. As our greatest enemy, to fall for her, to want a future with her, was treason in so many ways. Except my father was dead now. I would be taking over the family soon, and I would make the rules.

I could fuck whoever I wanted, as long as I didn't fall for them.

I cried out as come burst from the tip of my dick, thick and hot. After pumping my shaft until my knees went weak, I washed up, dried off, and got dressed. A black suit with a button-down, opened at the top, would do the trick.

The full-length mirror showed an image that was too close to that of my dad, but such was life. A life that was getting more stagnant by the day. My father had been a bastard to us, but he'd created a time of peace for the city and for our family.

“When the monster needed to play, he just attacked us.” I tilted my head to the side, studying the scars along my neck and the one on my face. “Maybe being a villain to the world and protecting the family is my legacy. Maybe.”

Then I examined the scars on my left forearm, which I always keep hidden. A neat row of lines had been etched into my skin, one for every time I'd fucked up as a child. More of Dad's love.

He made sure they were orderly and precise. He wanted me to know he wasn't doing it in anger or the heat of the moment. Each was a cold, calculated reminder of what I had done.

“Scars are lessons that never go away,” he'd said to me when I was eight. “If I make it hurt bad enough, you'll remember every single one. Stop being such a fucking disappointment.”

I ran my fingers over the only tattoo on that forearm, right beside my scars. It was Elisa in all her glory. To me, she was just another scar inflicted upon me by my father. He had set her in my path, and with her, I'd seen a sliver of how good life could be with an angel in my bed—even if I was a demon.

The lesson her scar reminded me about? I don't get a woman to love and a safe place to call home. I was broken a long time ago and nothing can ever fix me.

Not even her.

Fuck me if I ever gave in and tracked her down. She'd know just how much I'd been thinking of her if she ever saw the evidence on my damn skin.

“Stupid,” I whispered and pulled my shirt on.

My phone buzzed. Mom.

I picked it up and moved to the floor-to-ceiling windows of my penthouse, looking out on the city that was once my father’s but was now mine. “Mom.” I pressed my forehead to the glass.

“Daemon. I’m getting married. I wanted to tell you in person, but you know I’ve been busy. We’re doing it in three days. On Tuesday evening. You’ll be there. I need you to walk me down the aisle.” She paused and I said nothing. “It’s not a request.”

“Done.” I dropped the call and slid the phone in my back pocket. My father’s pocket watch that he’d gotten from his father and his father before him sat on my nightstand.

I picked it up and rubbed it against my chest before flipping it open. 10:52 p.m. I had stopped the clock at the moment my dad breathed his last breath. I wanted a reminder. I needed to remember that one moment when I killed the man who tormented me my entire life.

After grabbing my keys to the bike, I called my brother Vin. He picked up on the first ring. Good boy.

“What’s up, Daemon?” He sounded high.

“Meet me at Barron’s place. He still owes us money and I need to blow off some steam. Bring your boys and your gun.” I walked out the front door into the garage where most of my toys were.

“Hells yes. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Don’t you go having any fun without me.”

I dropped the call, not in the mood for his humor. The world felt off with Mom getting married. Who was this fucker anyway? “Do you care or do you not?”

I growled at my own question.





“You in a mood? ‘Cause I need to know this shit before we do our thing.” Vin walked up and grabbed my shoulder, squeezing hard. I stifled a flinch. The motherfucker had been lifting again.

“Let’s just get this done.” I rolled my shoulder, warning him to release me.

We stood up the street from Shane Barron’s pawn shop, away from the grate-covered windows in front of the building. When we moved in, it would have to be quick, before he could engage his security locks. And he couldn’t see us coming.

“Right. So you *are* in a fucking mood.” Vin ran his hand down his face and chuckled. “You talked to Mom, didn’t you?”

I looked up and down the sidewalk to make sure no one was clocking us. “Who’s the guy?”

“Don’t know. You know she doesn’t like me. She says I have spooky eyes.” He laughed and widened his eyes at me. My brother was an excellent hitman, and he did a great job of looking like one too. He was covered in tattoos everywhere but his face.

“Yeah, you look like a mad dog ready to bite.”

He howled. “Let me off my leash and tell me who to kill.”

“Easy, boy. For now. We’ll see. And stop being a bitch. Mom doesn’t like any of us. She wanted girls.” I glanced over at Barron’s as Lanny and Terrance moved up the sidewalk from the opposite side of the door. “Wait for us. I want to talk to Barron before you blow his brains out all over the jewelry case.”

Lanny lifted his hands. “All you, boss.”

Vin popped me in the chest. “Mom got a girl. Mikel is as pretty as any woman I’ve fucked.”

“Prettier than a few of them.” I smirked, unable to help myself. Our youngest brother, the movie star, was the only one with a feminine side out of us boys.

I looked at my brother. “Just you and me in Barron’s.” I reached back to touch my Glock in the back of my pants. I knew it was there but double-checking never hurt.

I wasn’t planning on using it today, but sometimes other people gave you no choice but violence. I was always ready to step up to the challenge.

Vin nodded. “Let’s do it. You talk, I’ll shoot—if need be.” He lifted his hand as if allowing me to go first.

So I did.

“Don’t do anything without me saying so.” I pressed my hand against the cool glass and walked in. The place was empty and smelled like mothballs and broken dreams.

“How can I help you—” Barron’s voice stopped short as he appeared from a back room, his face visibly paling.

“It disturbs me that we had to come down here.” I grabbed a stool and pulled it up to the counter, sitting down slowly. “Vin, go see if there’s anyone else here.”

My mad dog brother went sniffing around the place.

“Daemon, I was going to call. You know my mom’s been sick and it’s just hard times right now, man.” Barron pressed his sausage-fat fingers to the glass. His white wife-beater was stained with several meals and he stank.

“Sounds like life to me.” I pressed my elbows to the glass and tapped it one finger at a time as I watched him closely. “I’m not as lenient as my father.”

Sweat began to drip down the side of his face even though the temperature in the room was cool. Barron dropped down onto a stool on his side of the counter and reached up to wipe his brow. “I heard you offed the old man. That true?”

“I off a lot of people.” I shrugged. “Some would say it was my mother that did it. Some Vin.”

“As if. I wish,” Vin called out from somewhere in the back of the store. His voice sounded muffled.

Barron scowled. “You better not be eating my doughnuts!”

I snapped my fingers to get his attention and let my gaze grow darker. “You owe us two hundred Gs. He can have all the fucking doughnuts he wants.”

“Right, about that.” Barron glanced around like he was looking for an escape route.

“I want my money. You’ve had more than enough time.”

“I don’t have that kind of money right now, but I can get it!” He stood up and balled his fists on the counter. “You know I’m good for it. I’ve done business with your father for thirty years. Hell, I used to be in the syndicate. Remember? I was there when you were a kid.”

“I do remember.” I leaned back and crossed my arms over my chest. “Vin, is there anybody back there?”

“Oh, hell yeah.” Vin’s voice lifted as he spoke, as if he were getting more and more excited. “A few kids and an old lady. What do you want me to do with them?”

I leveled my gaze at Barron. “Yeah, Shane. What do I want him to do with them?”

“Daemon, come on, man. I’m good for it. How many times have I helped you guys out?” Barron walked around the counter to stand in front of me. The fat fucker smelled like a trashcan at the city morgue.

“You’ve never helped me out. Maybe my father a time or two, but I feel like that’s all been repaid at this point.” I stood. “No money? Kill the old lady, Vin.”

“And the kids?” he asked.

“Make them watch,” I said. “Let them see what happens when you break a promise.”

“No! Wait! I can get it. For fuck’s sake. Just give me some time, and I’ll keep my promise, Daemon. That’s my mom. Would you want your mom to die for something you fucked up on?” He reached for me.

I stepped back. “Don’t touch me.” I glanced over my shoulder. “Kill her.”

“Wait, I have information!” Barron said.

“Stop,” I called out.

“Cock tease,” Vin called back, chuckling.

I grabbed Barron by the throat, squeezing hard before lifting him off the floor. He might have been fat, but I spent my days and nights in the gym trying hard to sweat out the desire to murder everyone in my life.

“This better be good,” I said. “Or I’ll let him have the kids too.”

“You’ll want to know, I swear,” he choked out.

I released him and he fell roughly to the scuffed linoleum floors. “Hurry the fuck up.”

“The La Rosas,” he said between wheezing breaths.

“Yeah, what about those useless pricks?”

“They’re in town. Here in Chicago.” He stared up at me from the floor with sincerity in his eyes.

“Which ones?”

“All of them,” he said eagerly. “The main ones anyway. The father. The brothers. The daughter.”

A chill ran through me like someone had walked over my grave. “What the fuck are they doing here?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ve heard other stuff, but no one told me the La Rosas were involved.”

“What other stuff?” I asked. “Goddammit, Barron, don’t make me drag this out of you. Spit it the fuck out.”

“Guns. Drugs. Some new supplier muscling in.” He shrugged. “I swear, if I knew more, I would tell you. I literally swear on the life of my mother.” Tears ran down his fat cheeks. “I’ll find out. I can ask around. Please. I’ll do anything.”

I needed information more than I needed two hundred thousand dollars, so I nodded. “You have two weeks to pay me back. If you don’t have the money by then, I’ll be back for

your mother. Only I won't kill her. I'll put her to work in one of the brothels to pay back your debt. She's not worth much, though. It might take her the rest of her life."

He sank to the floor. "You wouldn't."

"I'm not doing anything. You are, by not paying me back. In the meantime, get me information on what the La Rosas are up to. Find out if they're making a move on Chicago." I raised my voice. "Vin, let's go."

Vin came out from the back area and pulled me off to the side where Barron couldn't eavesdrop. "What's going on? Why the change in plans?"

"The La Rosas are here," I said quietly. "Like all of them."

Vin whistled through his teeth. "Why? You think it's about the new cargo coming in this week? Fucking vultures."

"I doubt it," I said. "That's top secret. But maybe. That's why the change of plans. I want Barron to find out what's going on for us. We'll have our people look into it too, of course, but the slimy fuck knows every other slimy fuck in this city. He might be able to work faster, and time might be of the essence if they're coming for us."

He nodded. "I know. We've got a wedding coming up."

I grimaced. "Don't remind me."

Vin nodded toward Barron. "At least let me and the boys rough him up. He didn't pay us back and needs to be taught a lesson."

"Sure. Go for it. Just make sure he can still snoop around for us. If I wanted him in the hospital, I would have used these." I patted my pocket where my brass knuckles always were.

He grinned. "Maximum pain, minimum crippling. I love a challenge."

I walked away and passed Lanny and Terrance as they walked in. No need to stay and listen to the sound of Barron's screams. I much more enjoyed listening to a female scream. Anguish did nothing for me.

But begging? I liked that.

I liked that a lot.

## CHAPTER 3



“Thanks for meeting with me.” Dave smiled from across the table at me. The little coffee shop downtown was his favorite. It was close to the hospital too, which was helpful.

“Of course.” I leaned back and put my hands in my lap. A few more days and my father and brothers would be headed back to Boston and I could get back to life as usual. Dad expected me to stay at the house with them while he was in town. It was a rule of sorts. He wanted to be within arm’s distance of everyone in case he needed you at a moment’s notice.

“I’m not sure how to go about this.” His voice was soft and his expression hurt.

A tall, dark guy walked by the window just behind Dave and my attention quickly moved to him. The way he carried himself reminded me of my dark angel. No. I needed to get him out of my head. He’d ruled my dreams for the last five years and I couldn’t shake him.

He was a monster like my brothers. I knew it. Then why was I so drawn to him?

“Elisa?” Dave’s hand lay on top of mine.

I blinked a few times. “Oh. I’m sorry. I’ve been so out of it since graduating.”

“It’s been longer than that.” He squeezed my hand and leaned back. “Look, I’m just going to come out and say it.”



“Sure. Just be straightforward with me. What’s going on?” I wanted to reach across the table and grab his hand back. We were like two little old people trying to comfort each other. It was silly and grossed me out. I’d been raised by demons and vipers and yet, since losing my mother, I’d tried so hard to be something else. Something docile, and in doing so, I’d given myself over to fear.

Her fate wasn’t my fate, right?

“You back with me?” He chuckled and lifted his coffee to his lips, looking at me over the rim.

“Yes. Go ahead.”

“I’ll make it fast and to the point.”

“You’ve said that already.” My patience was running thin. I’d gone from calm and distracted to pissed in a matter of minutes. Why? How? Was this the curse my brothers suffered under? To not have control over your emotions at any given time?

Dave was going to break up with me. Every bone in my body knew it. And I wanted that. But my ego was raging. What did it mean that I couldn’t even keep a sweet, docile man in my life?

Nothing. It meant nothing.

“I’ve met someone else at the hospital. I don’t think you’re interested in me—in us. I’m honestly not sure you ever were.” He offered me a smile. It held a hint of sadness but more relief than anything else.

“I’m glad to hear that. I hope you’ll be happy with her.” I leaned back in my chair and let out a long sigh. Life was just going to keep handing me trials and tribulations. Not that this one mattered so much, but it still felt like a blow I hadn’t seen coming. “I’m gonna go.”

“You okay?” He stood with real concern on his face. It wasn’t for me. It was for my brother, his best friend.

“Oh yeah. All good. Thanks for the drink.” I picked up my coffee and walked to the door quickly, hoping to catch another

glimpse of tall, dark, and handsome. I had dated Dave simply to shut my brother up. He was safe and good.

All of the things that turned me off.

Maybe I was a monster like the rest of them. How could an honest woman let a man treat her like a whore and want more of it? Electricity ran through my veins as I walked out into the early spring air. The guy turned the corner about three blocks down.

I chunked the coffee and walked after him, having to pick my stride up to an almost-jog. It was the guy from the club. It had to be, right?

“Get in,” a familiar voice called from beside me. A black Bugatti had pulled up and my brother Jace smiled like a tomcat. “Dad wants us.”

“What?” I glanced back in the direction of my naughty future and let out a sigh.

“Get in. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

I got into the car and buckled up before giving him a fuck-off look. “Why are you guys still here? This is stupid. Go back to Boston.”

He laughed loudly. “You don’t think I want to? I haven’t had good pussy in four days.”

“Gross.” I turned to look out the window. “Aren’t you dating some nice girl from New York? Or did you guys break up because you’re a dick?”

“Wow. Someone got up on the wrong side of the clouds this morning. Momma’s little angel got a stick up her ass?” He pushed at my shoulder.

I swatted him off, not in the mood for any of them anymore. “Dave broke up with me. Answer me on Larissa. You still with her?” I glanced over at him. His knuckles grew white from how hard he gripped the steering wheel.

“Sort of. She’s a pipe dream. A girl like you. She’s got her shit together. It’s only a matter of time before she finds out that I’m just a piece of shit.”

“My turn to say wow.” I wrapped my arms around myself and gave him my attention, a little shocked by his openness. “You care about her.”

“Do you care about Dan?”

“Dave,” I corrected him. “And no. I don’t. I started dating him—”

“I don’t care why. He wasn’t right for you. You can keep fighting your nature or realize that you’re stuck.” He dropped one hand into his lap and leaned back, visibly relaxing. “You know what Dad told me a few years ago when I told him that I wanted to start a gym and get out of the family business?”

I nodded. I knew because I’d heard him say it to everyone in the family including me. “He told you that the only way out of the family business was through the graveyard?”

He snorted. “How the fuck did you know that?”

“He told me too when I said I wanted to be a lawyer—the good kind. The kind that didn’t sneak around and bend the law for crooks like him.”

“Holy shit. You said that to Dad?”

I shrugged. “I’m not all rainbows and haloes.”

“But you’re weak and small. Docile. Scared all of the time.”

“Not all of the time.” I turned to watch the road ahead of us. I hadn’t always been the weakest link. Mom dying changed all of that. Fear like I’d never imagined possible wrapped around me. I went from belonging to being a kitten in a den of wolves.

And I couldn’t figure out how to be more of a wolf. Maybe my dark angel could help me.

“What did Dad say when you told him about you being a lawyer? Did he flip his shit? He would have beat my ass. Hell, he’s beat my ass a million times for far less.”

“He slapped me across the face and told me that I’d do what he wanted me to do or I’d find myself with a new last

name.” I glanced over at him as chill bumps covered my skin. My father had threatened all of us more times than we could count, but he normally came through with the threat. Not that time.

“And you said what?” Jace’s eyes had grown wide. He reached up and pulled off his baseball cap and tossed it in the backseat before running his fingers through his brown hair. We must have been getting close to Dad’s house. Jace would never fully be himself around Dad. None of us were.

“I asked if he was going to kill me like he killed Mom.” I pressed my cheek to the headrest and let my eyes rest fully on my brother. “He clenched his jaw and walked out. I guess that was his way of saying, do what you want.”

“Hey. That’s ballsy and shit, but you need to know that it’s a lie. You might almost be a lawyer, but you’ll be working for the family. Don’t get this shit backwards. I don’t want to see him put you in the grave.” He paused and I remained quiet. “You don’t really think he killed Mom, do you?”

“I don’t know. Someone did.” I reached up and wiped a tear off my cheek. “And the most powerful man with rats everywhere doesn’t know who did it? I doubt that.”

“Keep that to yourself. I don’t even want to hear anything else about it. Leave me out of it.” Jace had visibly paled.

“Who is this woman he’s going to marry someday?” I asked.

Jace coughed and pulled into the driveway of the old-world mansion Father had bought. “Not someday, today.”

I jerked up. “What? Is that why we’re coming here today?” My blood ran cold. No way in hell I was ready for a stepmom.

“I don’t know. I know Alex was working on some of the details of a wedding yesterday. He wouldn’t stop bitching about it. Hell, maybe it’s not today. Alex flew home this morning to take care of some family business back in Boston.” Jace put the car in park and rolled his shoulders. “Act surprised either way. I don’t want to get anyone in trouble. That always ends with a fucking beating.”

I bit my lip and got out of the car, not ready nor would I ever be, for Father taking on a new wife. I needed more information, but knowing my dad, that wasn't going to happen.

Decan opened the door and focused on Jace. "You're late."

"Fuck you." Jace walked in and I followed him as Decan stared me down with his ice-cold expression.

"Hi, brother," I mumbled and walked faster down the hallway.

Drake and Father were already seated at a table and Alex was on a video call with them. I slid in next to Drake, who looked over and smiled at me. The touch of concern gave me all I needed to know regarding whether he knew about me and Dave breaking up. Dave most likely went to my brother first. *Stupid.*

"Sit down," my father barked and everyone else found their seat. He turned his attention back to Alex on the screen. "Update everyone now that they're all here."

Alex cleared his throat and glanced around at us. "Mayor Plummer was murdered last night. We need to make sure the next one is in our pocket too. Unfortunately the candidate that the city wants to see win is none other than Sharon Cocksucker Beasley."

"That's not going to fit on a campaign sign," Jace said.

My father slammed his hand on the table. "Shut your useless mouth. This isn't a fucking game."

I was glad I hadn't laughed.

Alex cleared his throat again and continued. "She's mother to eight kids and has drummed up a lot of support creating shelters and programs to feed the needy. People think she's a good woman. Hell, maybe she even is. Regardless, we cannot let her win."

"Why is it unfortunate?" Decan pulled a knife from his pocket and ran his gloved finger down it. Something was seriously wrong with him. "Because you're going soft and you

don't want to kill a good citizen?" The smile that painted his face was terrifying. Death was his favorite subject.

"She's well known and well protected," Alex barked.

My father glanced around at us and spoke up. "We're going to have to create an accident."

"And kill her?" I shook my head. "Why am I at this meeting? I don't want to know this."

"Me either." Drake glanced around, his voice strong, steady, sure that we were in the right, because we were.

"We have other business to discuss that you will need to be here for. My time is precious, so we're doing it all right now." My father lifted his eyebrows and glared at me then Drake. "Don't speak unless you're spoken to. Got it?"

I nodded and knew my brother had too.

"What do you have in mind for the accident and who are we looking to put into the position?" Jace asked, his voice steady as if we were discussing where we were going for Sunday Brunch.

"Let's go with a car accident," Alex offered. "Off the Old Townsend Bridge. Should be easy enough."

"Let me kill her." Decan glanced up at the screen. "Please?"

"No. We don't need it to look like a murder. We need it to look like an accident." Alex turned toward our father. "What do you think?"

"I'm good with it. Just cover your tracks and make it happen fast." He ran his fingers through his hair. "We'll work on getting Jessie Miller in office. We've got him in our pocket."

"What about the eight kids?" I squeaked out. "You can't do this another way? Maybe make her look dirty. Plant something on her." My pulse was pounding in the side of my neck. There had to be a better way to deal with this than taking out a mother of eight kids. How many levels of hell would there be for my family? For me if I went down this path?

“We could pin it on the Petrovs.” Jace snorted. “I know they’re here in Chicago, but—”

“That’s enough.” My father cut him off, shocking everyone with the biting sound of his voice. “Take care of it, Alex and Decan. Onto the next subject. My wedding.”

“Wedding?” I said out loud, wishing I hadn’t the second I did.

“Yes.” My father turned his dark gaze on me. “You will be a bridesmaid. My new wife has no daughters. Only four sons.”

“Four sons?” Drake ran his hands down his face. “Dad, you know I respect you and I don’t ask questions, but what do you want from us in this thing? Are we just supposed to show up and support you? Or are we trying to blend these families? And who are these people? What’s the lady’s name? We need more information.”

Much to my surprise, everyone stayed quiet and still, simply staring at our father. He turned to look each of us dead in the face before speaking in a much calmer tone.

“Your mother died five years ago. She was my soul mate. I married for love the first time and it broke me.” He paused but showed no expression.

Broke him? Was he broken? That alone was terrifying, seeing that he was a raging demon most days. What was he like before he was broken? I couldn’t remember a time when he wasn’t vile. Love hadn’t changed him. Nothing had, nor would anything ever.

“I’m marrying for position and security this time. She’s a powerful woman and you don’t have to like her, but you will respect her. We are not joining our families. They are not coming into the family business with us. We will stay in Boston and her family will remain here in Chicago, but we will unite and I will be away at times. Alex will take over in my leave.”

“What’s her name, Father?” Jace asked, his face pale once again.

Did everyone know something I didn't? Or had they figured out something I should have been more aware of?

"Lillian." He turned his attention back to Alex. "We are to be married on Tuesday night. Have everything in place. Use anyone you need to get it done." He stood and turned to look at me. "You will be a part of the ceremony. Her oldest son will walk her down the aisle. Alex will be my best man. So you need to get back, son."

I glanced at Alex and saw nothing. If my brother had feelings, he'd learned a long time ago to never show them. They were far too dangerous.

"Yes, sir." I turned my attention back to my father and nodded. "Just let me know how I can help."

"Good answer." He turned and walked to the door. "Don't ask me any more questions. It's an alliance. The rest is inconsequential. What I do, I do to protect all of us and all of them. That's all I'll say about it."

I let the air leave my lungs after he left the room. Thought after thought, memory after memory swam through my vision. All of my mother and her time with my dad. She was the only one that could control him. After she died, those of us too weak to handle his wrath left. And now he was pulling back into the middle of the madness.

Drake would fight to stay away from all of it. He was an up-and-coming surgeon at the best hospital in all of Chicago. I wasn't sure I had the strength to battle my father. Not without help.

And from what I could tell, no one was coming to my aid anytime soon.



## CHAPTER 4



## DAEMON

I pulled my jacket tight before zipping it up. It was spring in Chicago, but early spring still felt a lot like winter. Businesspeople moved past me in a hurry, their lives wrapped up in what they did for a living and not who they were.

Not that I had much room to talk. My entire life was blended with our syndicate. With all of the recent issues, I knew it was time to rain hell on the city. I glanced around and felt a pang of sadness. I loved the city my grandfather helped to build, but it was going soft.

It for sure thought with my father dead that I was going to be softer. Surely the next generation wouldn't be as bastardly as the last.

"Wrong," I mumbled and glanced to my left as I walked by a popular coffee shop.

It was packed, but in the middle of the room was a woman with long white-blonde hair. Her back was to me, but my stomach tightened. Not a chance.

Then again, Barron had said the La Rosas were in town. We knew the doctor, Drake, had been here for a while, but I had specifically stayed away from our intel on Elisa. I didn't want to know where she was. The woman was poison. Being with her would be the death of me.

I forced myself not to go into the coffee shop, just in case it *was* her.

“Daemon,” a deep voice said. The mayor, Jerry Lipsome. The older man would have had my respect if I had been born to a different family. He was good and kind. But he knew the rules of engagement. Everyone in power did.

“Mayor,” I responded and tipped my head toward him but kept moving to my destination. I had one stop left to make for the day before I went to visit my mother.

This wedding thing was getting under my skin. She’d be wed to someone in two days’ time and yet she hadn’t given any of us information on who the guy was.

I had too many other things going on this week, with the new cargo and the fucking La Rosas. It felt important to know who my mother was getting hitched to. Did she expect him to be a part of the family business? Because that was my call. Not hers.

I turned to my right and jogged up the steps to the Fifty-First Precinct. Time to visit one of the new detectives that was making more waves than his pay grade allowed for. I had considered sending Vin, but he’d just want to kill the guy.

Dead cops were a problem and not too useful in providing information to the organization.

“Daemon.” Cindy, the almost retired cop at the front desk, glanced up. A smile touched her lips. Poor thing acted like I wasn’t the vilest thing to walk through the doors in or out of handcuffs that day.

Or maybe she played a good game.

“Cindy.” I stopped and pulled my wallet from my coat pocket. “I’m here to see Detective Wallace?”

“Oh sure. He just got in.” She reached for my ID and typed a few things on her keyboard, none of the information mine. We put on the shows we had to. Both she and I were used to it. “All good to go. He’s in the third office to the left down the hall. The only one without a name on the door.”

“Thank you.” I winked at her and her cheeks turned pink.

Finding the door with no name, I knocked twice and opened the door to the new cop's office. "Detective Wallace?"

He turned from staring out the window and his eyes grew wide. "Oh. Wow. I didn't think you'd take this long to show up." His smile was cocky. As if he knew me.

"I'm glad you expected me." I sat down across from him and clasped my hands over my stomach. "You've been here, what, two weeks?"

"Three, but who's counting?" He leaned forward and pressed his forearms to the desk. "You know I come from San Diego, right? We have mafia families down there. And I'm not doing a damn thing they tell me to either. I got into this line to make a difference for good. Not to be an errand boy for the devil."

"Errand boy for the devil." I smiled. "I like that."

"Besides, your old man is dead." He leaned back, trying to mimic me. "You don't have to keep the syndicate alive. I know of a guy—"

I cut him off. "I don't have time to reminisce or listen to a lesson on the improvement of society. People behave best for the city when there is a boogie man. You know that and I do too. There's nothing we don't do here that isn't being done ten times worse at this very moment." I ran my hand over my chin and smiled. "But thanks for the effort. Did you practice it?"

He snorted and sat up straighter. "I'm not doing anything you want me to do. I know everyone in this place is under your thumb."

"Why do you think that is?" I sat up, mimicking him now.

"Because they're terrified of you. And you just love that shit, don't you?" The guy was in his mid-thirties and too young to understand why people did what they did, but he had a lot to gain by fighting the good fight from his perspective. From mine, he could only lose.

"No, you misunderstood my question. Why do you believe there are people here that are under my thumb?" I paused as

his face registered understanding. “Have you seen me haunting this place and threatening people?”

“No.” He ran his hands down his pants. Sweaty palms. Good. At least he wasn’t a total idiot. “But I know how this works.”

“I’m interested in your theories, detective. Do tell.” I leaned back and crossed my arms over my chest loosely. He was going to be a long-time asset for my syndicate or he would be dead. The unspoken choice was his. And we both knew it. He just believed there was a way around it, from what I could tell. It was almost sweet.

“I told you, I come from San Diego. The Coopers’ syndicate down there was disgusting. They had everyone paid off or on death threats. I moved because I’m not doing that shit. My father did, but I’m not.”

Ah, and there it was. His old man was hooked up to the Coopers. They were quite a nasty bunch of heathens, but every human was when given power. Mafia meant power—taken or handed over by the crowds. It was hard to control for some. For me, it sat like a crown on my head.

“How old are you?”

His brow tightened. “Why?”

“Because you moved from California to Chicago and expected us to be different or better than some washed-up surf boys trying to play bad?” I smiled and narrowed my eyes a little.

He visibly swallowed and moved his hand up toward his hip where his gun rested. “Your point?”

I reached inside my coat pocket and he jerked his hand fully up to his gun. “Nothing to be wild about.” I pulled out an envelope and slid it across the table. “But you might want to get a better story on why you came to the city.”

His shoulder dropped as he reached for the envelope. “What is this?”

“Pictures of you that I’m sure you wouldn’t want your young bride to see.” I stood and moved to the back of the chair as he shuffled through various images of him fucking two younger girls than he should have been with. “High school, maybe?”

“This wasn’t me.” He growled and looked up at me. “You fabricated these.”

“Did I?” I smiled. “Looks exactly like you, doesn’t it?”

He picked them up as disgust crossed his face. “No. Yes. Fuck.” He glanced up at me, his eyes filled with hate. “I’m not doing anything for you.”

“Don’t.” I turned and walked to the door before pulling another envelope from my pocket. I turned and spun my wrist, sending it to him like a Frisbee. “Those blackmail pictures should stop you from getting in my way. I don’t need your help at all. Not now. Not ever. But if you get in my way, I’ll destroy you. Find the real criminals and help me keep my city safe.”

“What’s this shit?” He stood and let the pictures fall out on his desk, the last one of his young wife and little girl. “Why do you have these? Where did you get them?” His voice was full of rage as he shook.

“I took them myself.” I opened the door and walked out, pausing just outside of it to turn and look him in the face. “I’ve met everyone in your family at this point, Clint. You take care now. And hopefully you never have to see me again.”

“How dare you—”

I closed the door and walked toward the front. He would soon be on our side and helping us push things in the right direction, but he would need time. And a little coaxing. Fuck me, I needed a sister that could win him over. But all the Petrovs had for generations was boys.

It’s like we’re cursed and blessed.

“Hey, Petrov,” the chief called from behind me. I’d have known his voice anywhere. He and my father served on the force together when they were young.

I turned and extended my hand. “Chief.”

He shook it and stepped closer, holding tight to it. “I hear some new outfit is moving in, headed by someone worse than your old man.”

*The fucking La Rosas.* I hid my surprise. How the fuck did he know about that shit when I barely knew? “Did you now?”

“I don’t want any trouble here. We’ve been in a solid partnership with your family since the city was built. I’m not interested in new rules and new relationships.”

“You and me both. I’m already on top of this.” I pulled back and released his hand. “I’m pretty sure I know who it is.”

He reached out and patted my chest. “Might want to find out for sure, Daemon. We’ll need to stick together to keep things the same. Best to put out the small fires before they turn big.”

“Right.” I turned and walked out of the police station, blood pulsing in my ears. The La Rosas had some muscle but not enough to take us on directly. If they were going to hit us, it would be when we were vulnerable, off balance.

Like at a wedding.

Hell, for all I knew, this mystery man she was marrying could be in on the whole thing. At first, I had assumed he was just some random guy my mother was fucking and decided to hitch up to and travel the world with.

Dread crept down my spine. That might not be the case. If he wasn’t just a normal citizen with a big dick and a bank roll, then who was he? Maybe a friend of the La Rosas?

I pulled out my phone and called Dezzy. He was closest to Mom.

“What’s up, bro?” He sounded playful as always.

“Who the fuck is Mom marrying?” I cut to the chase and walked quickly to my bike.

“Wow. No hello or hi? That’s rude, dude.”

“I’ll fucking show you rude. Now listen. I’ve been hearing talk of a new group trying to break into our markets. At the same time, I’m hearing the La Rosa family just happens to be in town right now.” I glanced over my shoulder to see if someone was following me. I hated feeling jumpy in my own damn city, but a lot of things were coming at me all at once. Maybe I was blinded.

“How does that relate to Mom’s wedding?” He coughed and shuffled something on his end of the phone.

“Maybe it doesn’t, but I want to make sure we don’t get fucked at that wedding like we’re the bride.”

“Fuck, bro, that’s Mom. Don’t be gross.” He paused. “I don’t know, by the way. She’s been tight-lipped on it. I know the guy is someone she’s known since grade school, but that’s it.”

“So he’s not a complete stranger? That’s good, I suppose.” I reached the bike and got on it but didn’t start it yet. “Was she cheating on Dad?”

He chuckled. “I’m not her BFF, D. I’m her son too. And I don’t know, but I would have cheated on Dad. He was a monster. To us. To her. To everyone.”

“Thanks.” I dropped the call and started the bike. Something was terribly wrong. I knew it in my gut, but I couldn’t seem to figure out what it was.

From what the chief had said, someone worse than my father wanted to take over Petrov control of Chicago. I only knew of one man that fit that description in America. The only man that could measure up to my father’s vileness was Alex La Rosa.

And there was no way in hell Mom was marrying our sworn enemy.



## CHAPTER 5



“Don’t be nervous. Don’t be nervous.” Sara rubbed her hands together and blew into them as she sat in the passenger seat of my Lexus.

“Are you talking to me or yourself?” I smiled and reached over to rub her arm.

“Both of us.” She dropped her hands into her lap with a long sigh. “You’re as nervous as I am, right?”

“No.” I shrugged and pulled into the garage of Williams, Heckler, and Barnes. “I’ve been looking forward to this all my life. I thought I’d end up in the family business. But now I’m free.”

“I get that. My mom and dad both wanted me to be a teacher like they are, and I think that’s just awesome for them, but I need more tension in my life.”

I chuckled and rolled down my window. An older guy stepped up and lifted his hand. “ID?”

“Sure.” I leaned down and grabbed my purse from beneath me, getting out my license and handing it to him.

“Great. You’ll get a badge after your orientation today.” He offered a crooked smile.

“How did you know we were new?” I took the license back and dropped it in the console while still paying attention to him.

“Young lady, I know every car that comes and leaves this place. I’ve been here for thirty years. If I don’t know you, you

probably don't belong in this garage.”

“Awesome. I'm Elisa. This is Sara.” I glanced over at my best friend, who offered a half-wave as she messed with her phone.

“Nice to meet you both. I'm Sam. Good luck today. I've seen many young people come the first day and never come back.” He stepped back and waved us on.

Sara huffed. “That was inspiring. Good grief.”

“We'll be fine. How hard can it be? We just finished law school and we're studying for the bar. They're not going to have us spearheading our own cases yet.” I pulled into a parking spot and got out, looping my arm into Sara's and half-pulling her into the building.

“What if they hate us?” she asked.

“Hate *you* maybe,” I replied and released her. “They're going to love me.”

She laughed and rammed her shoulder against mine. “Alright. Let's make a bet. First one to sleep with someone in the company wins dinner.”

“First one to sleep with a partner wins a weekend away.”

“Oh, I like that better.” She waggled her eyebrows as we approached the security desk. “Or let's do both.”

“Let's.”

She would win. She always did.



Jason Williams, one of the three partners at the firm, opened the door to his office a few hours after I'd gone through orientation. “Elisa La Rosa. Come in.”

“Thank you.” I walked past him and breathed in softly. His cologne was dreamy. As was he. Mid-forties maybe but he kept himself in such great shape that he could have passed for

thirty-three at most. Everyone in the city loved him. He was the golden boy born of one of the Chicago Cubs managers.

“Everything went well this morning, I assume?” He moved around me and sat down in his chair on the other side of his massive cherrywood desk. The polish was so fresh that I could see myself in the reflection if I glanced down.

“It did. I’m looking forward to getting started. Have you guys assigned me a lawyer to work with?” I crossed my legs and tried to hold my voice steady. Hopefully Sara was doing well. I was nervous, but no way in hell was I letting anyone know.

“We did. You’ll actually be working with me and Heckler. He’s another partner in the firm. He was away during your initial interviews, so I don’t think you got to meet him, but he’s got a lunch today that he’s going to let you shadow him at.” He smiled, his eyes searching my face.

I returned the gesture. “Oh wow. I’m surprised I get to shadow a partner. Is there another lawyer I’ll work for too?”

“In time.” He nodded. “We want you to settle in first. It’s been a while since we’ve had such a blue-blooded family name join our firm. We want to make sure you’re given every opportunity that we have.”

I knew immediately why. “My father.”

He chuckled. “Of course we know your father. Even though he’s in Boston, he does plenty of business right here in Chicago.”

“Right.” I held back my disappointment. My stomach clenched and my shoulders started to sag, but I forced them back up. I’d never get out from under my father. No matter how hard I tried.

Once again, he’d won. And I hadn’t even seen this one coming.

“So let’s go over a few things, then I’ll have my secretary show you to your shared office. I know you’re friends with Sara Kate Billings but we try to mix things up a little so that you’ll meet new members of the team. You’ll be officing

with,” he paused and picked up my folder, “Jerry Jacks. He’s a great kid. Friend of a friend. He’s been here two years, so he’ll be your buddy for the next six months as you settle in.”

“Okay, great.” I stood as he stood. “Thank you for your time this morning.”

“Thank you for choosing our firm. We feel like you’re going to be a great fit.”

“Anything for my dad, right?” I turned and walked to the door, unable to help myself from throwing a soft punch.

He chuckled and opened the door. “Your dad is a powerful man. I’m happy to keep him happy.”

“So true.” I walked out and stood beside Mr. Williams’s secretary’s desk until she got up and walked me to my new office.

After dropping my stuff on the empty desk in the room, I sat down and let myself feel the weight of my family’s involvement in my life. There was nowhere to run or hide. Maybe I should have gotten a degree in veterinarian medicine and moved to a small cabin in Montana just to finally get away.

“And what? Live in fear every day that someone would show up and yank you out of your life or kill everyone you loved?” I leaned back in my chair and jumped at the sound of a male voice behind me.

“Yikes. That sounds deep. You writing a novel or in a witness protection program?” A big, goofy-looking guy with red curly hair and glasses sat down at the other desk. He smiled.

“Both?” I laughed and stood up, offering him my hand. “I’m Elisa La Rosa.”

“Oh, I know who you are.” He shook it. “Your father is one of the biggest clients of the firm. He’s got what, like seventy businesses across the US? You’re so lucky. My dad drives a garbage truck in the city and gets drunk the minute he gets home.”

I pulled my hand back slowly. “Uh, I’m sorry?”

He laughed loudly, the action softening his face. He didn’t look more than fifteen years old. “I’m kidding. Sort of.” He cleared his throat. “I’m here to help with anything you need. We’ll start working on research and files tomorrow. I hear you have a lunch with one of the partners today. Did they say which one yet?”

“I think it’s Mr. Heckler?” I turned to grab the folder from my bag I’d gotten earlier that day in orientation.

“Oh, Heck. He’s great. He’s the most laid back of the three. But they’re actually all great guys, which is rare.” He stood as I turned to face him, his hand extended. “Let’s try this again. I’m Jerry Jacks. Nice to meet you.”

I shook his hand and offered him a smile. He seemed like a good guy. “Nice to meet you too. How long have you been here?”

“Just over two years.” He took a step back and crossed his arms over his chest. I had to lean back a little to look up at him. “Thought I was going to play basketball, but it would seem my father isn’t interested in me doing what I want with my life.”

“The garbage man?” I cocked my eyebrow.

“No, I was kidding. He’s actually a businessman. You’ll meet him soon, I’m sure.” He shook his head. “Everyone knows my dad. Are you not from around here?”

“Everyone knows mine too. I’m from Boston. I thought you knew enough about my dad that you’d know that.” I stood too, feeling a little too small otherwise.

“Well I don’t know where your dad lives.” He chuckled. “Alright, let me get you set up on your computer and logged into everything. I’ll show you some systems, and when Heck comes to take you to lunch, I’ll get some of my work done for the day. Sound good?”

“Perfect.” I turned to get my computer out and took a deep breath. Normal. All I wanted was a normal life. To have a good job and get married and raise a family.

This felt like the start of normal. I accepted that because I needed to. No matter how much of a lie it might have been.



A knock on the door behind us caused me to jump. Jerry chuckled. “Hey, guys.” A new voice I hadn’t heard before.

I turned and stood as Jerry did. The man extended his hand and smiled. “I’m Mark Heckler. You must be Elisa?”

“I am.” I shook his hand and reached for my bag. “You ready for lunch?”

“Yes. It’s a lunch meeting, so please bring something to take notes on.” He turned to Jerry. “How’s it going, Jacks? Enjoy your spring break trip?”

“I did,” Jerry answered, slipping his hands into his pants pockets. “Thank you again for the time off.”

Mark waved him off. “All good. You work hard. We want you to have a life where you can.”

I smiled and moved toward the door. “Who is the lunch with? I’m thinking I should have asked that earlier so I would be better prepared.”

He moved out of the doorway and half-waved at Jerry before turning his attention on me. He too looked like he was in his forties. Dark hair and a nose too big for his face made him a contrast of sorts. He would have been handsome but for his nose, but something told me by the shyness in his eyes that he knew that.

“Nothing to prepare for. We’re going to be having lunch with Val Roadmen and Michael Cappantio.” He held the elevator open for me. “They’re part of a much larger family business structure that we’ve had for years.”

Part of me didn’t want to ask, but I had to. “*The Michael Cappantio? The movie star?*”

He laughed. “I forgot you were young. Yes. That’s the one. I’m sure you know—”

I cut him off, though I didn't mean to. "Oh yes. I would never act like a fangirl. I'm sorry I even asked in the manner that I did to you."

He chuckled again. "It's all good. He's a great guy and that's just a cover name. But as you're aware, everything we do and say is confidential."

"Absolutely." I nodded as butterflies swirled in my stomach. Sara was going to lose her shit. She loved Michael Cappantio. She'd been watching him on the big screen for years and often made me rewatch his movies or TV shows over and over during the year. He was our binge weekend and holiday favorite.

"Good." We made it to the bottom of the elevator and walked out into the big, beautiful glass building the law firm shared with a handful of other businesses.

"This place is beautiful," I mumbled and realized I needed to catch up with Mr. Heckler.

"It is. I love it down here. It still has a lot of the original architecture from when the city was rebuilt. Being from Boston, I'm sure you're used to this kind of stuff too."

I nodded. "I am, but it's nice to see it in other places. I didn't travel much as a kid. It's so cool to explore a new place."

"Chicago has been my home since I was a boy. It's the best city in the world." He held the door and the wind whipped my jacket around.

I grabbed it and buttoned it up as we walked in silence toward a deli on the corner. He held the door.

"Thank you, Mr. Heckler." I moved inside.

"Call me Heck unless we're in front of a client. Then it's just Mark." He pulled out my seat as a middle-aged woman with a serious look on her face stood. Michael Cappantio stood too and smiled at me.

"Val. Michael. This is Elisa. She's going to be joining us. Today is her first day." He shook their hands. I did too.



“Nice to meet you,” Val said and sat down before pulling out a folder and starting in on a list of things she wanted to talk to Heck about.

“We’ll grab the food.” Michael moved around to my side of the table and offered his arm. “Shall we?”

I glanced at my boss, who was already knee deep in conversation with our client, before turning back to the beautiful man offering me his arm.

“Do I call you Michael or Mr. Cappantio?” I slipped my hand around his arm and walked to the counter with him. The place was so busy that we had to slip around groups of people, most not giving either of us a second glance.

“Call me daddy.” He chuckled as my eyes went wide. “You’re beautiful. You look like a snow goddess.” He moved to the counter, releasing me. “Come, let me buy you lunch. Then dinner. Then spend the night with me.”

My words caught in my throat, but it didn’t matter. He was having a good time playing with me. I could have listened to his voice all day. He turned to order the food and I took a few moments to really take him in.

His dark skin was almost glowing and healthy. His beard and mustache were trimmed close and his golden brown hair was pulled up in a messy man-bun. He wore white jeans and a black shirt with a leather bomber. Everything about him was attractive—most of all, his playful demeanor.

He turned to glance at me. “You want anything else?”

“Did you order for everyone?” I came out of my shock and glanced at the cashier.

“I did.” He turned back to her. “Oh and a few of those incredible black-and-white cookies you guys are famous for.”

“You bet.” The woman finished ringing him up and he reached forward to give her a credit card.

“Nope.” Heck moved in between us and snatched Michael’s card back. “This is my treat.”

“You shouldn’t have.” Michael moved back and let Heck finish paying the bill. “You’ve seen my movies?” His attention was back on me.

“I have. You’re very talented, Mr. Cappantio.” I felt my cheeks burn.

“You have no idea.” He smiled. “Come have a drink with me tonight. Let’s celebrate your first day in a new job. A new career?”

“Yes,” I answered his question, then realized by the smug look of satisfaction on his face that he thought I was saying yes to drinks. “Yes to the first day. No to drinks. I don’t think it’s appropriate. I’m sure there are rules against it.”

“It’s just drinks. We can talk business if you like.” He extended his phone. “Put your address in here. A car will pick you up at seven. Feel free to bring a friend or friends.”

Sara would kill me if I passed up the opportunity for her to meet Michael. There was no way I’d do that to her. So it wasn’t about him trying to seduce me. I could let him seduce her. Or both of us?

No, that wasn’t me. I could never be that brave, that uninhibited.

“Okay.” I took the phone and typed in my information. “My roommate, Sara, is in love with you.”

“Good. Should be fun then.” He turned and walked back to the table. The way he carried himself and the darkness of his clothing and features swept me away to the moment my dark lover awakened all my senses in an elevator a few years before.

Images swam through my mind’s eye, stealing my breath. Was that the last time I’d felt something good in my life?

“God,” I whispered, the idea of having such a naughty thought in the middle of a downtown deli leaving me paralyzed.

“You okay?” Heck moved up beside me and touched my upper back.

I jerked away and caught my breath. “Oh, sorry. I’m good. I’ll be back in just a minute. Need to wash my hands.”

I disappeared to the bathroom and closed the stall before pressing my back to it. Why did the memory of that night have to tempt me so bad?

Because no one had made me feel anything like it before nor since. Would I ever find him? Mikel looked so much like him, but maybe it was just my mind playing tricks on me.

I closed my eyes and tried to catch my breath as his scent, his words, the feel of his hands pulled me deeper into depravity.

“Fuck me,” I whispered softly and found myself pressing my hand to my stomach. “No. Not here.”

Yes. I let my thoughts switch to him watching me as I slipped my hand into my panties and drove my fingers into my hot wetness.

My hips drove forward of their own accord, and I let it take me as I bit my tongue and fucked myself over the edge. The world exploded and I knew I needed to find him.

It was the worst idea I’d ever had and the best. Nothing was going to bring me to life like he did.

“No,” I said loudly and pulled my sticky fingers from my pussy as my pulse beat against my backbone. After taking a few minutes to catch my breath, I walked out, washed my hands, and rejoined the group.

Michael watched me closely as if he knew. I finally glanced up and looked at him in the face. I shouldn’t have. He was almost the spitting image of my lover.

“Do you have a brother?” I asked softly, not really wanting to know.

“Lots of them.” He sat back and smiled. “You should meet them. Or maybe you already have?”

“Maybe,” I mumbled and forced myself to pay attention. Maybe I would leave Sara at home and let Michael take advantage of me.

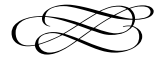
It wasn't like I was going to find the man that haunted my dreams every night. Not like it would be healthy to try.

He treated me like a whore.

And if I were being fully honest, I loved it.

Every dark, dirty minute of it.

## CHAPTER 6



“Tell Daemon that I’ll be in touch in a few days. I need to work through this new complication from our meeting with Heckler,” Val, the family CPA, said from beside me.

“Sure. Thanks.” I waved her off and walked to the closest parking garage, Heckler and Elisa just a few feet in front of me. I let my eyes move down the back of her. She was petite but had curves that left me hard.

And she was willing to grab drinks later that night. Guess no one had told the sweet little thing that sleeping with a client was probably not on the list of approved activities for the firm.

I wouldn’t be telling her either.

Maybe there was a way to see if she had any acting skills. She was beautiful enough to be on the big screen with me. Her lightness to my dark. She was unique and didn’t belong here. Maybe Scandinavian? I wasn’t sure, but she lit a fire in me to know more.

Lucky for me, girls were easy and willing to do just about anything I wanted them to do. Lucky for them, I was unlike my bastardly brothers and treated women right—mostly.

After pulling my phone from my jacket pocket, I made a sharp left and pulled my attention away from her. What was her last name? Had I caught that? No.

What did it matter?

I lifted the phone to my ear. “Call Daemon.”

“Calling Daemon,” the female voice stuck in the phone responded.

“Mikel.” He sounded like Father, which was concerning. He hadn’t been sleeping since killing our father and it seemed like things were just getting worse.

But much like Dad, he wouldn’t let any of us really in to help either. Regardless, I wouldn’t stop trying.

“Drinks. Tonight. Me and you. And this new girl I met.” I pulled my key fob out and clicked the button. The Tesla came to life.

“I wish.” He let out a sigh and the sound of the city filled the phone too. “I have too much to do. But tell me something. You know anything about this new man Mom is marrying? Dez doesn’t and I’m sure Vin hasn’t even thought about it. He could give zero fucks about her.”

“You’re going out with us tonight. No arguments.” I got in the car and closed the door. “And I don’t know shit about this marriage bullshit. I know the guy is a long-time friend of hers. Like a childhood sweetheart or something. I overheard her talking to Aunt Vanny. It was weird honestly. I’ve never heard Mom be anything but serious.”

“Hmm, Aunt Vanny. Alright. I’ll call her. Thanks for that.”

“Hey! You’re going with me tonight.” I put the car in drive and turned out onto the busy Chicago street. I had a few stops to make to collect money for the family. My acting was a front to help with the wealth we all had and to buy into Hollywood. My real gig was being in charge of the capital the family had. And occasionally, that meant doing some pickups myself.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Daemon growled. “I have like ten bullets heading my way, and I have no idea where they’re coming from. I don’t need any distractions right now.” He cleared his throat. “You stopping by the shirt factory today?”

“I’m on my way now after I go by the pasta place.” I rolled down my window, enjoying the way people stopped to point and wave. Being famous had its perks. Especially if you were an attention whore, which I easily was. “And a distraction is

exactly what you need. There's a beautiful girl I met today and she's bringing a friend. I don't need to fuck two girls tonight. Come out and let's blow off some steam. You're going to love them. Just your type. I'm not taking no for an answer."

Another sigh. "Fine. But I'm not staying long."

"That's your call, D." I gave him instructions on where to meet us and dropped the call. He'd be there. In a shitty mood no doubt but he'd still be there.

I got to the pasta shop and parked up front by the restaurant. Dezzy's car was out front, which surprised me a little.

*What are you doing here, brother?* I got out and walked to the door, opening it as a camera clicked behind me. I turned and smiled, giving them something to capture on the next shot.

"Hey thanks!" the kid yelled and ran off.

"Sure. Hope you got my good side." I walked into the dimly lit restaurant and the smell of onions and garlic welcomed me. I breathed in deep and smiled as the sound of my brother's voice greeted me. He was flirting with some girl at the hostess stand. She was probably half his age. Not that he cared.

"It's just one drink," he purred to her.

I patted the top of his back from behind me and squeezed his shoulder. "Then it turns into one night. Then one year. Then one life." I winked at her and she tilted her head to the side and swooned. "Then you're married to this bastard for the rest of your days. What a tragedy."

"Really?" He stood up straight and lifted his eyebrows at me.

"Sure." I glanced back over at the girl. "Can you grab Gippo?"

"Of course." She turned and walked quickly to the kitchen.

"You're really going to step up and cock block me like that? What's wrong with you? Who taught you how to be a wingman?" Dezzy reached out and patted my chest. He looked



more like Mom than any of us. I wasn't sure if that was because he was closest to her and she was wearing off on him or just good genetics.

“Come on. You don't want to bed that girl.” I cupped my hands over his. “She's working for us in a way, right? Daemon wouldn't put up with that.”

He tugged his hands away and gave me a big grin. “Where is the old grump anyway?”

“No clue.” I moved to sit down at one of the tables nearby. “I invited him out for drinks and maybe to get laid later tonight. Hopefully he makes it. He needs it. The guy is getting paranoid.”

“Agreed.” My brother walked to the bar and poured himself something dark before offering me a glass.

I took it and motioned for him to join me. “How's business?”

“Good. I'll get out to the house this week and update Daemon. Everything is going good. We have that new cargo shipment coming in later this week.” He chuckled. “The new way to store the goods is in diapers. So you don't put the fluffy absorbent stuff in there. You put the powder.”

“Interesting.” I took a sip of my drink, enjoying the way it went down. “I want some when it comes in.”

“Of course.” He sipped his drink and studied me. “When are you headed back out to LA?”

“Well, I can't leave before this wedding thing. Whatever the hell is going on with that.”

He rolled his eyes and leaned forward, pressing his elbows to the table as he cradled his glass in his hands. “Any word on who mister mysterious is?”

“No, and it's driving Daemon crazy.” I reached up and ran my fingers through my hair. “But I heard Mom talking to Aunt Vanny and it sounded like she was a schoolgirl with her first crush.”

His eyes widened a little bit. “Well, that's terrifying.”

I laughed. “What’s terrifying is that Daemon killed Dad and his mood has only gotten worse.”

“Speaking of, why didn’t he let any of us help with that?” My brother leaned back as Gippo hobbled up, the old man holding a bag and looking worse than I’d seen him in a while.

I stood and pulled him in for a hug before kissing his cheek. “You alright, Papa?”

“Yes. Yes.” He dropped the bag on the table. “Just getting too old for this restaurant business. Maybe we look at bringing someone else in to help.”

“I can do that.” I motioned for him to sit, but he waved me off. He’d been friends with my father for as long as I was alive. “Anything else?”

“No. Business is good. Too good for an old man losing his eyesight.” He smiled and patted my head, then Dezy’s. “The old bastard would have been proud of how you boys picked things up and kept going. He never would have admitted it, but it’s true. Most families die or disperse when their head is cut off.”

“He taught us well,” Dezy responded.

Gippo wandered back to the kitchen.

Dezy turned his attention back to me. “Why is D so worked up about Mom getting married? I feel like we’re missing something.”

“Because he thinks we’re under attack, that they’ll strike at the wedding when we’re distracted and vulnerable.”

Dezy laughed. “It’s not a Petrov wedding without at least one gunfight.”

“If the La Rosas really are in town, we’ll be lucky if it’s just one,” I said. “D is worried about the syndicate now that he’s the boss of it.”

“He’s still in the underboss role though.” Dezy picked his drink back up. “Who’s taking that from him? He can’t do both.”

“No clue. That’s something we can talk to him about after the wedding stuff,” I offered. “But something about all of it has him rattled.”

“Yeah, the part where Mom isn’t being straightforward about things. I mean, she just springs that shit on us a few days before the wedding? Shouldn’t we know we can trust this guy before he gets this close to the business? It’s not like we run a family snow-cone stand. He’s gonna see us do some gangster shit.” He snorted and grabbed his phone from his pocket as it rang.

By the sound of the conversation, he was going to be a while. I shot back my liquor and stood, grabbing the bag and waving goodbye to my brother. After slipping the bag into the back of my pants, I walked out and stopped.

Cameras flashed everywhere. I smiled and posed a little. *Stupid.*

Normally I didn’t mind so much, but to have my picture taken in places that could implicate the family or my real business dealings in any way was just infantile. Daemon would remind me of that for sure.

“Michael,” a voice called out. “What are you doing in Chicago?”

“I come here to get away from time to time.” I pointed to the restaurant behind me. “This is my favorite pasta shop. You should all try it sometime.”

They called after me as I carefully made my way through them to the car. Worry raced through me. Who was going to help my oldest brother? No way they could depend on me.

Dezzy was capable but a little slow and far too interested in getting laid. Vin was mostly dependable but he was a maniac. The motherfucker was too far gone in my opinion.

That left me.

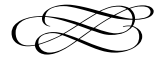
“No way.” I got in the car and drove through the crowd of people that had gathered. Glancing back in the rearview mirror, I saw most of them make their way into the restaurant.

I chuckled. “Gippo is going to fucking kill me. Or love me more.”

It was a gamble either way. So was the family business. I couldn't step up and support Daemon the way he needed someone to, but maybe this new father figure would help.

“Hell, maybe he's exactly who we all need in our lives. It can't always be bad, right?”

## CHAPTER 7



## DAEMON

“**W**rong.” I got off my bike and walked to the house, so many things weighing heavy on me. “All of this just feels wrong to me.”

Especially going out with my brother that night. How was I the only one that didn't have time for stupid shit like the rest of them?

*Cause you're the boss now.*

It was what I wanted, right? I'd killed the old man.

Pushing the door to the mansion open, I glanced over my shoulder and saw nothing. I'd have to regain my center. There were wolves at the door. If I couldn't fight them off, I didn't deserve to be the boss.

“Daemon. How are you, sir?” Janis, one of our long-time butlers, walked to the door and smiled warmly at me.

I turned as he helped me get my coat off. “I'm good. Who's here?”

“No one at the moment, sir. Your mother stopped by earlier, but only to grab some clothes. She didn't seem much like herself.”

I snorted. “I guess marrying someone on a whim would make me a little less stable too.”

“I do believe she's known the man for a long time. She has albums from her school days that he's in, but none of that is my business.” He stepped back and I turned.

“Do you know who he is?”

“No, but I would assume your aunt does. I overheard them talking the other day.”

“Are you not worried about sharing my mother’s secrets?” A smile played at the edge of my lips. I’d always liked Janis. He favored me above my brothers, which was helpful. And made me feel a little special.

“My loyalties were to your father, and now that you’re in charge, my loyalties lie with you. I serve the syndicate, not your family.” He folded my jacket over his forearm. “Can I get you anything?”

“A whiskey on ice. In my office please.” I walked slowly to my father’s old office. It still smelled like him, which was oddly comforting.

I dropped down in his seat and turned to face the tall windows that looked out over the large property. Spring was trying to make its way back, but winter had a tight grip on the city that year.

Somewhere in my daydreaming, I heard Janis drop off the drink, but I stayed with my memories.

*“Why?” My father lifted his hand from the floor, both of his legs broken by the sledgehammer I’d brought with me to the cabin. He loved to hunt and fish when he could get away. He never returned a better man.*

*Only more violent and filled with hate.*

*“Because I hate you.” I pulled the gun from the back of my slacks and pointed it at him. Excitement raced through me like electricity.*

*“You’re being set up, Daemon. There’s no way whatever you believe I did is true.”*

*I laughed crudely. The vibration of it stung my throat. I swallowed hard before responding. “I don’t have something I believe. I lived every day of the last thirty-two years with you*

*beating me, belittling me, taking everything I loved and murdering it in front of me.”*

*He crawled backward, letting out a few grunts. Even in what must have been excruciating pain, he wasn't willing to give in.*

*He yelled at me, the volume of it shaking me to my core. “Everything I've done has been to make you stronger. Don't you know one day you will lead this family, boy?”*

*“That day is today, old man.” I pulled the trigger and unloaded round after round of bullets into him.*

*He cried out and fell back, twitching. I approached him and got down on the floor with him. I straddled his bloody chest as he gargled on his own blood.*

*“You took everything from me my whole life. My pride. My dignity. My confidence. And then Jenny.” I pressed the barrel of the gun to his forehead and pressed hard. “That was the last straw, Dad.”*

*His eyes grew wide and he reached for me, his bloody fingers gripping my face before sliding down my chin and my throat, then falling limp. He smiled and coughed.*

*“You've been lied to,” he whispered roughly. When he opened his eyes for the last time, the sadness in them cut me to my dark soul. I'd never seen him sad or holding regret a day in his life and yet, there it was. Vulnerable and seconds from death.*

*I let my head drop and let out a cry that should have shaken the building. All I wanted was for him to love me, and hate was my lot in life.*

*Tears streamed down my face as I sobbed. He went lifeless beneath me, the concern or terror replaced by stillness.*

*I took one last look at him through my tears and envied the peace he must have felt. After collecting myself, I washed up in the bathroom of the cabin then walked out and dropped a match on the gasoline trail I'd left before I came in.*



It was the best and worst day of my life.

I picked up the whiskey, needing to down it in one shot. The memory of even muttering Jenny's name left my heart shaking. She was my first love, back when we were only children and didn't truly understand what we were feeling. It had been love nonetheless. She was the only light my life ever had, and my piece of shit father had taken her.

"To make me stronger," I whispered and got up to get another drink.

Maybe a few more shots of whiskey and I'd feel more like myself. The booze would clear my head. I had to figure out who Mom was marrying, which meant calling Aunt Vanny. I needed to have my wits about me for that conversation.

"Daemon?" Her voice was thick and happy.

I smiled. "Aunt Vanny. How are you?"

"Never been better, son. What do you want?" She was never one to drag something along. It what was it was and that was it.

"Lots of things, but today, I'd love to know what you know about this guy Mom's marrying."

"Why don't you ask your mother?" The lift in her voice said she was teasing me.

"Right." I dropped back down into my seat. "She's not been around firstly, but you know as well as I do that if she wanted us to know, she would have already told us."

"I agree. Let's just say he's an old childhood flame, but if you're concerned, you should be. I've never understood my sister, and honestly, I get the love part, but it's going to make waves."

I sat up straight as my stomach dropped. "Do you know his name?"

"I do, but that's not my place to say, Daemon. You know that. Just be prepared. You're going to have to fight for your future. It's not going to be handed to you like you thought with your father gone."

“Thanks, Aunt V.” I dropped the call and tossed the phone onto the desk. What game was my mother playing? She rarely got involved in anything to do with the syndicate. Not before Dad’s death and certainly not after it.

Where she wasn’t thrilled with me offing the old man, she didn’t seem too upset by it either. She knew what I was going to do, just not my timing. That felt like putting her at risk for letting something slip.

“Daemon.” I glanced up to find her standing in the doorway of the office. “You need to change the colors in here. Make it more yours.”

“I need to buy a new house.” I stood. “His ghost is everywhere.”

“It haunts me too.” She ran her fingers through her short, curly hair and moved to stand just across the desk from me. “Why are you working so hard to find out who I’m marrying? What business is it of yours, son?”

“It’s all of our business, Mother. We’re a syndicate that’s run mostly by our blood family. This guy that’s coming into the family, is he going to want to help run it? Now with Dad dead, it’s my turn to lead us. Not some guy you’re sleeping with.” Anger burned deep inside of me as I pressed my hands to the desk and leaned across it, giving her a long stare.

“I’m your mother, and you will not talk to me like that.” She leaned toward me too. “He’s my concern and not yours. He’s got his own business and his own plans. This isn’t about blending two families, Daemon. It’s about solidifying our position and making sure that when the threats come, you have someone to back you up in keeping us safe.”

“I don’t like it. I don’t need help.”

She slapped her hand down on the desk and glared at me. “You don’t know what you need. You’re a heartbroken boy who just murdered his father. You need to take a breather and collect yourself. Stop worrying about things that spread you too thin. Focus on the family and leave my personal affairs to me.”

“Give me your word that he’s not going to interfere with my syndicate.”

She let out a low growl. “It’s our syndicate, boy, and he’ll do whatever I damn well want him to do.”

“You’re bringing war upon yourself then.” I moved back and sat down in father’s chair, weary from her as I usually was after a few minutes in her presence.

“Don’t threaten me.” She crossed her arms over her chest and smiled as if we’d been talking about plans for a summer vacation. “Besides, you’ll love him. You don’t know him, but once you get to, he’s nothing like your father.”

“Right.” I glanced down at my shirt to avoid her gaze.

“The wedding will be here and in the backyard. So you have no choice but to attend.”

I was too tired to argue. I had too much to do to make sure our defenses were prepared. “I’ll be here tomorrow night, but this better not mess with anything we have planned to do with the syndicate going forward. We’re at a delicate place right now. We can’t have too many surprises.”

“Make sure to dress your best. I want you to impress him. He’s got sons of his own, but my hope is that he accepts all of you boys right into his family.”

“How many sons?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Four? Three? Five? Something like that.”

“No girls?” I raised my eyebrow and locked onto her again.

“One. But she’s off living her dreams.” She turned and walked to the door before glancing over her shoulder. “Stop digging. You’ll know everything tomorrow. You’re wasting your mental energy.”

“I just don’t understand why you can’t tell us who he is. Seems mysterious in a way that leaves me suspicious.”

She paused by the door and glanced over her shoulder. “Focus on you. I’ve got me.” And with that, she walked out, leaving me more concerned than I was before.

The chief of police had stated that he had word on the street that the guy Mom was marrying was way worse than my old man. Something was off. But all things would be made known the following evening at the wedding.

Wedding. How ridiculous was that?

“There you are.” Mikel walked in and pulled off his jacket before throwing it toward the couch by the fireplace. “Mom come by?” He sniffed the air. “I swear she’s been wearing the same perfume for a thousand years.”

“A thousand years?” I stood and slipped my hands into my pockets. “It does feel at times like she’s a vampire.”

“Uh oh. Mommy troubles.” He laughed and walked over to the fireplace, starting it up.

“It’s spring. What are you doing?” I moved over to the window that looked out at the back forty acres of the property.

“It’s freezing outside. I don’t give a dick what time of the year it is. It’s cold.” He stood and moved to stand beside me by the window. “Any info on the guy from Mom?”

“Not a word, but I’m not feeling good about this. Bring your gun.”

“To the wedding?” He snorted. “Mom would fucking kill us all.”

I turned to face him and stared into his face. “I’m serious. Something is wrong with all of this. Bring your gun. I’ll tell Vin. You tell Dezzy. We need to be prepared.”

“I think you’re overreacting, but alright.” He reached up and patted me on the chest as some of his hair slipped from his man-bun. “I’ll be ready to shoot up the fucking wedding with you. Can we kill the priest?”

I rolled my eyes. “Play all you like, brother. Tomorrow isn’t going to be the happy-go-lucky event everyone is hoping for. Mom’s playing a dangerous game.”

“Aren’t we all?” He turned and moved toward the door. “Well, before we ruin Mom’s life, can you get ready and let’s go have some fun with these girls I met?”

I glanced down at my watch. “Can’t do it. Mom’s wedding is tomorrow, and I have to make sure everything’s ready to go in case shit goes bad.”

“You might need to get some sleep,” he said. “You might be jumping at shadows.”

“You know what? I fucking hope so.”

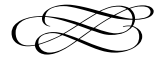
Mikel looked conflicted. “Should I stay and help? I mean, those girls are pretty hot, and I’d hate to disappoint them, but I suppose, if you needed me, like really really needed me—”

“Just go on your date. You can help me tomorrow before the circus starts.”

He grinned like I’d just given him a gift. “You’re the best. Are you sure you don’t want to join me? Just for a few hours.”

I considered it, feeling a draw to his offer I had trouble denying. But duty was more important than pussy. I shook my head. “It’s fine. It’s not like one of those girls is my soul mate.”

## CHAPTER 8



The sun in Chicago looked different than back home in Boston. Whether it was the proximity to Lake Michigan or the wind that always made the sky look a little less blue and a little more hazy, I didn't know, but standing in my bedroom at my father's mansion, looking out over the sprawling backyard, I suddenly missed Boston.

I'd wanted to leave there my whole life in an attempt to get away from my family, particularly my father, but now that I was elsewhere, he'd managed to follow me. Was there nothing I could do to escape his cold, calculating grip?

Apparently, not even my new job would allow me to do so. When I'd asked Heck for the day off because my father was getting married, he'd been thrilled, insisting I send my father his best. Annoyed, I'd done my best to hide my true feelings and assured the attorney I was shadowing that I would. But it drove me crazy that even the law firm I was working with knew about my father's shady dealings and wanted to kiss his ass. Why couldn't I get even the slightest bit of independence?

Shouting from down the hallway told me that not all of my brothers were in their prospective rooms getting ready for the wedding at the moment. At least two of them were arguing about something. It sounded to me like Alex and Jace, but I couldn't be sure from this distance. Whatever they were doing, they'd better not piss off Dad on his big day.

None of us even knew who the bride was. Did he honestly think it was normal for a family to come together for a wedding where the patriarch would be marrying someone

we'd never even met before? Really, this was strange even for my family.

But then, we all had a lot of secrets. My thoughts immediately went to my dark angel, but I couldn't let them linger there. My cheeks heated, and I remembered how I'd had to excuse myself from the business lunch the day before because I couldn't stop thinking about him.

I shook my head to clear it and tried to concentrate on the matter at hand. Checking the clock, I saw that we only had about an hour before this shitshow was set to begin. I let out a sigh and then turned back to the mirror. I was going to have to do something to hide the dark circles beneath my eyes.

Hanging out with Michael the night before had been fun, but it wasn't something I ever wanted to do again. Something about him reminded me so much of my dark angel, I could hardly stand to be in the same room with him. It was silly, but they had similar coloring, similar posture, and even their voices were eerily alike.

I'd made up an excuse and cut out pretty early, even for me. Sara had stayed, though. I'd sent her a few texts earlier to see what had happened, but she'd been vague. Had she fucked the famous movie star? It was certainly possible. If so, I hoped she was okay. It had to be a strange realization that you'd actually slept with the man of your dreams.

I knew what that was like. Again, my mind went back to the man who'd taught me everything I'd never known about myself five years ago. My skin lit on fire just thinking of him. I'd had no idea what I really wanted from a man until he took me. All of my inhibitions had melted away.

Maybe it was because of the substances coursing through my veins at the time, but I didn't think that was entirely it. Something told me that man would be able to elicit those sorts of responses from me if I was completely sober, standing in a church before God and the rest of the world—including my asshole father.

With the dark circles beneath my eyes successfully hidden, I moved on to my eyelids. Damn my dark angel for keeping



me awake half the night. After I'd returned from drinks with Michael, I'd tried to go to sleep, but my dreams had been filled with images of him.

Biting down on my bottom lip, I felt a ripple of electricity pulse through me, the familiar ache between my thighs setting in. Taking a few deep breaths, I did my best to will it away, but it was difficult. I could easily crawl beneath the blankets in my bed and pretend my hands were his, like I had a thousand times before.

But there was no time for that at the moment. If we were late to the wedding because of me, my bastard father wouldn't hesitate to punish me for it. He had no qualms about hitting girls, not even when the girl in question was his only daughter.

Moving on to my lipstick, I couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to see him again. Would I recognize him? I thought so. Though it had been five years and my mind had been hazy when I'd been with him, I thought my body would automatically respond to being in his presence, like a homing pigeon returning to the place where it belonged.

A chill went down my spine just thinking about it. My body yearned for him, but my mind knew it was unlikely. What were the chances we would ever run into each other again? Especially now that I was no longer living in Boston, where it had all taken place.

Besides, if I ever did see him again, would I rush to him and wrap him up in my arms or turn into a melted puddle at his feet? Would I be a quivering mound of flesh or rip my clothes off and throw myself at him? What if he didn't even remember me?

God, that would burn like a branding iron to the gut.

Shaking my head, I rid my thoughts of him, hopefully once and for all—for the evening anyway. I had to finish getting ready for the wedding. With my makeup almost done, all I needed to do was slip on my heels and add some jewelry. The light yellow dress I was wearing hadn't been my choice, but just like with the graduation, my father tended to dictate what I

wore, and no one had been around to swap it out for me this time.

My bedroom door flew open so hard, it hit the wall, probably making a hole in the drywall. My eyes widening, I stared at my brothers Jace and Alex as they came flying into my room. Jace was in the front, his white shirt only buttoned about halfway up, his collar hanging open.

Alex was right on his tail, fully dressed and completely put together as always. Neither of them wore a friendly expression as they bore down on me, though.

“What the hell?” I asked, trying not to shrink away from them. If I was going to be an independent woman, I had to be more assertive and not cower when my brothers—or anyone else—came shooting toward me. “What if I’d been changing?”

“We’ve seen you naked before, sis, and it ain’t nothing to brag about,” Jace said, a rude stab to my heart that wasn’t necessary. It wasn’t like he’d seen me undressed in the last fifteen years, anyway. “What the fuck is this we hear about you sleeping with Mikel Petrov?”

“What?” I practically screeched in his face, horrified. I might not be completely loyal to our family all the time like these two, but I sure the hell would never have anything to do with a Petrov. Our families had been at war for ages. They were responsible for my mother’s death, I had no doubt. “What are you talking about? I would never!”

“Bullshit!” Alex stepped around Jace, getting even closer to me. “We know you went out with him last night. You fucking a Petrov happens over my dead body—or yours!”

Confusion washed over me as his narrowed gaze, only inches from my face, tore me apart. “I went out with Michael Cappantio last night, not a Petrov. And it wasn’t a date. We just had drinks. And Sara was there. If anyone fucked him, it was her.”

“You stupid bitch,” Alex muttered, turning around and running a hand through his hair. “Michael Cappantio *is* Mikel Petrov!”

“What?” Mouth open, I stared at him, dumbfounded. Was he for real?

“Yeah, sis. How can you live in Petrov territory for five years and not know that? Dumb bitch,” Jace mumbled. “You’re lucky you survived here this long with that kind of ignorance.”

“Yeah, you might’ve ended up like Jimmy de Luca, served up in Chicago dogs to unsuspecting customers at a wiener cart downtown.” Alex seemed to realize then that I truly hadn’t known.

Taking a deep breath, I began to formulate a response, wanting to remind them that I had lived there for five years—problem free—but what good would it do? None of my brothers ever listened to me. None but Drake.

He appeared in my doorway next, and I suddenly felt much safer. I needed to figure out a way to defend myself against these assholes, but I just didn’t have it in me to be so ruthless. It was almost like the blood that ran through their veins was foreign to mine.

“Knock it off, guys.” Drake’s tone was nonchalant. He would never actually try to order Alex around since he was the oldest and outranked everyone. “She didn’t know, but she does now. Sis won’t be messing around with any more fucking Petrovs.”

“She’d better not be.” Alex’s eyes flashed to mine in a menacing stare. “People in our family who would do that would go missing.”

“I understand,” I said, just wanting them to leave.

“Come on.” Drake motioned for them to leave with him. “Let’s let her finish getting dressed and go. Dad’s getting married in less than an hour, and we have a drive across town to get to the site.”

“And if there’s one thing we know for sure, whatever terrible troll Dad is marrying, she’ll be better than a fucking Petrov,” Jace said as the three of them headed out into the hallway.

I managed to give Drake a thankful smile as he closed the door.

Once they were gone, I took a few deep breaths. Dwelling on the fact that they treated me as a pawn, as less than human, wouldn't get me anywhere. What else was new? At the moment, I just needed to finish getting ready for the wedding and get this the hell over with.

A few minutes later, I found myself in the backseat of a large black SUV next to Drake as we headed through the Chicago suburbs to another upscale neighborhood. The houses here were similar to the ones where my father's mansion was located, but the yards were even larger, and the fences were taller.

We pulled up to a large gray iron gate, and the driver pushed a button, eventually making it through. We'd had to take several SUVs because my father brought a lot of his higher ranking goons along. They were his friends, I supposed. Either that, or they were security measures. Surely, the Petrovs wouldn't try any shit at my father's wedding?

The house came into view in front of us at an angle. Looming against the overcast sky, the large brick mansion gave off an air of mystery, almost as if it belonged in a gothic novel—or Gotham City. My eyes wandered over turrets and balconies, across the black rooftop, trying to take it all in. It had to be twice as big as the mansion we were staying in here, probably just as big as our home in Boston.

When the SUVs came to a stop, I slid out before anyone opened the door for me. We congregated together and moved slowly toward the entrance, but movement on the balcony above the door caught our attention.

Immediately, my heart stopped beating as my mouth dropped, and a shudder went through my entire body.

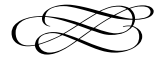
A man stood there, looking down at us, an angry scowl on his face. My eyes locked on his dark brown orbs, and flashes of memories made my body begin to quiver uncontrollably from the inside out.

“God,” I mumbled, gasping, doing my best not to come unraveled right then and there. But from the sounds around me, my family members were also reacting to his presence.

Not because they recognized him the same way I did. No, no one else had any idea that I’d just come face to face with literally the man of my dreams. There he was, staring down at me from above, my dark angel. Angry and glowering, he was obviously very upset to see me—to see us. I had no idea why.

But then I noticed what he had in his hand—a gun.

## CHAPTER 9



## DAEMON

I should've killed them all.

The moment those bastard La Rosas started piling out of their SUVs into my driveway, I should've opened fire, spraying the whole bunch of them with machine gun fire, asking questions later.

After all, a man didn't get very far in my line of business if he had a nice long chat with each of his victims before he put a bullet right between their eyes.

But I'd become distracted the moment my eyes locked onto the icy blue stare of Elisa La Rosa.

Standing there with her brothers and the rest of the goons who'd poured out of the vehicles together, like they had no idea whose house they'd just arrived at, she looked up at me, and immediately my body had responded to her. She felt it, too. I could tell by the way she'd gasped and taken a step backward, like maybe she was about to swoon like one of those women in a black and white movie.

She remembered me. She knew exactly who I was—the prick who'd drugged her and taken her every way imaginable. From this distance, I couldn't tell if that glint in her eye was fear or something else. Was it possible the woman was actually happy to see me?

No, of course not. How could she be? The things we'd done, the way I'd claimed her? No, she wouldn't ever want to see me again for the rest of her life after what I'd done to her.

But I was thrilled to see her.

This was the real Elisa, too. Not the version of her I saw when I went to sleep at night. Not some look-alike who got my hopes up when I glimpsed her from behind only to turn around and shatter my dreams. Not a drawing of her I carried with me, always, on my arm. No, this was the real Elisa La Rosa. Standing in my yard. With all of her fucking brothers.

She looked good, too. Damn good. Better than she did before, which was saying something. She was still petite, but the woman had curves on her now, and her breasts had gotten bigger. Visions of them danced before my eyes, her perky nipples, the way they bounced when she rode my cock.

My mind shot back to the present, and I remembered there was a war going on now. I couldn't let her distract me, though she was the only reason I hadn't shot the rest of her family the moment I realized who they were.

Suddenly, my brothers were there beside me, and we weren't the only ones with guns drawn. The La Rosas were taking aim right back at us. I was about to have a shootout on the balcony of my family home in broad daylight on the day of my mother's wedding.

I should've known these assholes were in town for a reason. They'd probably planned to sneak up on us while we were distracted. How the hell had they gotten in the gate? Did we have a traitor among us?

"What the fuck are they doing here?" Vin shouted from my left. "Let's shoot their goddamn eyes out!"

"How the fuck?" Alex La Rosa shouted up at us, his gun trained on me. "You assholes! What are you doing here?"

"What are *we* doing here?" Dezy screamed from his position on my left. "You're the fuckers who need to answer that question!"

The two sides continued to hurl insults and questions at one another until I raised my voice above the others, demanding everyone's respect.



“All right, La Rosa!” I shouted down at the patriarch of the family, Alexander, who was standing near the first SUV that had pulled up. “Give me one fucking reason not to kill every single one of you right now.” *Yes, I’ll kill you all and take my woman. Your only daughter, you fucking prick.*

Alexander La Rosa smiled smugly at me, even letting out a hardy laugh as his eyes met mine. He didn’t open his mouth to respond, though, and my finger itched even more than before, grazing the trigger, begging to be let loose. I could kill the bastard right now, consequences be damned, and walk away a happy man.

It was then that I saw another figure moving in the yard beneath us, exiting the house and gliding across the grass. Confused, I stared at my mother as she walked straight over to Alexander La Rosa. What was she thinking? If she moved aside, I’d have a clean shot. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to take him out.

Mother turned and looked up at us. “I’ll give you a reason, Daemon!” she shouted up at me. “You’re not killing any of these people because this is the man I’m marrying.” She reached over and pulled his body against hers. “Alexander La Rosa is about to become your stepfather.”

All of the blood drained from my face. My mouth hung open as her words infiltrated my mind before I could fully process what she was saying.

This was the man she was marrying? Alexander La Rosa? All I could mumble was, “Fuck me.”



It had taken all of my strength not to shoot anyway. Not to take out all of the others and leave my mother there to shelter her betrothed until I could get a clean shot on him. But my brothers had faltered, dipping the ends of their guns at once, shock not allowing them to process it all any more quickly than I had been able to.

Even Vin, who normally would've shot the fuck out of everyone and asked questions later had just stood there.

“Now, let's get this straight,” Mother said, sitting in a chair in the large parlor toward the back of the house. She'd moved my brothers and me in there to discuss the situation in hopes that no one “accidentally” shot anyone else. “I don't need anyone's permission to get married to Alexander or anyone else. I am the matriarch of this family, and what I say goes. Period.”

My mouth opened to argue with her, to tell her that I was in charge now that Father was dead, but before I could get a word out, Vin piped up.

“But Ma, it's the La Rosas. Wouldn't it be more fun to shoot them all dead right here and now? We've been fighting them for years. Why not let our syndicate get a leg up and have a little fun, huh? It'd be the perfect plot for you to bait them here under the guise of marrying him and then we blow all of their brains out.” Vin laughed manically, always out for blood.

“I agree with Vin,” I said, though I'd find a way to spare Elisa. “I can't believe this, Mom. How long have you been—” I stopped myself, not wanting to say the words.

I wanted to kill that bastard Alexander just for fucking my mother. I didn't know for sure that they had, of course, but they'd been awful handsy before, which made me think they'd somehow managed to be together behind all of our backs—another tidbit that made me sick to my stomach.

We really needed to tighten up security.

“It's none of your business, Daemon,” my mother said, her eyes narrowed. She was dressed in a white wedding gown, which was a little ridiculous considering how many sons she had, but she looked well put together. Stylish as ever, not a hair or fleck of makeup out of place. Yet, when she looked at me like that, it was like she was the Wicked Witch of the West, and I'd better mind my business or she'd fly away with me dangling off the end of her broomstick. “This is happening. Period.”

“Well, I guess it could be worse,” Dezzy threw out. “I mean, she could be marrying Al Capone’s corpse. That would really stink.” Dezzy laughed hysterically at his own jokes, neither of which were funny.

He didn’t give a shit what happened today. All he ever worried about was the business side of things. Anything that didn’t affect the bottom line, he didn’t care about. He wasn’t a killer like Vin, but if he had to defend himself, he would do what he had to do. And if killing was good for business, he would do that too.

“Mother,” Mikel said, his tone serious and full of concern, “just please tell us, if you manage to go through with this, nothing is going to change with the business. We’ve worked hard to manage the syndicate over the years and keep the business within our family. Now, it’s like you want to hand some of that over to our archenemies.”

My brother had a point. The last thing I wanted was to share our business dealings with the likes of La Rosa. Thinking over each of the brothers, my stomach twisted. I couldn’t even imagine myself running a deal alongside Alex or Jace or whatever the dumb fucks’ names were. “This isn’t happening,” I declared, shaking my head.

“The fuck it’s not.” Mom rarely used that word, but she didn’t have any problem tossing it around now.

Raising my voice, I said, “Unless you want a *Game of Thrones* wedding, Mom, you will call this catastrophe off right now.”

“And unless you want a bullet buried between your eyes, my son, you will shut your trap.” Her’s words were cold and calculating. “Listen, I am still in charge here, whether you like it or not. What I say still goes in this syndicate. As far as I know, no one died and left you in charge, Daemon.” It was a low blow, mentioning that Father had died and I still wasn’t running things, not officially anyway. Her eyes roamed over the rest of my brothers. “That goes for all of you, too.”

“You’re going to marry Alexander La Rosa?” Vin didn’t phrase it as a question so much as a statement he’d have to

learn to accept.

“I will marry whoever the fuck I want to.” With that, Mother stood, straightening her gown. “Now, you stay here while I go and speak to my groom. And if I so much as hear a single bullet fired, I guarantee you that whoever goes against me will soon be joining any member of the La Rosa family you dare target in death. Do I make myself clear?”

My mother took stock of each of us, looking from one brother to the next until each of us had answered her with an affirmative, “Yes, Mother.” When I spoke up, the words caught in my throat.

I wouldn’t go against her. Not right now, but the fact that she was actually going through with this, that she planned on marrying the patriarch of the family we had considered our greatest enemies for as long as I could remember, told me she had either lost her goddamn mind or she had something up her sleeve she hadn’t shared with me.

I couldn’t fathom the latter could be possible. My mother was smart and cunning, but she wasn’t that diabolical. No, whatever this was, it was a mistake, one the entire Petrov family was going to suffer from if we didn’t find a way to make it work in our favor.

Vin got up to pace the room, Dezzy let out a nervous laugh, and Mikel sat like a statue, barely breathing, all of us trying to deal with this in whatever way we could.

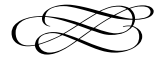
There had to be something I could do. But at the moment, all I could think about was how much I hated Alexander La Rosa and all of his sons—and how much I wanted his daughter.

Elisa La Rosa was here—at my house—but not under ideal circumstances. No, she was here to absolutely fuck up my life along with the rest of her family. Seeing her again had been heaven for the few seconds it took me to snap out of it and realize I had a crisis on my hands.

And then another thought occurred to me. If her father married my mother... that would make her my stepsister.

“Fuck.”

# CHAPTER 10



**I** *can't fucking believe it.*

After all of these years, five to be exact, I was finally face to face with the man I'd been losing sleep over since he woke me up in every way possible. And when I'd finally seen him again, he'd been pointing a gun at me.

Daemon Petrov. I'd heard his name a million times, but never had it registered in my mind that he was the one who'd done all of those things to me. The oldest son of my family's rivals, one of the people my brothers wanted dead more than anyone else.

He was the one who had lit my body on fire and scorched my soul in such a way that, even though it had been years since I'd looked into his dark eyes, I'd never been able to let him go.

Sitting in the backyard of the Petrov mansion, I was in a daze until my brother Decan brought a charcuterie board over to where I was sitting next to Drake. The caterers didn't look happy, but none of them would dare say anything to my brothers.

The rest of the family was scattered around, carrying on stunned conversations. The place was decorated for a wedding, one that none of us could believe was about to take place.

Our father was going to marry Lillian Petrov? Why? How? None of it made any sense to me. I wasn't associated with the business that much, and even I knew this was insane.

A few feet away, Alex and Jace were having a heated discussion, though from the bits and pieces I could hear, they were in agreement. This couldn't happen.

Yet our father was standing a few hundred yards away from us, up by a flower-covered arch, one I assumed was meant to be the place where the ceremony would take place when he married Mrs. Petrov.

Around us, caterers were working, preparing the place for the wedding, or the reception, or something. I couldn't think straight. Petrov goons were also strategically placed throughout the back garden, just in case one of us got out of line, no doubt.

"What the fuck?" Decan muttered, popping a cube of cheese into his mouth. "Can you believe this shit?"

"No, not even a little bit," Drake replied, not touching the food. I wasn't hungry either, but when a waiter wandered by with a tray of drinks, I took one, not even caring what it was.

Our father had an air about him like this place was already his, standing there with his hands pushed down deep in his pockets, his chin raised. None of us were brave enough to go ask him what was going on because he'd just respond violently. If there was one thing all of his children knew, it was that we were never to question Father. Never.

I didn't mind questioning my brother a bit, though. "Decan, who was that guy with the gun? The first one? Was it Daemon?"

Decan's eyebrows drew together as he stared at me. I felt my cheeks flush. Surely, he didn't suspect anything, did he?

"Yeah, dumbass," he replied, shaking his head. "You really don't know anything about what we do, do you?"

"Leave her alone, Dec." Drake glared at him. "She's not caught up in all of this bullshit like the rest of you animals."

"You're in it deeper than you'd like to admit, Doc." Decan shoved another piece of cheese into his face.



I was already certain that it had been Daemon, but I knew absolutely nothing about him other than the fact that he was my dark angel—and my worst nightmare.

“That guy is truly fucked in the head,” Decan said, possibly more to himself than to me. “Talk about having a black heart. He thinks it’s his job to serve justice to everyone in the world, even though he’s done more wrong than most.”

“He’s that bad?” My voice quivered a bit, possibly from fear but maybe a little bit from excitement as well. Yeah, I had the idea he was a bad guy when I’d first met him.

“Fuck yeah,” Decan continued. “He’s soulless. Not an ounce of compassion in him. I won’t tell you the stories I’ve heard. They’d fuck you up.”

My eyes widened, but it was Drake’s arm on mine that made me stop asking. My brothers didn’t need to know that I’d already gotten a little taste of that soullessness—and that I wanted more.

It seemed like Decan was a bit in awe of Daemon, though. When he spoke about him, it wasn’t just with hate in his voice but with a note of reverence as well.

Turning away from my brothers, I tried to quell the ache that was beginning to flare up deep inside of me again. I couldn’t be thinking about Daemon the way that I had been for the last five years when he was so close. Not when the circumstances were the way that they were at the moment. This was the day my father would marry his mother. How fucked up was I? Thinking about my own soon-to-be stepbrother like that?

That realization wasn’t enough to stop the flashes of images that invaded my every thought. How was it possible that he was even hotter than I remembered him? When his eyes had locked on mine, I’d immediately flooded my panties, sopping them, and now, I wanted to tear out of the garden and go find a bathroom to relieve the pressure mounting throughout my core.

I didn't move, though. Seeing Mrs. Petrov come out of the house and approach my father, I tried to discern what was happening. She didn't seem angry, but she was in a rush, her body language cold, though not to him. How the hell did the two of them even meet?

Decan and Drake got up to go speak with Alex and Jace, leaving me alone, which I appreciated. It was all so much. I needed a moment alone to think.

I didn't get it, though. A tap on my shoulder drew my attention away from them. Turning, I locked eyes with a pair of dark orbs, and my heart stopped for a second.

But it wasn't Daemon.

"Michael," I muttered, realizing now why the actor I'd hung out with the night before reminded me so much of my dark angel. "Or should I say Mikel?"

He offered me another drink, which I accepted since I'd drained my first glass. Pulling out the chair Drake had vacated, he said, "Hey, I had no idea who you were last night."

"Same," I admitted. Looking at the glass, I asked, "There's nothing in this drink I'm going to regret is there?"

Chuckling under his breath, he shook his head. "No, nothing but champagne. Although I'm not sure what we're celebrating. Man, this is fucked up." He took a sip of his drink, and I did the same, agreeing with him.

"Why are you the only one out here?" I wanted to know where Daemon was, but I couldn't ask.

"I was elected to come check on the old lady," he replied with a smirk on his face. "But I wanted to speak to you, too. Let you know if I'd had any idea last night, I would've—"

"Shot me?" I laughed, but I was also serious. This man was dangerous, a killer, just like the other members of his family. Yet, he paraded around Hollywood like there was nothing unusual about him or his family at all.

Michael laughed. "No, of course not. But I wouldn't have asked you out either. This is so fucked up, our parents getting

married. We're not supposed to mix, you know?"

"I know," I said quickly. I agreed with him. "But my father does what he wants."

"As does my mother." He took another drink, shaking his head slowly.

"Do you know how long they've been dating?" I needed to try to put the pieces of this messed-up puzzle together.

"No, I was going to ask if you knew. We just found out she was getting married a day or two ago."

"Our father just told us, too." Shaking my head, I fought to wrap my mind around it.

"Do you think your brothers will stay here?" His eyes went to where my four brothers were standing, talking. When I looked at them, I was met with glares. The conversation I'd had earlier with Alex and Jace came to mind. They wouldn't like me speaking to Michael—Mikel.

"No, I doubt it," I assured him. "They've all got work to do in Boston. Well, except for Drake. But he's a doctor."

"Yeah, and I'm an actor," he replied, sarcastically.

"No, really. He *is* a doctor." He needed to know Drake wasn't a part of this, but he only nodded, not believing me. Mikel had been in enough movies to count himself as a real actor, despite what their reasoning was for in making him part of the Hollywood scene. "My father might stick around and hand things in Boston completely over to Alex. Who the hell knows?" I took another drink.

My eyes were drawn to Lillian.

She was speaking to my father still, but her eyes were on me. A shiver of fear went down my spine. Her eyes were locked on me like a lion about to swallow its prey whole.

"Well, I think the whole thing is fucked up." Michael stood. "I've been spotted, so I'll see you later. Bye, Elisa."

"Bye." Something about the way he said my name didn't quite settle over me the right way. I couldn't put my finger on

it, though.

And I didn't have time to because the next thing I knew, my father was standing in front of me. "Come."

At his sharp request, I stood, following him across the yard, wondering what the hell was going on now. He led me off to the side away from everyone. The entire time I followed him, my lungs refused to expand. What did he want?

Stopping behind a copse of trees, he said plainly, "You belong to Daemon Petrov now."

My father's words simply didn't register in my mind. What the fuck was he talking about? Blankly, I stared at him, not able to formulate a sentence, not even a word.

"It has been decided." He folded his arms in front of him, signaling there was nothing I could say anyway.

"Wh-what?" I stammered, finally able to speak. "You're giving me to him? A complete stranger? Our rival?" For the life of me, I couldn't understand why my father would do such a thing.

With a nonchalant shrug, he said, "It's called leverage, young lady. And you are the epitome of it."

"Leverage?" What was that supposed to mean?

"Yes. We have too much bad blood between the two families. Your new mother and I agree this is the best way to make sure things go smoothly. As long as he has you, it's a guarantee I won't attack their syndicate. I'll have no choice. And in exchange for his trust, he will have you to do with what he wishes."

On information overload, I tried to process. Essentially, I would be Daemon's hostage, and if my father broke his trust, he could kill me.

What he probably didn't know was that my father likely didn't care if I lived or died.

"I'm just supposed to be a gift to him?" I asked. "Like I'm property?"

“You’re whatever the fuck I want you to be, and now, you’ll be whatever the fuck *he* wants you to be. And don’t you fucking forget it! Listen, you will do as I say. You are a member of this family, and you will play your role.”

All I could think about was my education, my career—my future. He expected me to throw that all away? “But what about my job?”

I barely got the words out of my mouth when his fist connected with my gut, knocking my stomach into my spine and forcing all of the air out of my body in one ugly exhale. Pain radiated from my center, causing me to double over as stars filled my vision.

“Don’t you start with your bullshit crying,” he whispered. “You will not ruin this day. If you’re lucky, Daemon will agree to this arrangement. It’s the only way you will be useful to this family. And useless people don’t hang around long.”

With tears in my eyes, I looked up at him, trying to focus. I couldn’t say anything even if I wanted to, with no air in my lungs.

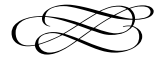
My father continued in that sharp whisper he used when he was trying to be even more terrifying than normal. “This is no vacation for you either, darling daughter. I’m not sending you over to him just to get your fill of Russian cock. You keep your eyes and ears open for me, and maybe you’ll finally do something to contribute.”

I locked eyes with him, finding my head slowly rocking back and forth. I had no idea what to say, but I couldn’t argue with him or refuse.

“See if you can finally do something that doesn’t disappoint me, huh? For once in your life, don’t let me down?”

“Yes, Father,” I muttered, wondering if I would even survive being possessed by my dark angel. Something told me my life was ending, and there was nothing in the world I could do about it.

## CHAPTER 11



## DAEMON

After her little discussion with her betrothed, Mom came back to get me, pulling me aside. I had no fucking idea where Mikel had gone or what he'd figured out, but walking down the hallway with her, anger boiled up inside of me. Was she really thinking of going through with this?

She led me to my father's conference room. The room was a mix between an elaborate study and a typical mob boss conference room. A large aquarium boasting some of the world's rarest saltwater fish sat against one wall, stretching over twelve feet in length.

The table easily fit fifteen of my father's lieutenants. The dark wood was stained a cherry color that hid bloodstains, and this table had seen plenty of those. The scent of cigar smoke lingered here well after the old man had smoked his last.

Mom stopped in the center of the room, turning to face me with that no-nonsense look she always wore when she was about to school me. I held my breath. She didn't actually expect me to back down on this, did she? How would the other gangsters from our rival families view me if I allowed my mother to marry the bastard we'd been fighting for all of these years?

"Daemon, you are my oldest son, and I respect you as a member of this family. A leader of this family. But you have to know, I demand the same sort of respect from you. I am getting married today. To Alexander La Rosa. And I don't give a damn whether or not you agree."

“Fuck no!” The words were hardly out of my mouth before her palm connected with the side of my face, hard enough to send my head spinning, her ring biting into the skin on my cheek.

If anyone had been around to see that, I would have been forced to kill her. If another person had dared lay a hand on me in such a fashion, it would be the last thing they ever did.

But this was my mother. She stood looking at me with the same narrowed gaze she always did when she was telling me how things were. For a moment, I was a small child looking up at her, no longer willing to argue about whether or not I cared to eat the beets on my plate. I was eating them. My tongue useless, I stood there, staring at her, waiting for her to speak.

“This is why I kept this information from you, Daemon.” Grabbing me by the tie, she pulled me closer. I was a yapping dog, and she was about to silence me. “I don’t give a fuck whether you like it or not. All you need to do now is keep your goddamn mouth shut, stand beside me, and let me decide what is best for this family. If you want to keep this family strong, you will do as I say!”

In this position, with her claws wrapped around my noose, I couldn’t say much if I wanted to. My eyes narrowed, despite the fact that they were beginning to bulge from my skull since my oxygen supply was low.

Keep the family strong. Of course, I wanted to keep the family strong. Nothing else mattered. But how the hell was marrying our enemy going to do that exactly?

Was it possible she knew something I didn’t? I doubted it. After all, I’d been running things for years before Dad’s untimely death. But the way her eyes were staring into my soul, I had to wonder. Did she truly have a secret she wasn’t sharing with me? Was she doing this to get to La Rosa? I had no idea.

Mom released my tie with a snap, allowing me to suck in a full breath at last. I tried to play it off like I was fine, but she knew better.



Leaning against the table, tapping her pointy red fingernails on the conference table, she purred, “Alexander has a gift for you.”

Skeptical, I stared at her, wondering what the hell she was talking about now. “What’s that?”

A feline-like smile slowly spread from one side of her mouth to the other. “His daughter.”

At the mention of Elisa, my cock flickered to attention, straining against my pants. Thank God for long jackets. “What are you saying?”

Shrugging, she folded her arms, ceasing the annoying clacking on the table. “Call it leverage. A hostage. Your prisoner. Fuck, call her your goddamn slave if that’s what turns you on. I don’t care what you call her, but Alexander wants you to have her as a show of his respect for you and to let you know you needn’t worry about him infringing on any of your... business.”

Not knowing what to say, I turned and stared at the fish tank, watching a clown fish swim in circles, a large angelfish right behind it. She was an angel, Elisa La Rosa. And a lot of the times, I was a fucking clown. What was I supposed to do with this information? Elisa La Rosa would be mine as an insurance policy? Fuck.

It was all I’d ever wanted being offered to me on a silver platter by my archnemesis, as if he could read my mind and knew I’d been craving his daughter ever since that night five years ago.

But there was no fucking way he knew about that or else he would’ve killed me a long time ago. My left arm began to itch uncontrollably, right where her tattoo cut into my skin, as if she were there now, begging for attention.

For a moment, I indulged my wildest fantasies. Owning her, commanding her, taking her any time I wanted to, however I wanted. And she wanted me, too. I’d seen the way she looked at me when she realized who she was looking at. I knew that look.

How was it possible after what I'd taken from her that she could want more? I had no idea, but I'd give it to her—over and over again—until she begged me to stop.

“No.” The word slipped from between my lips without a second thought. “I don't want La Rosa's fucking daughter. I don't want anything to do with any of this.”

With a sigh, Mom said, “Why can't you ever just behave?” She stepped around me and opened the door.

Alexander La Rosa himself stepped into the room, his face twisted in what could only be described as part menacing scowl and part amused grin. “Daemon,” he said, coming toward me. “It's about time we met under peaceful circumstances.”

Immediately, my shoulders tilted back, my chest puffing out. The bastard better know better than to offer me his hand. I wouldn't take it.

He didn't. Instead, he stood across from me, his hands folded in front of him, not making a show of his strength and power at all. I tried to relax, but my posture stayed the same.

“Listen, Daemon. I understand you hate me. I'm an evil prick. But then, isn't everyone in this room? With few exceptions, everyone in this house and in the yard would fall into that category. I mean, I don't know all of the caterers, but I did see one serving champagne with blue cheese.” He wrinkled his nose, and Mother tittered, wrapping her hand around his arm.

So now the fucker was a comedian?

“What is it you want?” I demanded, folding my arms.

“Just a ceasefire, that's all. All of us have blood on our hands, right? I've done some shit to your family. And your family has definitely done some shit to mine, you know?” He looked me dead in the eyes then. There could be no mistaking he was talking about the death of his wife. “I'm not asking us all to be best friends. No sleepovers or orgies. Just a ceasefire. A straight-up truce.”

“Why would I agree to that?” I asked him. “Why would I trust you?”

He looked at my mother, and she nodded.

“Well, as your mom has already explained, I’m willing to trust you with my most precious possession. My little girl. Elisa means the world to me. The fact that I am willing to hand her over to you, for safekeeping, should let you know that I am serious when I say I mean your family no harm. I’ve simply found a woman I know I cannot live without in your darling mother. That’s all.”

I didn’t buy everything he was saying. There had to be more to this. I waited, hoping he’d say more.

He did. “Listen, no one is going to make a move on you as long as you have her, right? If she could potentially be put in danger, my men won’t act.”

“So you’re saying if she’s not with me, you might try to kill me?” If my deduction was correct, that was exactly what he had just said.

Shrugging, he replied, “I’m not going to bullshit you. I have my sons under control, but they have a lot of soldiers underneath them, and like me, a lot of them haven’t forgotten what happened five years ago. To a degree, I’m willing to forgive and forget because it means I get to be with your mother. But they’re not always so easily persuaded to let things go. Don’t misunderstand. I remember, too, but I’ve... found happiness again, and that’s important to me.”

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I tried to read his expression. I did see a hint of sadness there, but there was something else, an emotion I couldn’t quite recognize.

I honestly didn’t know the exact details of what had gone down the night his wife had died—the night Vin had killed her. I’d been so wrapped up in Elisa, I’d never found out.

But it was clear Alexander held me responsible for what had happened to Sophia La Rosa, and a man like that clearly wasn’t just going to let it go. We’d taken out his wife, an

innocent victim in all of this, in his own city. I couldn't expect him to simply forgive any of us for that.

Something smelled fishy about all of this. Perhaps it would be more fitting for me to ram the knife in my pocket right into Alexander La Rosa's throat and then dunk his head into that fish tank behind me, holding him there until he bled out or drowned.

Only an idiot would act so irrationally, though. A true boss would have a plan before he pulled his knife. I had nothing at this moment, considering I only found out about all of this a few hours ago. No, I couldn't do anything—not yet.

Which meant I could continue to refuse his offer or accept it.

The temptation to agree, to welcome Elisa into my life, into my bed, was overwhelming. But how could I just go along with this game without knowing the rules?

“Come on, Daemon. Our guests will have arrived and be waiting on us,” Mother said. “What you do with the girl is completely up to you, but don't refuse Alexander's offer.”

He'd proposed the only thing in the world I'd be willing to accept, what my heart had been longing for all of these years. How could I say no?

Alexander took a step forward. “She's the most precious thing in the world to me, Daemon. All I'm asking is that your family doesn't make a move on mine, and in return, I will do the same.” He held his hand out to me. “Elisa is yours, and our two families will find a way to coexist in harmony.”

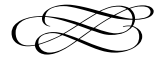
My eyes flickered to his hand. Mother practically vibrated standing next to Alexander, willing me to just shake it already and be done with it.

With a sharp nod, I said, “Fine. As long as I have Elisa, we won't make a move on you, and I expect you to do the same.” Shaking his hand, I stared into his eyes, solidifying the exchange.

“You have my word,” Alexander La Rosa promised me.

What good was the word of the devil anyway?

## CHAPTER 12



A little over an hour after my family made their grand entrance into the Petrov estate, the wedding finally began. Sitting in a chair near the front, on the groom's side, of course, my mind wandered back to everything that had just happened. Only Drake's leg against mine, lightly bouncing up and down, tied me to the real world.

My father was giving me to Daemon Petrov? How was that possible?

Looking at my old man, standing there in front of everyone, with what appeared to be a joyful smile on his face, I tried to entertain the notion that this was all a dream or some sort of sick joke. But he appeared to be so happy, standing beneath the flowered archway, Alex at his side, serving as his best man. How could he be marrying the matriarch of our number one enemy syndicate?

Alex didn't look happy with a deep scowl on his face. He was a younger version of our father. Just as mean, a little wilder, and a lot more likely to lose his cool and act impulsively, something the old man had outgrown—for the most part. Alex's gaze continued to move across the crowd, beyond the rows of chairs, to the perimeter of the back garden, always looking, always assessing the risk.

When my oldest brother's eyes landed on the row of Petrov brothers seated on the bride's side, they grew even darker, narrower, and more full of hate. He'd always been so close to Father. To have this surprise dumped on him the same way it was the rest of us had to be even more painful for him.

The music changed, and everyone around me stood. I clambered to my feet, trying to keep my mind on the present as best as I could. With any luck, this would be a short ceremony, and then we could just go home—unless I had to stay here with Daemon starting tonight.

Something told me there would be a reception. Booze and guns didn't exactly mix. Throw in some people who desperately wanted to murder one another, and we were bound for trouble.

Turning my head, I noticed Lillian walking up the aisle in her white flowing gown first, noting it was an odd choice for a second wedding. Then I caught sight of Daemon, and my heart forgot to beat for a moment before finally falling back into a rapid rhythm.

Daemon's jaw was clenched, his dark eyes narrowed as the two of them glided up the aisle. His mother looked like a white puffy cloud, whereas he was a thunderstorm about to explode, rippling out in waves of lightning and thunder that were bound to destroy us all. As he passed me by, I could almost smell the rain flowing off him. In that suit, he looked hot as fuck, his muscles visible beneath the tight black fabric. My teeth automatically sank into my bottom lip as a flood of memories hit me like a deluge.

His eyes never faltered from the death stare he held on my father. But Father's eyes were fixed on Lillian, the two of them smiling at one another as if the rest of us didn't matter—or didn't even exist.

The priest asked Daemon who gave this woman to be married to this man. His answer was a low growl, barely audible to any of us. He didn't lean over and kiss his mother on the cheek, only removed her hand from his own and turned to walk away.

Lillian had no one to stand at the altar with her, which might've made me sad, but she was still the enemy at the moment, even if my father did marry her. Would she be happy once her sons started to marry and she had daughters-in-law?



Or was she glad to have no daughters? I wondered what she would think of me.

My gaze followed Daemon to the front row across from where we were sitting as he found a seat next to Mikel. Though my mind told me continuously to rip my eyes away, I couldn't help but stare at him for a long moment. Muscle, power, darkness. Those were the only words I could think of to describe him.

Looking at him made a fire light inside of me, a fire I could never completely extinguish. But I was also terrified of what would happen when I was his. My brother had told me he was dangerous. I already knew that. He was a killer—ruthless. Heartless. Yet, I was willing to hand him my own heart without a second thought.

Or was I? As another wave of fear washed over me, I managed to pull my eyes away from him. I had no idea what actually belonging to him would mean, but I was about to find out.

Assuming he would have me.

Was there a chance he had told my father that he didn't want me? That he could take his offer and shove it up his ass? I had no way of knowing for sure at the moment, but I suspected that, when my father went to go speak to Daemon and Lillian earlier, right before the ceremony began, I had been the topic of discussion.

The priest began the ceremony like it was any other joyful occasion, as if any god in their right mind would actually bless this union. We all sat and watched, listening to an exchange of vows. It was nothing elaborate. No gushy love songs were sung, no candles lit, no sappy vows that would lead us to believe that this marriage was based on the kind of love one would witness in a Hallmark movie. No, this certainly seemed like some sort of a business arrangement to me, even if both of the family heads that were tying the knot were smiling at one another with merriment in their eyes.

While they were pledging themselves to one another, my mind went back to Daemon. What if he felt obligated to accept

me because my father had offered? What if he knew it was what his mother wanted, so he played along? My entire life, I'd been trying to escape a home where I was unwanted, disregarded, and treated like garbage. Now, I would belong to a monster who could actually end up treating me worse. After all, I was the daughter of a man he despised. Why not use and abuse me?

Thinking back to that night, when he'd made my body feel things I'd never thought imaginable, I had to wonder how much I'd even dislike it if he did abuse me. What if I wanted him to do those things to me? What if he took me the same way every night, commanding me, breaking me? Who would I be five years from now? Ten? Would I even be alive?

And what about my job? Surely, Daemon Petrov wouldn't allow me to continue to work at the law firm. He'd likely keep me in a birdcage in a room, my only view of the world through a locked window.

My entire existence was full of the unknown right now. Fear was born of the unknown, and my mind was overflowing with both. Not knowing what was about to happen meant there was no way to prepare for danger. No way to plan or strategize. All I could do was react.

My body was already doing plenty of that. With my legs crossed, I gave a tight squeeze, hoping to calm the ache that continued to grow with every passing thought of Daemon. If I was going to survive this, I had to find a way to get my shit together. Otherwise, he'd chew me up and spit me out until I had nothing left to give.

Next to me, Drake fidgeted in his seat, his leg knocking into mine. For a moment, I was able to get out of my head and take in the scene in front of me. Lillian was telling my father how she'd always treasure him. It was all such a farce. My father said the same thing, but with him, there was no way of telling whether or not this was a game.

Ordinarily, whenever Father did something with these kinds of ramifications, my brothers would know all about every single detail so they could help him carry out his plan.

The fact that none of them had known, not even Alex, made me wonder if this was legitimate.

Personally, I never wanted to have anything to do with the mob life. I certainly didn't want to get swept up in it now. But I was a bargaining chip, a pawn, more so than I had ever been before, so I couldn't break away from it.

For a moment, I closed my eyes and imagined what it would be like if I got up and slipped away. Most of the time, no one paid me any mind anyway. What if I stood, turned around, and slowly crept to the garden's edge, making my way between the trees, disappearing from the wedding, from the family, from my life? What if no one noticed, and no one came after me? I could make it back to my apartment in time to pack a few things, tell Sara goodbye, and then go start a new life somewhere else.

At the sound of my father's commanding voice saying something to Lillian about loving her from the first moment he ever met her, my eyes flew open.

I wouldn't make it more than two steps from my current position if I tried to run away. Either Petrov's goons would nab me, or my father's would. They'd haul me back to face my father's wrath. And he would be angry, too. Trying to leave would remind him that I wasn't all in for the family, that I was thinking of what was best for me instead of what he presumed was best for the entire syndicate. No, my ass wasn't going anywhere without my father's permission.

And in a few hours, maybe a day, two at best, the place I'd be going was right into Daemon Petrov's clutches.

How ironic was it that the place I'd dreamt of being for so many years was now the most terrifying place on earth to me?

The priest had us all bow our heads so that we could say one final prayer. Beside me, I heard Drake's breathing become irregular, like the last thing he wanted to do was ask god to bless this union.

When our eyes opened, my father was sliding a ring on Lillian Petrov's finger. From here, all I could tell was that it

was a huge diamond with a glittery gold band. For all I knew, it could be my dead mother's ring, though Lillian would probably never stand for that.

With the ring sliding over her knuckle, settling on her finger, I felt my throat constrict, the air barely passing in and out of my lungs. This was happening. They were kissing. The priest was saying man and wife. He had put a ring on her finger and a chain around my neck.

Looking across the aisle at Daemon, I didn't know if I wanted him to turn and look at me, to acknowledge my existence, or to never let his heavy dark eyes land on my face again.

Almost as if I'd willed it, his head turned, and his eyes met mine. All I saw there was hate. Pure rage. Loathing. I had to look away, blinking back tears. The Petrov-La Rosa wedding had sealed the fate for a man and a woman, but it wasn't my father and Daemon's mother who had been bound by this matrimony. No, it was me who had found herself in binding, heavy chains, a tether I could never sever.

I belonged to Daemon Petrov now, for better or worse. Now, I would find out for myself if this monster had a soul. Judging by his expression as he watched our parents walk down the aisle, my dreams were about to shift into nightmares.

## CHAPTER 13



## DAEMON

Rolling the ice around in my glass, I drained the rest of my whiskey before reaching for the bottle off the wet bar in the upstairs study, refilling it.

What the fuck was going on? How in the hell had all of this happened? None of it made any sense to me. This morning, I had been irritated that my mother was about to marry a man I'd never met. I had no fucking idea it was going to be Alexander La Rosa. Now, I was standing in my room knocking back drinks, trying to wrap my head around it, but it was impossible.

Sounds of partying filtered through the closed windows, the noise from the reception reaching me here. I'd left Vin in charge of making sure the La Rosas didn't get out of hand. The thought of sticking around down there made me nauseated. I could only imagine watching the two sides square off across the room from one another, like at an eighth grade dance, only instead of girls on one side and boys on the other it was one mob per side.

Alexander La Rosa wouldn't allow anything to go wild. Of that, I was certain. I'd leave it up to him. After all, that was the fucker in charge now, right? Him and my ma? They could just drag me around by the balls and get me to do whatever the fuck they wanted because I always bent to Mama Petrov's will.

Shaking my head, I drained my glass again, wondering how many I'd had. I'd lost count, and I didn't fucking care.

A light knock on the door had me turning around. I knew who it was before I said a word, before the door swung open. Feeling the nervousness radiating off her, I took a deep breath. I didn't feel anxious, but I wasn't sure what to do with her.

A normal person would open his arms to the girl, tell her how much he'd missed her, how he'd been dreaming of her. I was not a normal person, though. I did want to fuck her more than anything else in the world, but I wasn't going to. At least, I didn't think I was. Giving her that kind of power, letting her know that she could get me to come undone so easily, was the wrong move.

That wouldn't stop me from having a little fun with her, though, as I taught her a lesson or two.

"Come." I bit out in a rumble, the word a command. The first of many I would give her now that she belonged to me.

Elisa La Rosa pushed the door open slowly, waiting on the other side of the threshold before she finally stepped into the room. Her hand shook slightly as she closed it.

I'd noticed her earlier, that was for damn sure. Starting with the tips of her toes sticking out the ends of her golden heels, I'd climbed her body slowly, taking my time, letting each curve of her body settle into my mind. I did it again now, though, lapping her up, drinking her deeply, like the whiskey I'd drained from my glass.

In that gown, she looked like an angel who'd just fluttered right out of one of my dreams. Her hair pulled up onto the top of her head accentuated the length of her delicate neck. One touch of a finger from a monster like me, and she'd shatter into a million pieces, leaving shards of crystal all over the tile floor.

*Not if I touch her. When I touch her.*

"What the fuck do you want?" My voice was an angry growl, like a wild animal protecting its den.

Her ruby-red lips quivered slightly as she took a deep breath and parted her mouth to speak. "M-my father said I should come up here and find you."

She was nervous, that was for damn sure. But she didn't seem to be afraid of me. She wasn't cowering, trying to hide. No, she was presenting herself to me. Like a good little girl. Like an obedient little girl.

Still, I didn't know what to make of this arrangement just yet. As much as I wanted her, I needed to know she wanted me, too.

"So you don't want to be here?" Turning around, I poured myself another drink, not offering her anything.

"It wasn't my idea," she began. With my drink refilled, I was compelled to look at her again, watching her, expecting her to finish. "But I'm here willingly."

Scoffing, I took another sip of my drink, part of me wanting to sober up so that I could remember what happened that night, wherever it led.

"I'll do what it takes to protect my family," she continued. "Just like you do yours."

Taking a few steps closer to her, I expected her to back up, but she didn't. The girl held her ground, which was impressive when she was faced with a man like me.

I finished off my drink and set the glass down on a side table before prowling even closer to her. In a menacing voice, I asked her, "What did he tell you to do when you got up here?"

Her eyes never left my face, but her voice was an ethereal whisper, only a bit shaky with indecision. "Anything you want."

"Anything I want?" Arching an eyebrow, I let loose a calculated laugh. "Really?"

She nodded, biting down on her bottom lip the way I'd noticed her doing several times earlier when she was looking at me and didn't think I could see her.

"Anything I want," I repeated before reaching around and grabbing her ass, squeezing her right butt cheek roughly.



Appreciating the feel of it, how fine her body really was, I stared into her eyes. “Like this?”

“Sure. If that’s what you want.” Her gaze was unwavering as she continued to stare into my face.

With my hand still planted firmly on her perfect ass, I grabbed her left breast with my other hand, running my thumb across her nipple. Even through the fabric of her dress and whatever the fuck she was wearing underneath, I felt her harden instantly. Continuing to manipulate her peak, I asked, “What about this?”

“I’m a big girl,” she said, a slight moan in her voice, like maybe she was enjoying it. “I can handle it.”

“Oh? You can handle it?” Her head rocked back and forth, daring me to go further.

Anger at the entire situation coursed through me, and for a split second, I became unhinged. Without thinking of the consequences, only wanting to shock and punish her, I grabbed hold of the collar of her dress and yanked the fabric down and away from her body, tearing the garment into shreds. It fell from her body, pooling at her feet, leaving her standing there, her mouth agape, only her lacy black bra and panties shielding her body from me.

Now, I could tell she was shaken. I’d managed to take what little power she thought she possessed, and she was tipping off balance, ready to tumble right into my hands.

Still, she was a fighter. I could see her trying to get her head on straight.

Moving toward her, I forced her to back up until she was against the wall next to the door. Then, dragging my knuckles along her cheekbone, I lit a fire in her skin. Her eyelids fluttered a moment before falling closed. I slid my hand down her side, along the curve of her hip, gliding along her smooth skin until she let out a soft moan.

Her blue eyes flew open and fixed on my face again. With staggered breath, she silently attempted to convince me that

she was unaffected, but it was quite clear that she wanted me—badly.

Leaning in, I let my warm breath wash over her cheek. “Why are you here?” I asked her. Her blue eyes turned toward me, but she didn’t answer. “Are you really okay with this, Miss La Rosa? Because being my property means I own you in every way, shape, and form. Do you get that?”

Slowly, she nodded, but I needed to show her more. My hand crept from her hip to the lacy fabric of her panties, my fingers working their way between her thighs. At first, she kept them clutched together, but the moment my fingers grazed the wetness there, she loosened her grip.

She was already sopping wet for me. Not only could I feel it on the outside of her panties, but I could smell the sweet fragrance I’d lapped up all of those years ago. Working my way between her panties and her warm flesh, I slipped a finger between her outer folds, feeling my dick harden instantly. I had to keep my own reaction hidden from her, though. She couldn’t know the power she had over me.

Continuing to stroke her, I watched her fight for control of her own body, but it was a battle she couldn’t win. “Do you like that?” I asked her, already knowing the answer.

“Yes.” Her eyes were closed, her head tilted back.

For some reason, her response irritated me. Did she even mean it? Sure, her body was responding to me, but what about her mind? I wanted to consume her, but was I purely catnip for her? Was she just getting off on me because she could?

Taking hold of her chin with my free hand, I lifted her face to look at me. Her eyes flew open. “Why the fuck are you here, Elisa?” I demanded.

Her soft whispered answer infuriated me. “I just want to make you happy.”

“Bullshit!” Pulling my hand out of her panties, I slapped her hard across the cheek. Her head snapped to the side, and she let out a gasp of surprise and pain. “That’s fucking bullshit, Elisa.”

She wasn't here to make me happy. What kind of a fucking moron did she think I was? She wasn't submitting to me—she was doing what her daddy wanted her to do, like she probably always had for her entire fucking life.

The thought of how good it would feel to know she was mine to command was quickly pushed away because right now it didn't matter. She was a fucking La Rosa, only here to serve one purpose—to help her family with whatever fucking plan Alexander had in mind now.

Raising a hand to her reddened cheek, she looked at me with confusion in her eyes. I didn't have time for any of this though. “Listen, bitch. Now is the time for you to go. If you want to run away, do it right now. Because if you stay, you belong to me in every fucking way imaginable. And what you got tonight is just a small taste of what your life will be like.”

I lowered my eyes to her shredded dress, implying she'd get more of that and the love tap I'd given her across the face.

Elisa stared at me. I could tell she was afraid, that she was weighing her options. Which would be worse, staying with the unknown monster or running back to the one she'd lived with her entire life?

*Just let her fucking go!* If she left, I wouldn't have her hanging around distracting me from the work I needed to do.

But if she stayed... I'd not only have her father's promise of protection, but I'd also have her. And even if she never quite let go of doing what her father wanted and fully submitted to me, well, that didn't mean I couldn't punish her pussy while she was here.

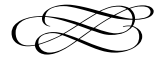
At the moment, she was leverage, though. If her old man thought me keeping her here with me meant that he couldn't strike, well, that would give me an opening to do what was necessary to make sure all hell broke loose in Chicago the moment he turned his back for just one moment.

So... maybe there were reasons I wanted her to stay after all.

Her blue eyes bored right through my skull, her chin raised in defiance, the red welt on her face beginning to fade. “I’m staying.”

Slowly, a crooked grin crept across my face. Menacing as I was when I was riding the high of possessing someone, I didn’t make her flinch. “Good. That’s fine. We’ll just find a room with a lock on the outside.” Her eyes widened slightly, though she tried to hide it. “In this house, that’s not a problem.”

## CHAPTER 14



Warm water surrounded me as I sank deeper into the bathtub, trying to drown my sorrows if I couldn't drown myself.

I'd only been at the Petrov mansion overnight, but already, I felt like I was in a gilded cage. The room Daemon had escorted me to after our encounter in the study was lovely. A large four-poster bed with a nice cherry finish sat between two large windows, with huge nightstands on either side in a matching finish. The bedding was soft and comfortable in a bright lavender that made the room light and airy, surprising for a mobster's house. There was a nice sitting area with a bookcase, a vanity, and a dresser. Noticeably missing was a television, and he had promptly confiscated my phone.

I hadn't slept well, despite the comfortable bed. Tossing and turning, my body and mind wouldn't rest as I went over and over the conversation I'd had with him. My flesh continued to sizzle in every place he'd touched me, especially my dripping wet pussy. Only having his fingers graze my outer folds hadn't been enough. Despite being afraid of the man and hating him when he'd slapped me, I'd wanted him to fuck me so badly. For five years, I'd done nothing but crave his touch. Instead, he'd stripped me to my underwear and then dragged me down the hallway, depositing me right into the birdcage I'd been expecting.

At least it was comfortable and had an attached bath. The tub was deep, big enough for two, and early this morning, a nice butler named Janis had brought me some clothing, along

with breakfast, and some luxury items like the bubble bath I was using now. I wished it had been Daemon to come in and see me, but so far, I hadn't even caught a glimpse of him.

Sitting in water up to my chin, I was alone with my thoughts, contemplating what the hell was wrong with me. Most good little girls were terrified of the monster beneath their bed, but I wanted this one to consume me, to lick me up and swallow me whole.

Was I demented? Was my mind so unbalanced that I wasn't even aware enough of what was good for me to understand that this was a quick way to meet a painful, untimely death? I didn't know for sure how to describe what was happening inside of me, but I had never felt more alive and in control of my destiny than when Daemon Petrov was commanding me.

On the surface, it made little sense. I couldn't reason through it. Nevertheless, giving myself over to him completely was by far the most satisfying thing I had ever done, and I wanted to do it again and again—until it killed me. Like a drug I knew was fucking me up on the inside, I continuously longed to let him crawl into my veins, consuming me from the inside out.

Janis had mentioned Daemon had errands to run today. That had to be some kind of code for syndicate business. Imagining Daemon in a grocery store, pushing around a cart, collecting milk and eggs almost made me laugh. It wasn't as if the man was out picking up the dry cleaning, though he most certainly might be hanging someone out to dry.

Lathering up a loofah, I cleaned myself off with the vanilla body wash Janis had given me, wondering what I was missing at work. I had planned on really sinking my teeth in, learning as much as I could, before I passed the bar and became a real attorney. Then, I could truly make a name for myself and leave my family and all of their shit behind.

Every moment I spent in this house was just another reminder that I no longer controlled my own destiny. If

Daemon didn't want me to go back to work, I wouldn't go back to work. It was as simple as that.

Sighing, I rinsed off and extracted myself from the now cooling bath water. I had no idea what to do with myself once I was out of the tub. Without my phone or a TV, I was limited to sleeping, thinking, or reading. None of the books on the shelf had looked particularly interesting when I perused them earlier, and a nap seemed out of the question. I was tired since I hadn't slept much last night, but every time I closed my eyes, I saw Daemon's face.

Drying off, I put on a pair of silk panties and a luxurious satin robe Janis had also brought me. The fabric felt nice against my skin. It was certainly better than any of the expensive tracksuits or pajamas I had back home.

I made my way into the bedroom and sat down at the vanity. Janis had given me some interesting beauty products. Most of them were brands I'd heard of but didn't use, things my mother would've liked. I wondered if Lillian had anything to do with his choices. Would she take an interest in her son's plaything?

Probably not. After all, Daemon didn't seem too interested in his new toy. He hadn't come by at all today, and the soft light filtering in between the blinds told me the sun was beginning to go down. I glanced at the clock next to my bed and saw it was almost six.

Just then, the door clicked open. In the mirror, I saw his reflection behind me. Looking hot as hell in a similar black suit to the one he had on the night before, his hair slightly disheveled, he took a few steps toward me, the permanent scowl on his face no surprise to me.

What was a surprise were the long-stemmed red roses he grasped in his hand. My eyes widened slightly as I tried to surmise what this was about. He was no cliché, like Dave, who would try to be sweet, especially after a fight. No, if Daemon Petrov was bringing me roses, it wasn't an apology.

That was when I noticed the thorns.



“Get up.”

Immediately, I did as I was told, turning to face him. Instinct told me to hold my robe closed at the top since I wasn't wearing a bra, but I kept my hands at my side, waiting.

Daemon reached over and grabbed the belt of my robe, pulling it free, then pushed the fabric off my shoulders. Like my dress the night before, it fell to the floor, leaving me standing before him in only my panties, which were growing wetter by the moment.

His eyes roamed over my nipples. Hardened by his gaze, they longed for his touch. His expression told me that he liked what he saw, but it was only a slight shift of his eyes that gave him away. The scowl stayed firmly in place.

“Well, at least you brought me flowers before you fuck me.” I gave him a nervous giggle, but he didn't think my joke was funny. If anything, the comment made him angrier. I should learn to keep my fucking mouth closed.

“Turn the fuck around.”

Once again, I did as he said, spinning to face my own reflection in the mirror. He dropped all but one of the roses onto the floor, and then, using it like a whip, he flung the stem across my back.

The thorns bit into my flesh, leaving me gasping, my mouth hanging open as tears stung my eyes. Intense, like a blinding flash of lightning, the sting lingered, but it also caused my core to tighten, that familiar ache growing. “What the fuck?” I mumbled, still unable to comprehend why he had done that.

“Shut your fucking mouth.” He did it again, and once more I felt my flesh ignite in pain, my skin scratched by the barbs. “I don't want to hear another word out of your mouth until you're ready to tell me the truth about what the fuck you're doing here.”

Biting down on my bottom lip, I stared at his reflection in the mirror, not sure what to say. How could I answer that for him when I didn't know myself?

“La Rosa means the rose,” he reminded me. As the stem bit into my back again, he asked, “Do you wanna be my little rose?”

*I'll be anything you want.* “You’re going to leave scars on me,” I reminded him.

Moving toward me, he discarded the rose and spun me around to face him, one finger lifting up my chin. I stared into his dark orbs, trembling with fear and anticipation. “What’s that, Rose? You don’t think you’re capable of leaving scars?”

Not knowing how to answer that, I asked him, “What do you want from me, Daemon?”

His mouth moved to mine in a hungry kiss, the desire masking the pain from my back even when his hands ground against the tender lines on my skin. Opening wide for him, I pressed against his body, feeling his thick cock between us. At the moment, all I wanted was to bring the agony of five years of longing for him to an end.

Reaching for his belt, I fumbled with it, needing to get to him. He let me unbuckle it, unzipping his pants and sliding my hand down inside his briefs. His dick was just as long and thick as I remembered it.

Grabbing me by the hair, he pushed me down to my knees. I went willingly. When he drew his cock out of his pants, my mouth opened wide, taking as much of him in as I could. He kept his hand on the back of my head, and within seconds, he was throat fucking me so hard, I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want to, though—I just wanted him inside of me, one way or another.

Swallowing down his salty precum, I slurped as quickly as I could, trying to satisfy him. My pussy was on fire, my thighs slick with need. If this was all I could have of him, it would be enough, but I wanted him inside of my cunt so badly, I began to whimper.

“You want me to fuck you?” he asked between grunts. I couldn’t answer with my mouth, so I looked up at him, a pleading look in my eyes.

Moving my hands as precisely as I could, I tried to reach for his shirt, intending to unbutton it so we could move to the bed, but he stopped me, grabbing my wrists with one hand. His other still tangled in my hair, he lifted me off the floor and moved me backward until I slammed into the wall. My scratches screamed at me, but the moment his mouth found mine again, all of that was gone.

Holding my wrists above my head, Daemon tore my panties off and pushed his pants further out of the way before lifting my ass so that my leg was wrapped around his waist. Then, he slammed inside me, forcing me against the wall so hard the pictures began to shake.

Wild animals fucking in a primal fashion, our bodies moved together, a mix of pain and pleasure overwhelming me. Within seconds, my pussy began to spasm around him, years of need culminating in a few moments of ecstasy.

When Daemon began to grunt, my eyes locked on his. Sweat poured off our foreheads as we rested against one another. For a moment, I felt like I completely understood him, like all of the walls he'd built around himself were gone, and it was just him and me and nothing else in the universe. He tightened up and then pounded into me a few more times before warmth spread through my core as his seed shot inside of me. *Good thing I'm on the pill.*

As soon as he was done, the spell was broken. He pushed off me and fixed his pants, not saying a word. Once he was fully dressed, he gave me one last glare and then stalked out of my room—leaving me bleeding and alone.

He left the roses where they were.

## CHAPTER 15



## DAEMON

Bishop's Cheese Factory hadn't produced a single slice of cheese in over twenty years. Yet, every time I walked into the warehouse in the industrial area of town, I immediately noticed it still stank of rancid cheddar. Somehow, the stench had worked its way into the concrete flooring, into the walls, into every surface of the massive structure. If it didn't make such a goddamn good cover for our weapons assembly plant, I might consider torching it and moving elsewhere. Given the circumstances, I did my best to ignore the foul smell and headed inside with Vin beside me, looking for Dezzy.

"You look pissy this morning," my brother noted.

"I always look pissy." We walked past rows of old machinery, rusted and broken from years of disregard, and headed toward the back where the real work took place now.

"True. But you look even more pissier than usual." My brother had a toothpick hanging out of his mouth for no good reason, so just to prove his point, I yanked it out and tossed it across the room. "The fuck?"

"Guess you're right," I mumbled. He swore at me again but otherwise let it go.

Vin had a point, though. I was pissier than usual. One would think that finally fucking the angel I'd been dreaming about for five years would make me happy, but it hadn't. Not for the long haul, anyway.

After my encounter with Elisa, I had gone back to my room and taken a long shower, trying to wash her scent off my

skin, trying to free my body from the feel of her. I couldn't let her get into my head. But thoughts of her wouldn't go away. How the fuck was I supposed to concentrate on work when that girl was messing with my mind like this? Remaining strong and in charge was essential.

Yet, I'd let her rock my world and make me lose control. It couldn't happen again.

Not when I was trying to solidify myself as the head of the family. My mother kept sticking her nose in the family business—someplace she didn't need to be. It wasn't as if she did any of the killing, after all, so the way I saw it, she shouldn't have much of a say in anything else.

But now that she'd married Alexander, who the fuck knew what was going to happen? Would he be trying to involve himself in our shit, too? What about his sons?

“We need to figure out what the hell is going on with the La Rosas,” I mentioned to Vin. “Do your thing, brother, and see what you can find out. Are they planning to stay here in town, or will they be heading home now that the wedding is over?”

Vin nodded. “I'll see what I can figure out. So far, though, Mom ain't talking.”

“I know. She seems to think keeping us in the dark is helpful somehow.” I had no idea why our mother wasn't just being straight with us. It was almost as if she was trying to fuck things up for the syndicate.

We finally found Dezzy in the back of the warehouse where a bunch of our workers were putting together the parts and pieces of munitions we'd had smuggled in. Glancing around the warehouse, I saw that we only had a few more crates to unload, which meant we were due for more to come in.

I'd check on that shipment, but I had other matters to attend to with Dezzy first. Quickly looking things over and seeing that operations were functioning as normal, I turned back to my brother.

“Hey, Daemon. You meet Yuri yet?” he asked, gesturing at a kid who looked like he wasn’t a day over seventeen. The guy was wearing a nice suit, though, looking all spiffy with a big goofy grin on his face. “He’s the new guy I was telling you about. So fresh off the boat, he still smells like *ukha*.”

Yuri laughed. “My mother makes the best *ukha*.”

His accent was thick, but his English was pretty good. Personally, I hated the traditional fish soup they were talking about, but I had heard good things about this guy. Extending my hand, I said, “Nice to meet you, Yuri.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Petrov. My family is honored that I have found a place in your syndicate, and I will do great things for you and the Petrov family.” His smile only widened as he gripped my hand in an impressively tight handshake.

“Can you believe this baby face has a wife and daughter at home?” Dezzzy pounded Yuri playfully in the stomach, causing him to release my hand as he ducked back, laughing. “He looks like a kid himself, huh?”

“I was just thinking you couldn’t be more than seventeen,” I admitted.

“Seventeen?” His laughter grew louder. “No, no. I assure you, despite my youthful appearance, I am a man. I just turned twenty-two last month.”

“Oh, well, then,” I replied sarcastically, “you’re practically a *dedushka*.”

“Well, no, I’m not a grandfather yet, but I’m not a child,” he assured me, his disposition much too happy for our line of work.

That was what had intrigued me about him when Dezzzy had mentioned the new guy a few days ago, though. He’d said he’d never met someone so delighted to be a part of our syndicate, but when he saw him in action, the man was fearless, leaping into any conflict without a second thought. Most of us were angry at the world all the time, and not even a good fight could bring us out of that. But Yuri? He was

special. Maybe it was having a wife and kid to go home to that made him more like a normal human than the rest of us bastards.

Vin was clearly confused by him since my brother's only two mindsets were fucking crazy and beyond fucking crazy. "What brought you to Chicago?" he asked, his forehead crinkled in confusion as he tried to figure the happy bastard out.

"I wanted a better life for my wife and daughter. My little one is only a few months old, so leaving was hard on them. My wife didn't want to come, and she doesn't approve of my work, but I tell her, the Petrovs take care of their people. We will be well provided for now that I am here. She only grumbles at me, but she will learn."

Having lost interest halfway through Yuri's response, Vin only mumbled and then looked away. I rolled my eyes at my brother. "I hope your wife will be happy with your paycheck, even if she doesn't like your job," I told him.

"When I buy her a diamond ring as big as an American football, then she will be happy." He laughed and slapped his leg, making Dezzy and me chuckle, too. It had been a while since I laughed, so I appreciated it.

The laughter faded, reminding me of why I had come there to begin with. "Dezzy, what's the story with the shipment we've got coming in? Is everything on schedule?"

"Well, I've got good news and bad news." My brother pushed his hands down deep into the pockets of his slacks and rocked back and forth. "Good news is that the cops have no idea. We're still on schedule for delivery tomorrow. The bad news is, some of the guys from the drug warehouse have told me they've noticed some weird guys they didn't recognize nosing around."

My eyebrows immediately lifted. "Who the fuck would that be?"

"No one knows," he said with a shrug. "We're trying to figure it out."



“Shit.” Running my hand along my jawline, I thought about the possibilities. Only one thing made sense. “I bet the fucking La Rosas are going to hit the shipment.”

“I don’t know, Daemon, but word of the marriage has spread like wildfire. Everyone in town and beyond wants to know what the fuck is going on. It may be someone else trying to take advantage of our distraction.” Dezzy seemed to have a lot of information on this, but not enough.

The underworld ran on gossip. This could be a big problem. “What are people saying?”

“Some of those bastards are saying the La Rosas are in charge now.”

Eyes wide, I took a hasty step toward my brother. He backed away, his hands flying up. I took a deep breath. I shouldn’t hit Dezzy for repeating what he’d heard. “Who the fuck said that?”

“Not sure who all has said it, but my sources say Charlie Pritchett’s been running his mouth down at Ringo’s,” he replied.

“Well, well, guess I know what bar I’ll be hitting up later,” Vin said, polishing his fingernails on his shoulder.

Leave it to Vin to be worried about one loudmouth sounding off instead of the actual problem at hand. “We need to delay that shipment,” I told Dezzy. “Let’s get some extra guys down there to the other warehouse and put them far enough out that they can see who the fuck is snooping around. That way, if someone is watching us or someone comes at us, we’ll have enough warning. If something goes down, we’ve gotta take one alive to get some information from them. Whoever the fuck these new players on the scene are, we’ll burn them alive. And if it is the fucking La Rosas, their entire family is going to wish they’d never heard the name Petrov.”

*That includes the little cunt who’s been distracting me.*

“Sure, Daemon,” Dezzy told me. “That should be no problem. We can get some guys out there tonight, make sure

they understand what we're looking for, and have 'em report back if they see anything."

Nodding, I made sure he understood me clearly. "Whatever they do, don't let them engage with anyone they see poking around. We can't trust any of our men to go into a fight like that without at least one of us there to direct things. Otherwise, they might fail to get a prisoner. We need someone we can force to talk. Tipping our hand too soon will only let them know what we're up to, and then, they'll back off before we can figure out who it is for sure and what they want."

While it only made sense to me that it would be the La Rosas, as Dezzy said, other syndicates might think we are weak at the moment, thanks to this sham wedding, so they might decide now was the time to try to move in on our territory. If so, we'd have to figure out who it was. My hand immediately went to the pocket of my suit where I had my little friend Justice tucked away. Rarely did that piece ever fail to make someone talk. When it did, it was usually because I punched too hard.

"I hear you, Daemon," Dezzy said with a nod. "I'll make sure to only send in our best guys so it won't get fucked up."

"I would be happy to step in and volunteer for the stakeout," Yuri said, practically giddy with anticipation. "Let me show you bosses what I can really do, huh?"

Smirking at him, I considered whether or not I should send him. At the moment, I had bigger plans for the guy, but it might be a way to let him dip his toes in the water. "I'll leave that up to Dezzy," I decided. "Now that that's settled, Vin, grab a couple of your hardest guys. We've got more work to do."

At my words, Vin practically bounced out of his skin. Like a dog taunted with a bone, he stared at me wide-eyed, ready to pounce. "Where are we going, brother?"

Gesturing for him to follow me, I replied, "I think you know where we are going."

“Yes!” Vin followed along behind me, cracking his knuckles, ready to exact some vengeance. We would show everyone the Petrovs were still running this fucking town.

## CHAPTER 16



The scratches on my back were ugly. They didn't hurt much, but they didn't look very good either. Glancing over my shoulder at my bare back in the mirror, I pulled my panties down a bit to look at the red lines left by the thorns on my bottom. How many times had Daemon whipped me with the roses anyway? It hadn't seemed like that many, but I saw five distinct marks.

Three of them were already beginning to fade, but the other two were a bit red and puffy. It probably wasn't something I should mess around with. Putting a dress on that hung loosely and foregoing a bra, I decided it was time to do something about it.

The room had a phone. I'd discovered that within a few hours of being left alone in my new dwellings. But it only allowed me to call one person, so it was essentially useless for most purposes. It would be helpful now, though.

Gingerly sitting down on the edge of the bed, I picked up the handset and dialed. The phone rang only twice before a familiar voice filled my ear. "Yes, Miss Elisa?" Janis said, his formal tone also infused with kindness.

"Hi, Janis. I cut myself. It's not bleeding or anything, but I was thinking I might need some disinfectant and bandages. Is that something you could help me with please?" I didn't want to tell him the truth, that Daemon had done the damage.

"Of course," he said quickly. "Do you need some pain medication as well?"

“No, no, nothing like that,” I told him quickly. “It’s not hurting. I just don’t want it to get infected.”

“Very well then. I’ll be right up, Miss.” Janis hung up the phone before I could thank him. He was always so kind to me. I appreciated how well he treated me.

Leaning back against the headboard was a bit uncomfortable because one of the puffy scratches was across my shoulder blade, but I’d be all right. It wasn’t like I was unfamiliar with pain.

Not long after the call ended, a slight knock on the door alerted me that my requests had arrived. “Come in,” I called, noting the sound of the key in the door. Daemon had actually locked me in here. Where did he even think I might go?

The door opened, but it wasn’t the kindhearted butler standing there with the first-aid supplies. No, it was someone I hadn’t expected at all. Trying not to gasp, I plastered a smile on my face, hoping it looked friendly and not terrified as Lillian walked into my room.

“Hello there, dear,” she said, waltzing in and nudging the door closed behind her with her foot because her hands were full. It seemed she’d brought the entire medicine cabinet with her. “Janis said that you cut yourself? Sounded like a job for a mother to me.”

I found it odd that the butler would mention something like that to my new stepmother, but I didn’t question it aloud. Was it possible she was somehow listening in on our phone call?

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I assured her. “I do appreciate the help, though. Thank you for bringing that in.”

“I’m happy to help.” Her tone was surprisingly motherly. It shouldn’t have been too surprising, considering how many sons she had. She’d probably bandaged a scraped knee or two in her time. But I wasn’t her little boy, and I had no idea why she would be interested in helping me.

“I can manage,” I insisted. For one thing, I didn’t want her to see the nature of my cuts. She’d ask questions, and telling her that I’d had rough sex with her oldest son, after he’d

whipped me with thorny roses, would be more than a little embarrassing.

“Please, Elisa. You’re our guest, and like it or not, you’re my stepdaughter now. No reason to be shy. I’m happy to help. Now, where is your cut, dear?” Her smile seemed genuine as she set the products down on my nightstand.

Staring into her eyes for a few seconds, I didn’t blink as I contemplated how to tell her. Eventually, I found my voice, weakly admitting, “On my back. And on my bottom.”

Her face didn’t change at all. “Okay. There’s more than one. No problem. You know, around here people are always needing to be patched up. Thank goodness it’s not a bullet wound.” She laughed, and I smiled up at her, but the thought of someone getting shot wasn’t amusing to me. “Let me just unzip your dress then, dear. Why don’t you flip over onto your tummy?”

My mouth moved wordlessly, but we both knew I wasn’t going to argue with her. She could call me a guest in her home or her stepdaughter or whatever, but the truth of the situation was that I now belonged to her son because of the agreement she’d helped my father work out with him.

With a loud sigh, I did as she asked, lying down on the bed on my stomach. She unzipped my dress and exposed my back. Lillian made a clicking noise in the back of her throat. “Looks painful,” she mumbled.

Thankfully, she knew better than to ask what had happened. She had to know I didn’t do this to myself, and only one other person could have done it. Maybe she was feeling bad that her son could act so savagely.

I saw no reason to admit that, at the time, I’d liked it.

“This may sting a little.” Lillian placed something cold and wet on my back. Closing my eyes, I thought about something else as the cuts did begin to sting. She blew on them as she went, trying to soothe my skin. When she pulled my panties down a bit to get to the one on my bottom, she did so without comment.

“Do you know what Petrov means, dear?” she asked as she began to apply some sort of ointment to the cuts that numbed the pain.

“Uhm, no,” I admitted. Maybe I should’ve known, but it never crossed my mind to think about it.

“It means rock,” she explained. “Fitting, don’t you think?”

Saying nothing, I lay there, staring at the door to my right, my head turned to the side. I wanted to leave. Thoughts of what would’ve happened if I would’ve run away at the wedding, as I’d contemplated, filled my mind. Then, it wouldn’t matter if I was stuck between a rock and a hard place now.

Undeterred by my lack of response, Lillian continued. “That’s what we have to deal with as women living in crime families, you know? The men in our life are all like rocks. Hard, unyielding. Often stuck in one place and refusing to budge.”

Listening to what she said, I could tell that it made sense, though I’d never had any thoughts of that nature before. Growing up with brothers, my father, and all of his friends taking part in the syndicate, I did everything I could to keep clear of it, to stay free from the danger that always surrounded me, but Lillian seemed to be saying that wasn’t the right approach. I tuned in, my thoughts moving immediately to Daemon and how to earn his trust.

“Hard against hard doesn’t work,” she continued, placing bandages on each of my cuts. “If you try to be hard yourself, something has to give. Something has to break. No, the only way to influence men of their nature—men like Daemon, his father, your father—is to do so with a soft touch.”

I felt her adjust my clothing, zipping up my dress, so I flipped over so that I was looking at her, sitting up, my knees still on the bed.

“Soft, careful control. That’s what it takes when you’re up against a rock like a Petrov, darling.” Lillian reached out and



ran her hand through my hair, stopping to caress my cheek. “Trust me. It’s the best way.”

Not knowing what to say to her, I only stared back. Why was she telling me all of this? What did she expect of me?

Lillian sat down next to me on the bed, smoothing out her green dress as she did so. She was put together, as always. Her earrings alone must’ve cost a small fortune. Emeralds surrounded by diamonds, the green matching her dress perfectly.

“Softly guide them when you can. Let them think it’s their idea. Always from their side, but never in their face.” She patted my leg the way that my own mother might’ve done. “They have to believe it’s their world, and you’re just living in it.”

Instinctively, I shook my head. “But I don’t want to live in it,” I reminded her. “I don’t want to be part of this world.”

Lillian scoffed at me, her expression still kind though cynical. “Well, you’re in it, dear, and I can’t imagine you getting out of it any time soon.”

“But I want to go back to work.” My heart began to race with the thought that I might never get to do that. “I’ve just started a new job.”

“My understanding is that you weren’t really there long enough to accomplish much—yet. Your father has arranged for you to take some time off, citing the wedding as the reason. I’m sure that you’ll be able to start again whenever the time is right. But for now, you’re a part of this family, Elisa. So you have to be strong. You seem like a strong girl to me, darling. But in this situation, it’s the strength of endurance that matters most.”

If I opened my mouth, chances were that tears would start to fall from my eyes, so I said nothing.

Lillian continued. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to reach out to me. I know our situation is strange, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t be here for you.” She squeezed my hand. “Let me know if I can help.”

Instinctively, I thanked her, and she continued to smile at me, but it seemed odd, like it wasn't quite genuine. And why would it be? Until recently, I was the daughter of her enemy. Just because there'd been a wedding, that didn't mean that I could trust her completely.

Getting up from the bed, Lillian gathered up the medical supplies. "I think it might be best if you and I keep this between us girls," she told me. "Daemon worries about useless things. If you tell him I was here, he'll ask too many questions. Sometimes it's best if he doesn't know. Keeping secrets from men like ours is necessary—often."

"All right," I told her. "I won't say anything to him." I wasn't sure how I'd explain the bandages if he saw them, but I was pretty flexible, so maybe I could fool him into thinking I'd put them on myself. If he even asked. I hadn't seen him in a while.

Lillian gave me one last smile and left the room, leaving me all alone in my lonely room again.

Going over everything she said, I did feel slightly better about my situation. Perhaps I wasn't in this completely alone after all. Maybe Lillian was someone I could talk to when the monster got ugly.

I hadn't been sitting there long when the door opened again, knocking against the wall and jarring me to attention.

"Get some fucking shoes on," Daemon demanded, clearly in a mood. "We're going for a ride."

Immediately, I got up off the bed, found some shoes, and followed him out the door.

A few minutes later, I found myself in the passenger seat of his sports car, the top down, the wind whipping through my hair as he drove like a maniac.

Terrified that the truce had ended and we were going someplace where no one would ever find me, I finally managed to ask him, "Where are we going?" What if my father had broken the agreement, and he was driving me out of the city to kill me?

Shouting above the wind, Daemon yelled, “To keep a promise.”

## CHAPTER 17



## DAEMON

Having Elisa in the car next to me as I barreled down the highway was exhilarating and made me want to drive even faster. The speedometer cranked up well past the speed limit. Only traffic from commuters making their way home from their office jobs occasionally forced me to slow down when I couldn't snake my way around them.

Clearly, Elisa was nervous, at least at first, before she asked me where we were going. The autumn wind whipped through her long white hair, blowing it out behind her like a long, glossy curtain. The woman was fucking gorgeous, but she didn't even seem to know that.

When I told her I was going to keep a promise, she seemed to relax only slightly. I had no intention of telling her where we were going, but I wanted her to see what I was capable of in a scenario where the chances of her getting hurt were slim.

No, tonight I would be the only one inflicting any pain.

Pulling into the parking lot at Ringo's, I checked my phone to see that Vin was about five minutes out with the guys he'd gathered up. I took my time getting out of the car, putting the top up so that no one hanging around this shithole would mess with it. Storming into the bar and taking care of business on my own was an option I wasn't afraid of, but I knew my brother would freak out if I didn't wait for him. I didn't plan on letting him get many shots in, but he'd want to at least watch. Vin loved the sight of blood.

Ringo's was a dump. The building was old and dilapidated, with peeling gray paint outside and broken windows. Trash and cigarette butts littered the sidewalk as we got out and walked to the front where a pink neon "Open" sign flickered erratically in the darkness.

Scanning the group of shady-looking individuals who loitered near the entrance, smoking and shouting at each other, I dared any of them to approach me. Recognizing me immediately, they scattered, like the rats who scurried around the edge of the building. The smell of urine hit our nostrils, and I saw Elisa grimace, swallowing back bile.

It made me smile.

The inside wasn't much better. The sound of the bell above the door ringing was swallowed up by the loud shouts of patrons, yelling at one another from across the space. The dim light revealed a cramped, cluttered space filled with broken tables and chairs, and a long bar that stretched the length of the room. The air was thick with the smoke of cheap cigarettes, making Elisa gag again.

I hardly had time to enjoy it as my eyes fell on the face of the man I'd been looking for.

Charlie Pritchett sat at the bar, drinking a beer, his eyes glued to the tiny television on the bartender's side of the bar, its cracked screen making it difficult to see the commentator giving a report on a sports channel.

Elisa's hand encircled my arm as she pressed up against me. I shook her off, not needing her hanging all over me, even if the warmth of her curvy body felt nice. She staggered a bit but regained her footing, sticking close as I made my way across the room.

The sound of familiar villainous laughter behind me let me know without even turning around that Vin was on the scene.

Charlie hadn't noticed us yet, but several other people had. Murmurs of swear words filled the room as it otherwise quieted down, and people began to back up, out of our way.

Seeing them react that way only fueled my confidence. If assholes like Charlie were going to say that I was no longer in charge, I would do what it took to make sure everyone was aware that I was still in complete control of this city.

If necessary, I'd break as many noses and shatter as many teeth as I needed to in order to ensure there was no more talk of La Rosa or anyone else moving into our territory. At the moment, everyone else seemed to understand why my brother and I were there and didn't want any part of it.

Charlie Pritchett finally turned around about the same time that my elbows sank down on the sticky bar, my ass occupying the stool next to him.

"Oh, fuck," he mumbled and quickly looked away.

Ringo stepped over, a dingy white towel tossed over his shoulder. "Hey, Mr. Petrov," he said politely, knowing what was good for him. "Can I get you a whiskey? Shot of rum?"

I made a gesture to Ringo to let him know that I'd take the usual, and he turned around to fix me up. Then, I returned my attention to Charlie. "How's it going, Pritchett?"

Sweat poured from his forehead as he glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and quickly looked away.

Charlie Pritchett was a large man, probably ten years older than me with the beer belly that attested to him spending most nights here in Ringo's shithole. Wearing a dirty white T-shirt and jeans, with a tattered flannel tossed over the top, he was a cross between a washed-up grunge rocker and a truck driver who'd taken a wrong turn. Charlie was about to find out exactly how off-course he'd gotten.

Finishing off the drink Ringo had given me, I caught the bar owner's eyes. "Mind if we take care of a little business?"

With his dirty dishrag shoved down inside of a streaked beer glass, Ringo shook his head. "Of course not, boss. You know you're always welcome to use my place however you want to."

"Good man." Vin punched the top of the bar a few times, all worked up. With each thump of his fist, Charlie jumped.

Grabbing Charlie by the back of his collar, I hauled him off the barstool and began to move him in the direction of the door in the back of the bar.

“I don’t want no trouble, Mr. Petrov,” Charlie whined, dragging his feet as he spun around, looking for someone to come help him. No one in the bar was fucked in the head enough to do that, though. He was on his own, and he knew it.

Vin and his group of jackals followed us, all of them cracking their knuckles and limbering up. I’d let them get a blow or two in if there was enough meat left for them to take a shot after I was done, but for now, Charlie was all mine.

Without looking, I knew Elisa was coming. No way in hell was she going to stick around in Ringo’s bar without me, even though none of those bastards would dare touch a woman who came in with me. But more than that, I could feel her presence, the warmth of her body, radiating off her as we crossed the floor and pushed into the back room.

“Come on, Mr. Petrov, sir,” Charlie begged as I slammed him down into a metal chair beneath a single bare bulb hanging in the storage room. The smell of urine lingered here as well, but blood had soaked into the concrete floor enough that its stench was the most noticeable. “Please. Whatever you heard—”

His words were clipped short when I slammed my fist into his cheek, sending his head spiraling to his right. Spit and blood flung across the room. He screeched like a little girl might if I’d punched her in the face.

“I hear you been saying you’ve lost faith in my syndicate, Charlie. That you think that other people are moving into our territory.” I waited for his eyes to return to me.

He tried to raise his hand to hold it against his jaw, already swelling, but Vin went to work, pulling his wrists behind his back and tying his arms around the chair with a length of rope from a shelf in the corner. Ringo truly was accommodating, which was why we made sure no one fucked with him.



“I didn’t say nothin’,” Charlie stammered, trying to speak around his wounded jaw. “You gotta believe me.”

“I don’t.” My left hook sent his head spinning in the other direction, connecting with his eye and splitting his eyebrow. Seeing no reason to get my little friend out of my pocket to waste on an asshole like him, I let my actual knuckles do the talking.

A few more punches to his face, and he began to look like a pack of hamburger at the butcher shop, his face raw, red, and bloodied.

Another jab with my right, and Charlie spit out several of his teeth. Tears rolled down his cheeks, his begging growing more intense.

Every word he said, every plea he made, pissed me off even more. Moving to body shots, I punched his fat gut over and over again, intermittently slamming my fist into his chest and limbs, wanting to hurt him in as many places as possible.

The entire time I was tearing him up, Vin stood behind him, shouting at him. “You should have known better than to fuck with the Petrovs, you dumb shit! What the fuck is the matter with you?”

My brother began to laugh like a maniac, especially when the blood truly began to flow. Vin was fucked in the head, that was for damn sure. I was shocked he was content to stand there and wait for me to finish.

Once I began to perspire a bit myself, I took a step back. The man was unrecognizable. Every orifice in his head spewed blood. Half of his teeth were on the floor, and his nose protruded at an awkward angle. His shirt was covered in blood and vomit from when I’d hit him in the stomach too many times in a row. He didn’t even look human.

That was when I heard a gasp from back by the door.

My eyes went to Elisa. I fully expected to see her horrified, cowering in the corner, covering her eyes. Imagine my surprise when I saw her staring intently, not at the man in the chair but at me. Her teeth fixed on her bottom lip, her hands

were intertwined in front of her, those lengthy legs crossed as she balanced on her high heels.

Was this turning her on? Did seeing me beat the living fuck out of an overweight bastard make her hot for me?

If so, perhaps I was done with this fucker after all. Maybe it was time for me to abandon this endeavor and let Vin do what he would with this asshole and anyone else in Ringo's bar who might think it was okay to talk shit about our family.

Slamming my fist into his jaw one more time, I said, "Charlie, I've got some good news for you. I'm done. I hope you've learned your lesson. However, that just means it's Vin's turn now."

"No!" Charlie managed to squeak out, staring at me through swollen eyes. "Please."

Chuckling under my breath, I stepped aside. It was sad to think that he would rather let me continue to beat the fuck out of him than know that I was letting my brother take a turn, but I couldn't blame him. Everyone knew my brother was a psycho.

"Can I kill him?" Vin asked, flexing his fingers.

With a shrug, I told him, "I don't give a fuck what you do, Vin. Just make sure the message is clear, all right?"

"You got it, boss." Vin's smile was wide, his eyes unfocused, the crazy look in them intensifying by the moment.

Without another word, I headed toward the door, taking Elisa by the wrist and tugging her along with me. She didn't seem to mind that my knuckles were dripping blood all down her hand as she hurried to keep up with me.

Walking out of the bar, I noticed the silence. No one had left, but they hadn't spoken a word while we were beating the shit out of Charlie either. They knew what was up. I didn't think we'd have to worry about anyone from Ringo's again.

## CHAPTER 18



Daemon's cock was buried in my throat. Sucking and slurping, I ran my tongue up and down his shaft, balancing myself the best I could as I leaned across the console, trying not to get in the way of his driving. But fuck if I couldn't help myself.

The moment he'd dragged me out of the bar and gotten me into the car, he'd kissed me. A deep kiss, full of tongue. Immediately, he'd lit my pussy on fire. I'd already been struggling with the ache, watching him beat the shit out of that bastard who'd been bad-mouthing the family.

Never in my life would I have thought that I would be turned on by something like that. Ordinarily, the sight of blood made me squeamish, and that man's face had looked revolting. But seeing the raw power pouring out of Daemon's muscular body as he slammed his fist into the bastard over and over again had been far too much for me to handle. I'd almost touched myself right then and there in the back room where six of his guys were standing around. Now *that* would've been a show they never would've forgotten.

After the kiss, he'd ripped out of the parking lot so fast, I'd slammed against the car window. Even the pain in my head couldn't stop me from going down on him. He hadn't complained when I'd reached across the console and unzipped his pants, freeing his massive cock. My hand hadn't been enough, though. No, I wanted to taste him. Salty liquid slid down my throat as he got closer and closer to exploding in my mouth.

Picking up my pace, I forgot all about my gag reflex and crammed as much of him into my throat as I could, taking him almost all the way in. One hand on his thigh, the other cupping his balls through his pants, I did my best to bring him to his peak. Granted, we were speeding down the highway now, so this was extremely dangerous. I didn't even have my seatbelt on but I didn't give a fuck. At the moment, if I died, at least I'd die making this man happy.

"Fuck, Elisa," he moaned, the car speeding up with every grunt and groan he produced. I could feel him starting to tighten up, his balls hardening. Daemon bucked his hips against me as I stole a glance at the speedometer. One hundred twenty miles per hour.

*Shit yeah.*

As wet as the danger made me, I needed to finish him off before we spun out of control and crashed into another car or the median. With one last deep suck and slurp, I felt him explode in my mouth, his essence sliding down my throat as my own body reacted to knowing I'd given him such intense pleasure. A ripple of the same feeling spread through me as my pussy spasmed a few times, taking my breath away.

Daemon grabbed me by the back of my hair, pulling me up. "Damn, woman," he mumbled, pushing his dick back into his pants. "What the fuck?"

I had no answer for that. All I could do was wipe my mouth on the back of my hand and sit back in my seat. I should've put my seatbelt on, but at this juncture, what was the point?

The ache between my legs continued to grow now that I'd had a little taste of ecstasy. I wanted him so fucking bad. I hoped, when we got back to his house, he'd fuck me like he had the other night. Pressing two fingers to my panties, I squeezed my legs together, trying to ease the pain, but it didn't work.

Daemon glanced at me out of the side of his eye but didn't say anything, nor did he reach over to help a girl out. My nipples rubbed against the inside of my dress, longing for his

touch. Looking out the window, I tried to think about anything else, but I couldn't stop the pain and yearning.

By the time Daemon pulled into the garage, I was whimpering, rocking back and forth in my seat. Knowing how pathetic I must look, I didn't turn my head to meet his eye, but when he ordered me to get out of the car, I did so quickly.

Daemon didn't wait for me. Walking with his long strides, he had the garage door open before I could even get around the car. We entered the house in tandem, walking down the hallway and up the stairs without a word between us. I followed him up, like a stray dog.

Like a stray dog looking for a leg to hump.

Rather than going to his own room, he headed to mine, flinging the door open so that it hit the wall, like he usually did. I stepped inside, barely having time to close the door behind me before his mouth crushed into mine, stealing my breath away.

Daemon backed me into the door, his hands finding my zipper and tugging it down. Once again, I heard the rip of fabric as he undressed me, but I didn't care. This dress was something Janis had brought me anyway. In fact, I had none of my own clothing here, not even my underwear. Daemon could rip all my clothes off me, and I'd worship him for it.

With his mouth still on mine, he began to work my aching nipples. He wasn't gentle at all as he tugged and kneaded my flesh, lifting them and palming both of my breasts while my back was still pushed up against the cold door.

Remembering how he'd taken me against the wall, I lifted a leg, practically grinding against him, pleading for him to fuck me right now, but he wasn't ready yet, and if there was one thing I'd learned about Daemon, it was that we would play this game by his rules.

Breathless from the deep kisses, when Daemon finally released my mouth to take my breast between his lips, I sucked in air. My hands went to his hair, threading the silky strands through my fingers. I gasped and continued to

whimper with longing until he lifted me off the floor and tossed me on the bed like a rag doll. My hair billowed out around me as I landed on my back, staring up at him.

All I had on were my panties, which were sopping wet by now, and my shoes. I went to kick those off when he said, “No. Leave them.” My feet froze on the bed. Whatever he wanted. As long as he fucked me, I didn’t care.

Daemon kicked off his shoes as he approached, staring at me with eyes so intense, I felt my flesh sizzle beneath his gaze. He stood in front of me unbuckling his belt and tossing it aside. My hand went to my crotch again. This time, just pressing against the damn fabric did nothing. A finger snaked beneath it, finding my opening.

Daemon watched me, but I could tell he disapproved. I needed something inside me. While my tiny finger was nothing compared to his massive cock, I felt like I was about to come undone.

With his pants down around his hips, he pulled his dick out of his boxers and came over to me. “Hands above your head,” he ordered. I raised them, hoping he knew there was no reason to restrain me. I’d do exactly what he wanted if that massive cock was about to be inside me.

He grabbed me by the ankles and spun me around so that my ass was nearly falling off the bed. Then, he tore my panties from my body, leaving them in two pieces. Pressing down on my knees, he exposed me completely.

When he lowered his head, I prayed it would be to taste me. The feeling of his rough tongue dragging along me sent a chill down my spine, even though I was just imagining it—remembering it. He didn’t lick me, though. He only breathed me in and then slid his fingers along my folds.

“Fuck, Elisa. You’re so wet.”

Not knowing what to say, I only whined for him again, keeping my hands up, like he’d said. I wanted to grab his hips and pull him to me, but I knew he wouldn’t be able to resist me now.

Daemon lifted my legs so that they were on my shoulders and thrust into me hard enough that my back arched off the bed. My whimpers quickly turned to grunts, moans, and groans that sounded anything but lady-like as he fucked me hard.

He kept his shirt on with his pants and boxers slipping down more with each thrust. Being naked except for my shoes while he was fully dressed seemed like a power play to me. I didn't care, though. The moment his thick cock entered me, I couldn't make sense of the world anyway. Besides, I'd tried to take his shirt off once before, and he'd stopped me. I had to imagine that was because he had some gnarly scars under there, considering all of the fights he'd been in.

At the moment, nothing mattered but his sweet cock. He hit me in places that had been burning for him since the last time he'd been inside me. Within minutes, he had my pussy spasming around him while my mind completely lost track of everything.

All I could think about was how unbelievable he made my body feel and how critical it was I kept my arms up like he'd told me to. When his head came down to find my breast, my knees now splayed on the bed, it felt amazing having him suck my tit while my arms were up. I wanted to touch him, but I wouldn't do anything without his permission. The last thing I wanted was to disappoint him.

Beneath his shirt, his muscles rippled and bulged with every flex, every thrust of his hips. The outline of his chest was visible against the tight fabric of his white shirt. God, he was a powerful bastard, and not just physically. The authority he'd demonstrated at the bar tonight had proven that a person didn't mess around with Daemon Petrov.

But I got to fuck around with him.

Daemon pounded into me over and over again, and finally, I felt him tightening up again. Though I'd been on the edge of euphoria the entire time, when we came together, it was a hard orgasm for me, the kind that leaves a girl curled in half, her face frozen in a grimace as she fights to inhale. His seed



spilled all through me with no condom between us, but I didn't even care. I was on birth control anyway, so it didn't really matter. No disease would be brave enough to attempt to infect someone like Daemon.

Completely spent, Daemon fell onto my bed, after working his way out of his pants. On top of the blankets, he lay there with his eyes closed in his boxers and shirt. His heart was hammering hard, and he breathed in gasps, like I was still doing.

After a few minutes, I realized he'd fallen asleep. Stunned, I turned to climb beneath my blankets. Still asleep, he moved to accommodate me, pulling me over against him. Beneath my ear, I could feel his heart hammering against his rib cage.

Closing my eyes, I considered what it would be like to sleep this way every night, in the arms of my dark angel, the only man who could ever get this sort of reaction out of my body. A smile fell into place just thinking about him. Yes, he had been my father's enemy at one time, and I still had no idea how any of this was going to play out. But for now, he was mine—and I was his. Always.

## CHAPTER 19



## DAEMON

Sun filtered in through the parted curtains, hitting me in the face. Something was off. The sun shouldn't be able to stream through the windows in my room in such a fashion that it hit me in the eyes.

Blinking a few times, I tried to reach for my phone on the nightstand before I fully opened my eyes, but it wasn't there. My nightstand wasn't where it was supposed to be either.

I realized I wasn't in my bedroom.

Scanning the room, I quickly remembered what had happened the night before. My dick twitched just thinking about how amazing that blow job in the car had been. Then, when I'd spread Elisa's legs wide open and claimed her, fuck, had that been earth-shattering.

But looking at her now, lying next to me, her head on the pillow I'd just been sleeping on, all of the intensity of the sex melted away, and all I saw was a beautiful, innocent girl. Her eyes were closed, her white hair fanning around her, the sunlight glinting off the strands to make her look even more angelic than usual.

She was an angel in a lot of ways. Dragged into this life through a father who never loved or appreciated her, she shouldn't have to put up with any of the shit she was exposed to on a daily basis. And I was just complicating things more by bringing her into my world.

The urge to run my hand along her smooth cheek was overwhelming. She was still naked, the tops of her breasts

peeking out above the blanket she had wrapped around her body. The faint scent of sex and her wet pussy lingered even after all of these hours. If I wanted to, I could take her again right now. I could start fucking her while she was asleep, let her wake up to my cock buried deep inside of her.

But no, I shouldn't do that. As tempting as it was, she was starting to confuse the hell out of me, and I needed to get my head on straight. I should've never allowed myself to fall asleep with her. Sharing a bed with her would make her think we had something intimate growing on—and we didn't.

The girl wasn't here because she'd chosen to be. No, she was only following orders, the way her father demanded. Given the opportunity, she'd waltz out of here right now, go back to her lawyer internship, and walk away from me forever. Sure, the sex was amazing, and she seemed to crave it, but that wouldn't be enough to keep her here if she had her freedom.

For all I knew, she was sent here to spy on me. Or to get into my head and distract me. I couldn't allow myself to succumb to her tricks just because she was hauntingly beautiful.

The tattoo on my arm began to itch. I ignored it. A lot of times, before I found her again, my arm felt like the true Elisa was trapped in there, trying to claw her way out. But that was just as fake as what my mind wanted to think was happening between the two of us.

Even if she were here for the right reasons, I was incapable of giving her what she wanted—what she needed. I didn't have feelings anymore, beyond hate and the thirst for revenge. No, I definitely wasn't capable of loving someone like Elisa La Rosa. At best, she made me vulnerable. At worst, she was a liability. Something they could take from me. A way to hurt me. I didn't need to give anyone a method to get to me.

Still, I'd felt so peaceful last night, during and after the sex, like nothing else mattered. Only her and me. It was a feeling I'd wanted to hang on to, which was why I'd allowed myself to fall asleep curled up next to her.

Was this woman different? Could I find a way to let her in? Let her melt away my rough exterior to see what was buried beneath the surface.

Her sapphire eyes flickered open, landing on my face. I froze, not sure what to do. The moment she registered it was me looking at her, Elisa's face lit up, a genuine smile spreading her lips. She was truly happy to see me here.

It felt so good, it hurt. Like a knife to the heart, something I'd witnessed, something I'd inflicted, but not something I'd experienced before myself. I'd been cut by lots of different knives in other places, though, so I recognized the sting. Looking into her clear blue eyes, I felt like someone emerging from a dark hole, someone who hadn't seen the sun in ages. Her dazzling smile almost made me blink. Overwhelmed, I struggled with the notion of pulling her closer to me, holding her in my arms like the cherished angel she deserved to be—or pushing her away.

It was no surprise which of my emotions won out. The moment her hand moved in an attempt to touch me, I was out of bed, flinging the covers off and looking for my pants. "No time for that," I told her. "I have real shit to do."

I heard the slight sigh that escaped her lips, followed by a small whimper, but I didn't even look back at her. In my mind, I could still hear the whimpers she'd been making as she begged me to fuck her the night before. This was obviously different, but it still caused a reaction within me.

With my pants on, I shoved my feet into my shoes and headed out the door to go get cleaned up in my room. I did have shit to do. With the shipment coming in, I had to be on high alert. I couldn't get distracted by Elisa or anything else.

I had a pretty good idea that we were going to be attacked, and if that happened, I had to be ready. People's lives depended on it.



The warehouse we ran drugs out of was in the industrial part of town, not far from the gun warehouse. Most of the buildings around here belonged to us, so it was easy enough to place lookouts on top of the other buildings in the area. We also made sure there were always plenty of loud noises to mask the sound of potential gunfire. Noises that sounded like they might come from a legitimate plant, like big machinery operating or the whir of an engine.

With Vin on one rooftop and his man Lanny on another, I felt pretty confident we'd see anything before it went down, but when the bastards struck, it was quick.

The moment our truck rolled up under cover of darkness to offload, the shooting began. Ten armed men with balaclavas and assault rifles opened fire on us, seeming to come out of nowhere. The organization was a little off, but they were definitely professionals. Their tactics and formations, the way they worked together, their weaponry and rapid-fire let me know this wasn't their first rodeo.

Angry, I gave the order for my guys to fight back. If these guys thought I'd let them walk away breathing, they had another fucking thing coming. The area behind the drug warehouse quickly became a killing field, the pavement running red with the blood of the attackers.

We took a few shots, too, but nothing major, not at first anyway. With Vin and Lanny acting like snipers, picking the bastards off one by one, I thought we had a good chance of ending all of them. But I wanted to keep at least one alive so we could figure out where the hell these assholes had come from, and what syndicate they were working for. In the back of my mind, I already had a suspicion, but I needed solid proof.

Three of the robbers managed to make it to the truck. Aiming my rifle, I sprayed the area with bullets, but it only seemed to slow them down.

"We've gotta figure out a way to stop them," I said, moving forward. I wasn't worried about the truck or what was in it at this point, but I wanted to make sure we got at least one of them alive. Maybe if I moved along the edge of the

building, I could get close to the men trying to take the truck without exposing myself too much. It wasn't worth dying over, though.

My plan was still in formation in my mind when I saw a blur and heard a shout. Yuri, our new hire straight from Russia, went barreling through the exchange of gunfire, headed right toward the bastard trying to get in the driver's seat of the vehicle. By now, our driver was out of the vehicle, helping us lay down fire, so there was plenty of room for the robber to get behind the wheel.

But Yuri wasn't having any of it. The crazy bastard grabbed the hijacker by his pant leg, trying to yank him out of the truck. Another one of the three who'd managed to make it to the truck hopped in through the passenger side, firing down at Yuri as the man he was holding on to kicked him in the face.

Yuri fell to the ground just as the truck began to roll backward, the third man jumping in through the back. The sound of them laughing as they pulled out of the parking lot, tires screeching, hit me the wrong way. Taking aim, I managed to shoot the asshole in the passenger side through the windshield. Blood spurted everywhere, and the driver had to slow to wipe his eyes, but they still managed to drive away with the truck.

Slinging my weapon over my shoulder, I ran to Yuri. Lying on his face on the pavement, he appeared to be dead. "Yuri!" I shouted, flipping him over. His eyes met mine, and I could see he was still hanging on. I wasn't a praying man, but I sent a message out into the universe that he would be okay. Thoughts of his young child and his wife came to mind.

His chest was bleeding, blood leaking beneath his body. "What the fuck were you doing?" one of the guys said behind me.

Yuri managed to say, "I couldn't let them take our stuff."

Shaking my head, I said, "You know you're not supposed to do shit like that without orders! We didn't even have our drugs on that truck, man. It was a decoy. The drugs are at

another location we haven't used before so they wouldn't be able to find them. Shit." He'd gotten shot over the decoy.

"I'm... sorry... boss," he managed to eke out. "I let you down."

"Shut the fuck up," I said with no real anger behind it. "Save your strength, kid. I'm going to get you help. I promise."

Yuri managed to nod, but then his eyes closed. I heard the guys behind him getting help. If we couldn't get him to a doctor soon, the kid was definitely going to die. I tried not to care, but the kid was new and had a family. For some reason, that felt fucked up to me.

These were feelings I hadn't experienced before. Damn it if Elisa wasn't making me fucking soft.

Behind him, I saw seven bodies on the ground. Six of them were still—lifeless. The other was moving slowly, trying to slip into the shadows and crawl out of here. That wasn't going to happen. We needed that guy. Maybe if I asked nicely, he could tell me who the fuck was behind this raid.

Stalking over to him, I grabbed the guy who was still alive by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet, not caring that he was bleeding from several bullet wounds. Ramming my fist into his stomach, I demanded to know, "Who the fuck are you working for?"

He sputtered a few times, coughing up blood before he could speak. His response sent a cold chill into my heart. "La Rosa."



## CHAPTER 20



Boredom settled over me once more as I picked at the food Janis had brought me. It was late for dinner, but then, in this house, most of the real work seemed to happen at night. It was only fitting that I would be eating dinner in the middle of the night.

The beef stroganoff tasted delicious, and I'd had plenty of food brought to me throughout the day. Janis had explained to me that there were a couple of chefs who worked in the kitchen. He was the only butler but a few maids also worked in the home. He came in and cleaned up my room every day, even though I told him he didn't have to. I liked talking to him, though. He was the only person Daemon would allow in my room, other than himself. Lillian hadn't come back in today, so the butler was the only person I had even spoken to since Daemon had fled early in the morning.

With no phone, no television, and nothing interesting to read, my mind wandered quite a bit. I thought about my family. Sometimes, I missed my mom. I always missed Drake. He had to be worried about me. At this point, I had no idea when I might see my favorite brother again. My father and my other brothers could go fuck themselves, but Drake and I had always been close.

Sighing, I took another bite of the warm pasta dish. If I ate all of the food they brought me because I was bored, I was going to get fat. Something told me Daemon wouldn't be as interested in me as he was now if I was pudgy.

Daemon. Was he even interested in me now, or did he just like fucking me because I let him do whatever he wanted? Thinking over what happened last night, I couldn't see much of a difference between the way I'd behaved when he'd first taken me all of those years ago to how I acted in the car, insisting on sucking his dick. I'd sat there, whimpering like a puppy dog, begging for him to fuck me. I would've done anything to get his cock buried inside of me, and he knew it.

Was I just a toy to him? A new plaything? Most of the time, it certainly seemed that way. Why was I sitting here, willing to give up my career and all of my dreams because Daemon Petrov liked to fuck me sometimes?

But then, I didn't have much choice at the moment. I couldn't go anywhere even if I wanted to—could I?

Stabbing a bite of beef with my fork, I thought about what I'd seen him do the night before. He'd beat the shit out of that man. I could never do something like that. Unlike Daemon, his brothers, and the rest of my family, I was weak. Daemon needed a strong woman, someone more like his own mother who could handle herself. She may have told me that it was a good idea to be soft with him, but I didn't see it that way. If I was too soft, he'd never want me, not for the long term anyway.

Is that even what I wanted? To be with Daemon for the long term? Before, when I'd had no idea who he was and only thought of him as my dark angel, I had no doubt in my mind that, once I found him, I'd want to be with him always. But now that I knew that he was the head of a crime family, I didn't know what I wanted from him. He was hot as fuck, but he also scared me, and I had a feeling he knew that, too.

I took another bite of my food, faintly hearing some noise downstairs. There were always guys coming in and out from what I could tell. Mostly members of the syndicate, no doubt. The house was also well guarded, and those guys were always hungry. I wondered if there were two cooks so that one was always on call.

From what I could tell, there was also plenty of booze. Janis had offered to bring me a drink plenty of times, but I didn't ever accept. The last thing I needed was to get drunk so my judgment was really impaired. It was hard enough to think straight now. I had to stay sharp to navigate these shark-filled waters.

So far, I'd managed to keep my head above water.

The sound of the key in the lock alerted me that someone was coming in, but when the door slammed into the wall, I knew who it was without even meeting his gaze. Daemon was clearly even more pissed than usual as he stalked across the room, an angry scowl on his face.

Picking up my plate, he threw it against the wall, the fine dinnerware shattering on impact and spreading sauce and noodles everywhere, the clumps of meat falling to the carpet and mixing with shards of ceramic.

My eyes as big as the plate he'd just shattered, I stared up at him, terrified. What had happened to him to make him react this way? What I had done?

Daemon grabbed me by the throat and slammed me into the wall right above the broken plate. Shards bit into my bare feet, and the scent of the dinner I had been enjoying filled my nostrils as the stroganoff coated the side of my face and hair. He wasn't squeezing tightly, but it was clear he meant business.

"What the fuck is your family up to?" he demanded, holding me against the wall but not squeezing my throat.

Unblinking, I tried to shake my head but couldn't. "I don't know what you're talking about," I assured him. I truly had no clue. If my father was up to something, he sure the fuck wasn't sharing that information with me.

"Bullshit!" he shouted at me, flecks of spit landing on my face.

Tears began to roll down my cheeks, no matter how hard I tried to hold them back. I didn't want to cry in front of him. He already thought I was weak. This would just solidify that

more, but I really didn't know what he was getting at. What had my father done now that I was going to have to feel the heat over?

I didn't get a chance to formulate a response to his comment that my words were bullshit. Daemon had me by the wrist and was dragging me out of the room. Again, I had to walk through the broken plate. Another sliver cut through my foot, leaving a trail of blood on the carpet as he dragged me down the hallway and down the stairs.

Struggling to keep up, I tried my best to just go along with him. The last thing I wanted was to make him more upset, but his legs were so much longer than mine, it was nearly impossible for me to keep up.

A few of the soldiers stood around downstairs when he pulled me through the living room. None of them said a word, only followed us with their eyes. Daemon's gaze was focused straight ahead of him, his hand still gripping my arm tightly.

We went immediately to the front door. Yanking it open, he stepped outside, pulling me with him. He didn't bother to close the door behind us.

A van sat in the circle drive. It looked like one of those utility vans kidnappers were so fond of. Surprised to see such a shady-looking vehicle out here, I didn't know what to think. What the hell was going on?

Daemon dragged me down the porch steps and across the walkway, my feet dragging on the cement, aggravating the cuts I'd gotten from the plate and biting into the soles of my feet, my heels, and grinding against my toes. The pain was bearable, but when we got to the rocky driveway, it intensified, causing me to wince with every step.

Lucky for me, I was at the van fast enough that I couldn't dwell on it. Daemon dragged me over to the back of the van where one of his men was waiting. He slid the door open and pushed me inside.

Falling onto my knees, I tried to catch myself before my face hit the dirty floorboard of the van, but I didn't quite make

it in time, and my cheek collided with the filthy surface. Someone grabbed hold of my shoulders and yanked me up, his grip not as commanding as Daemon's but not gentle.

Sitting up, I saw it was another one of his guys, one I didn't know. There were several in here. Daemon followed me in, and the door was closed behind him. Squatting next to me, he asked, "Do you know him?"

Confused, my eyes wandered over the faces of the men in the van. The dim backlight was on, illuminating them enough that I could see their features, but I didn't know any of them. A few looked familiar, like maybe I'd seen them at the wedding, but I had no idea who they were.

Then my eyes landed on a figure at the back of the van.

Bloodied and bruised, a large man sat with his bound hands against the driver's side of the van. His white wife-beater was covered in grime and blood, a makeshift bandage wound around his upper arm, tied in haste and stained red from the wound beneath. He was barefoot, wearing only the grimy shirt and a pair of black slacks. His short brown hair stood up on top of his head, also dirty, just like his face.

A gag was tied around his open mouth. He moaned against it a few times, as if he was trying to tell me something, but I didn't know what he was trying to tell me. My mind was still having trouble processing everything that had happened. A moment ago, I was alone in my room, peacefully eating a late dinner. Now, I was sitting in the back of a dirty van with food smeared all over my face and hair and blood trickling out of my feet.

"Do you know him?" This time, Daemon punctuated the question with a jab to my shoulder with his elbow.

"No!" I shouted, finally realizing what it was he wanted to know. "No, I don't know the gagged man. I don't know any of these people."

"Are you fucking sure? Because he says he works for your father," Daemon explained to me, every word dripping with anger.

Turning to look into Daemon's eyes, I tried to come up with a response. My mouth worked up and down a few times, but nothing came out. Eventually, I told him, "I know all of the guys who work for my father. All of the ones that are important, anyway. I'd recognize the lackeys, too. If this guy works for my family, he has to be new."

My head swiveled around again so I could look at the gagged man. I definitely didn't recognize him, but I didn't think that was because he was new. I thought he didn't really work for my father.

"New," Daemon echoed, and then, under his breath, he added something I didn't understand. "Like Yuri."

Again, I found myself staring at Daemon, but he wasn't looking at me now. His eyes were locked on something in the distance—or maybe nothing at all.

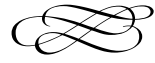
"Fuck it," Daemon said, shaking his head. Whatever he'd been thinking about seemed to fly out of his head. "Let's go for a ride." He turned to look over his shoulder at the man behind the wheel.

The driver said, "Sure thing, boss," and mashed down the gas pedal, sending me flying forward. Daemon braced himself, but he let me go. I slammed into one of the other guys, hurting my shoulder. He pushed me off, and I landed back on my ass next to Daemon.

Another day with Daemon, another set of bruises.

Where the hell were we going?

## CHAPTER 21





## DAEMON

The warehouse we took pieces of scum like this guy, who'd tried to rob us and had been a part of Yuri getting shot, was near the rest of our warehouses, but we never mixed the killing warehouse with the drug warehouse, the gun warehouse, or any of our other operations. No, this one needed to be in the same vicinity so we could mask what we were doing, but we didn't need blood in the coke.

I had my guys drag him into the back room, a place that used to be a meat locker, though it wasn't cold now. It worked well because of the nice meat hooks hanging from the ceiling. I took advantage of the tools that were given to me.

"Hang him up," I ordered, and the bastard was brought over to the closest hook, his bound hands slipped onto the sharp hook so that his feet barely touched the floor.

Elisa had been brought in along with him, walking gingerly. I hadn't noticed she wasn't wearing shoes until we were almost here. Seeing her raw, bleeding feet might've made me feel bad if I wasn't suspicious of her father. If Alexander really did know this bastard, and Elisa recognized him but was covering for him, she was as good as dead, too. I didn't care how tight and wet her pussy was.

"Sit her over there." I gestured to a metal chair on the other side of the room. It wasn't so far away that she wouldn't be able to see the show, but it was far enough away that she wouldn't get splattered with blood either. And there would be a lot of blood. Not that I cared too much if she got some of this asshole's fluids on her. If her family was involved in this the

way that the prisoner said it was, I might just cut him open and stick her face in it.

The gag tied around his mouth was cut free so he could speak.

“Anything you wanna tell me?” I asked, pushing up my sleeves. I still had on my suit jacket, but I wouldn’t let that stop me from beating the hell out of him. I never liked this suit much anyway.

“Yeah, I got something to tell you,” he said, a slight accent making it a little difficult to understand the words coming out of his raw, cut mouth. “Go fuck yourself.”

Shaking my head, I laughed. “Nah, I don’t have to fuck myself. See that girl over there? I’ll just fuck her when I’m done beating the shit out of you.” Deciding to leave my brass knuckles in my pocket for now, I took my first swing, a body shot that left him gasping for air. It was a nice feeling, having my fist connect with his breadbasket, but I was just getting started.

Using my bare knuckles allowed me to use my full strength. I reared back and wailed on him, hitting him again and again, not giving him a chance to catch his breath or speak. Unlike Charlie Pritchett, this poor bastard didn’t start crying like a baby, but he did slobber all over the place, drool and blood streaming down his face as he gasped for air.

The seams in my jacket tore at about the same time that I heard his ribs crack. That was when I decided to take a break. With my suit torn and his body battered, I took a step back. One of my guys handed me a towel which I used to wipe my hands. The sweat continued to pour off my forehead. My hair hung over my eyes, obstructing my view, so I pushed it out of the way.

Fury still burned through me as my eyes landed on Elisa. Sitting in the chair with her knees pulled up against her chest, she looked decidedly small. Once again, she was biting her bottom lip. Did this really turn her on? The thought of me beating the shit out of someone getting her all hot and bothered again almost made me laugh.

But I wasn't in the mood. I glared at her and then turned away. She wasn't going anywhere. It was quite clear that she was terrified of me anyway, for better or for worse.

Returning my attention to the punk hanging in front of me, I decided it was time to see if I could get some answers from him. So far, most of the punches I'd thrown had been body shots, so his face was intact, and he shouldn't have any problem answering me.

Taking my suit jacket off, I tossed it to one of my guys, but I kept my sleeves down. "Who do you work for, asshole?"

"I already fucking told you." Breathing heavily, he struggled to get the words out. "La Rosa."

My eyes went to Elisa. She shook her head slightly but didn't speak.

"How did you know when the shipment was supposed to arrive?" Flexing my fingers, I waited for him to answer, but it took him a moment to say anything at all.

"Your mom told me. After I fucked her." He laughed hysterically, clearly having lost all sense.

Obviously, he was just trying to get to me. If I gave a fuck about my mother, I might be offended.

I asked him a few more questions about the shipment, how he knew, who he worked for, who was in charge of the attack, and who the bastards who got away were.

I didn't like any of the answers he was giving me, though. Something about what he was telling me didn't quite ring of the truth. A few more punches to the gut didn't do anything to loosen him up, so I decided to take more drastic measures.

I snapped my fingers for my jacket, and one of the guys handed it to me. I reached into the interior pocket, hearing the prisoner gasp behind me. He must've thought I was retrieving my little friend. Not yet. Instead, I produced a phone. Elisa's phone.

Motioning for her to come over, I extended the phone. She walked gingerly over to me, and I handed her the device. "Call

your fucking father on video.”

Immediately, she did as I asked, though it took her a second because her hands were shaking.

When he answered, Alexander said, “What do you want, Elisa? I’m busy.”

Watching her carefully, I could tell that she was trying not to roll her eyes. “It’s important, Father,” she said. I motioned for her to turn the phone around so I could see La Rosa, and he could see me. He could also see the bastard hanging from the meat hook.

“La Rosa,” I began, trying my best to stay calm. He didn’t need to see me in a berserker rage. “Do you know this asshole?”

Alexander La Rosa squinted into the phone. “Nah, I don’t know him. Should I?”

My prisoner looked a little more nervous now that technology had brought his alleged boss into the picture, but he didn’t say anything.

“He stole a truck from me and he says he works for you, La Rosa,” I explained. “And you know what that means.”

La Rosa shook his head adamantly. “He definitely doesn’t work for me personally. I know all of my guys. Let me get my sons in here and see if any of them know him.” Turning around, he pressed a button on his desk and gave some sort of order I didn’t quite hear. Then, shifting so he was looking at me again, he said, “He could be one of their recruits, but I don’t think so. Ordinarily, I know all of the guys who work for the family. I don’t mind checking with the boys for you though, Daemon. Considering what’s at stake. Where’d you pick him up?”

Not wanting to give too much away, I said, “It doesn’t matter if he really doesn’t work for you, La Rosa. But I need some answers. So I’m getting them from him or from you.”

He chuckled under his breath but didn’t say more, and in a moment, I saw other forms walk into the room in various states of dress. One of his sons was in a suit, like he’d just

gotten home from causing a ruckus. Another was wearing gym clothes while one only had on pajama pants. I didn't see the doctor. Maybe he wasn't with them?

“Do any of you guys happen to know this fellow your new stepbrother has picked up?” La Rosa asked.

I hated hearing him call me that, and I could see by his sons' expressions that none of them were particularly happy with it either. One by one, they each said that they hadn't ever seen the man before. From their expressions, I tended to believe them.

“Good news, Daemon. We don't recognize him. I'm pretty sure the bastard is just lying to you. Makes sense. Why not try to drag us into it, huh?”

“Well, whichever one of you is lying, everyone needs to pay attention.” With that, I headed back to my jacket to grab my brass knuckles. Slipping them on, I approached the bastard. Immediately, he began to cry.

“Holy fuck!” one of the men on the call exclaimed. I turned to look at the phone, seeing that it was Decan. “They're real. Get that, Alex. They're actually real. I thought the hand of justice bit was just a street legend.”

His brother in the suit hushed him, looking annoyed. Glad for the quiet, I laid into my prisoner, punching him right in the face, leaving an imprint of my favorite word on his face. A few punches later, he was spitting out teeth, and his face began to look like something one would find in the butcher shop.

“That's disgusting,” I heard the brother in the pajama pants say. Jace, I think his name was. “Seriously, that is fucked up. Why can't phone calls be audio-only any more? That dude is a psycho.”

“He can hear you, you know?” Decan reminded him. “I don't think I'd call the man with the brass knuckles a psycho.”

A glance at the phone told me that the oldest brother, Alex, was stoically standing there, saying nothing. Alexander, the patriarch, actually looked a bit impressed. It might've made

me feel proud if I gave a shit what the old man thought of me. This was a warning, after all. Nothing more.

I took another break, removing the brass knuckles so that my hand could rest. While I stood there, staring at the mangled remains of my prisoner, I flexed my hand, trying to decide what to do with him.

“You know, Daemon,” Alexander began, “my sons and I are all in Boston, except for Drake, though he doesn’t mingle in these sorts of things. While it’s not impossible we could’ve orchestrated whatever went down from here, all of us are hands-on kinda guys. If you didn’t see any of us there when this went down, you can rest assured we weren’t involved.”

I said nothing, only stared at him through the phone, noticing Elisa’s hand was starting to shake a bit, probably from trying to hold it still for so long.

Alexander continued. “Just so you know, I will be returning to Chicago in a few days to see my new bride. I don’t want you to be surprised when I show up.”

Disgusted, I said nothing about his last comment. “Thank you for humoring me,” I replied before pushing the button to turn the call off. “Go sit down,” I told Elisa.

Immediately, she complied, walking away quickly despite the shape of her feet.

My eyes landed on the prisoner again. If it weren’t for a slight rise and fall of his chest, I might’ve thought he was already dead. Since he wasn’t, I decided to give someone else a chance to fuck him up.

I was done.

## CHAPTER 22



He was dead.

The guy that Daemon had beat the shit out of died a few seconds after I hung up the call with my father. The rest of the thugs standing around were disappointed because they'd hoped to get a punch or two in on the guy, but Daemon had told them he saw no point in punching a dead guy. One of them had taken a few pops anyway, and then Daemon had smashed that guy's nose in.

Daemon was not the type of person one fucked around with.

Sitting in my bedroom the next morning, I couldn't bring myself to even get out of bed. I had my knees pulled up to my chest, my arms wrapped around them, staring at nothing, my nightgown twisted into an uncomfortable knot around me that I couldn't feel.

It didn't matter. All I could think about was how dark and dangerous Daemon Petrov was and how I had been caught up in his web because of our past. I'd been enamored with him, thinking of him as some sort of superhuman being, which he kind of was, but not in a good way. Dark angel? More like the devil himself.

He'd killed a guy with his bare hands and then stopped to get a cheeseburger on the way home. The smell of grease and bacon had made me throw up what little beef stroganoff I'd gotten down before he slammed my face into it. My hand automatically went to my hair. I'd showered the night before,



so the crusty sauce was gone, but the memories of what had transpired were vividly replaying in my mind.

I needed to find a way to get out of this life forever. I'd always been a part of it. Seeing guys get beat up, watching my brothers' gunshot wounds be cleaned and sewn up, all of that was part of my life for so long, I didn't think about it most of the time.

But this was so different, watching the man I'd been fantasizing about for years and fucking for a few days literally beat a man to death. If he could do that to a big guy like the one hanging from the meat hook, what the fuck could he do to me?

Part of me also couldn't help but be turned on by the exhilarating primal power he displayed. I hated myself for it, aching and longing for him when he was splattered with someone else's blood. How sick did that make me?

My phone was even coated in blood from having to show my father what was going on. That guy wasn't part of our syndicate. I was certain of it from the very beginning. Why wouldn't someone lie and say they were part of our family with everything going on between the La Rosas and the Petrovs? The fact that the guy hadn't broken and spilled everything was pretty remarkable, but then, maybe by the time he was ready to talk, his jaw was broken.

I wished I had someone to talk to about all of this, but the only person I ever saw besides Daemon was Janis. The butler would speak to me about a lot of different things, but never once had he mentioned the family business. I couldn't blame him. No one who worked for my father would dare talk about the criminal aspects of our lives either.

Sighing, I tossed my head back. It had been so long since I talked to anyone I trusted. What I wouldn't give to talk to Sara right now. But I couldn't bring her into this. She was aware of who my father was and what he did, but she knew nothing of the details. It was better for her that way. No, I shouldn't consider talking to her.

But Drake—I could talk to Drake. My brother knew all of the misery I was going through. Just like me, he'd done everything he could to put some space between himself and the syndicate. If only I could talk to my brother.

That was when I realized I still had my phone.

“Holy shit,” I murmured, hopping out of bed. I'd put it in my pocket after the phone call last night, out of habit. I'd been too stunned to even think about what it meant to have it back. Now that I was thinking straight, I realized that I had it.

And I could use it!

A few seconds later, I had my phone in my hand. I took a second to wipe the blood off before calling my brother. He answered immediately. “Elisa? Is that you?”

Tears filled my eyes. “Yes, it's me. How are you?”

“Oh, thank god,” he muttered. “I'm fine, but I've been so worried about you. Are you okay? What's going on there? Why haven't you answered any of my texts? I've been so worried since our psycho father traded you off for his new bride.”

“I didn't have my phone,” I explained, thinking Sara was probably worried sick, too. “Listen, I really need to talk to you. I know it's asking a lot, but do you think you could come over here?”

“To the Petrov mansion? Yeah, sure.” Drake sounded slightly concerned about what I was asking him to do, but he wouldn't hesitate when it came to seeing me if that was what I needed from him.

“When you get here, I'm in the sixth room on the right. The door locks from the outside, so I'm not sure how you'll get in. I think there's a key.”

“Don't worry about that, Elisa. I can pick a lock,” he assured me. I wondered why I hadn't thought of that myself. I'd never been great at it, but I'd had some practice. Father insisted we all try.

“Okay. I’ll see you soon. Be careful, though. I’m not sure what Daemon will think if he knows you’re here.”

“I’m not afraid of him.” Drake truly sounded like he meant that. I wanted to say I wasn’t afraid of him either, but that wasn’t true. I was petrified. Still, I didn’t think Daemon would hurt my brother if he found him here since it would piss my father off, which would make his mother mad.

Taking a deep breath, I hung up and quickly sent Sara a text that I was okay but wasn’t allowed to have my phone. I told her I’d get back to her when I could. Then, I stashed my phone between the mattress and the box springs. Taking a shower, I made myself as presentable as possible, hoping my brother wouldn’t see any of my scratches or bruises. The cuts on my feet were still bothering me, but he wouldn’t be able to see those through my shoes.

Less than an hour later, I heard a sound outside of the door, and a moment later, it opened. My brother was standing there, his brow wrinkled with concern as he came in the door with two coffees in his hand. He set them down on the table and caught me as I threw myself into his arms.

“Thank goodness you’re all right,” he said, holding me against his chest. “How are you? Have you lost weight?”

Chuckling, I wiggled myself free. “You sound like a grandma or something. I don’t think I’ve lost weight.”

“You felt thinner than normal in my arms.” Drake picked up one of the coffees and handed it to me. “From your favorite place.”

“Thank you.” I took a sip and had to close my eyes. I’d missed my drink of choice so much. “Come in. Talk to me about things that are going on in the real world.”

We sat down on a small sofa against the windows. Drake’s forehead didn’t relax. “You look like you haven’t been sleeping well, Elisa. What’s going on?”

“Well, I’m currently being held hostage by a mob boss who thinks he owns me, mostly because our father told him that he does,” I replied, sounding nonchalant in a sarcastic

way. “So, yeah, it’s great. Who wouldn’t want to sleep when they’re surrounded by cold-blooded killers who naturally think you’re the enemy?” I was trying to be funny, but my brother didn’t think it was funny at all.

“We could go,” he said, his expression quite serious. “No one stopped me from walking in here, believe it or not. I saw some soldiers hanging out downstairs, but they either knew I was a part of the family now or they are just that clueless, but no one said a damn word to me. We could just walk right out the front door.”

It was fucking tempting. “I don’t know, Drake.” I took a deep breath, weighing my options. If I left, he would come after me. I had no doubt in my mind about it. And Daemon would be angry. “I think that would cause more trouble than it’s worth.”

“If you got away from here, left Chicago and Boston, headed to some tiny town in the middle of nowhere to start over? Why not? You know I can get you the papers you’d need to start over as someone else.”

I wanted to do what he was suggesting more than anything, but so many forces were forcing me to stay put, right there in my seat in Daemon’s home, that I couldn’t have gotten up if I wanted to. All I could say to my brother was, “I can’t.”

His face fell, disappointment settling into every frown line. “Why not?”

Shaking my head, I said, “I just can’t, Drake. Please, don’t ask me again.”

He stared at me for a long moment, but then, he accepted my words and nodded. “All right then. Well, if you can’t go, then you may as well make the most of being here. You can catch up on Netflix or something, right?”

Telling my brother that I wasn’t sure how long I might have my phone would just worry him, so I said, “Yeah, that’s one positive. How is everyone else?” I wanted to talk about anyone other than myself. “How are your friends at the hospital?”

Drake launched into a discussion about everything that was going on where he worked, and for a few minutes, it was like old times. We were both free, we both had lives, and neither of us were being held prisoner thanks to the bargaining of our old man. I might've completely forgotten everything that happened if the unfamiliar room we were sitting in wasn't so very different from my apartment.

Drake stayed for about an hour. It was a deadly game we were playing. "I think you should probably go soon," I told him as he finished his coffee.

I could tell he was disappointed, but he knew I was right. While he might've been able to get past the guards downstairs, he wouldn't be able to outrun Daemon. "All right. Will you please call me every day—if you can?"

"I will if I have my phone," I promised him. "Try not to worry about me. I am safe here. As long as Father is using me as a bargaining chip, Daemon isn't going to let anything happen to me."

"But he's a psycho," Drake pointed out.

My gut tightened up, not because he was wrong but because I didn't like hearing it. "He's different. But he won't hurt me."

"Well, when this is all over, I'm driving you to Orlando," he said as he stood, walking toward the door.

"Orlando?" I questioned, wondering what he was getting at.

"Fuck yes. If anyone deserves to pay a visit to that giant rodent, it's you. We'll forget our troubles over a Dole Whip."

He made me laugh. I couldn't even remember the last time I went to an amusement park. If I could go right now, I'd want to go with Drake and Sara, though. Something told me Daemon would find a way to make the happiest place on earth terrifying.

Drake hugged me tightly. "I wanna put you in my pocket and carry you home with me," he murmured.

“Not today. I love you, big brother.”

“I love you, too.” He kissed the top of my head, and then he was gone. I heard the lock turn again and then went over to my bed and tossed myself down, tears pouring from my eyes.

## CHAPTER 23



## DAEMON

**B**usiness was settled for the night. It was time for me to return home, and for once, I wouldn't be going home alone, and I wouldn't have to stop at a club to find someone to keep me company.

Pulling into the garage, I looked over at the car I'd driven the other night, when Elisa had gone down on me. Fuck, if that wasn't the best blow job I'd ever had. Everything about Elisa made my balls ache for her. I was getting hard just thinking about her.

I'd been rough on her, though, and the girl deserved a break. I knew by now that the asshole I'd beaten the shit out of yesterday wasn't working for La Rosa. He'd just been fucking with me. Not only had no one in town been able to confirm his story, but it only made sense that he was making shit up to try to hide who he was really working for.

I didn't know who that was yet, but I would find out. In the meantime, I needed to be sweet to the girl upstairs because she had been through a lot lately, and she deserved a little gentle handling.

Downstairs, a bunch of our soldiers were sitting around, talking about who knew what. The moment they saw me walk in, they snapped to attention. It irritated me to no end seeing them standing around talking and not actually working, but I didn't stop to rebuke them. I was on my way up the stairs to see Elisa, and I didn't want to stop and fuck around with anyone.



Unlocking her door, I waltzed in, not slamming the door against the wall this time. She was sitting in her bed, her knees to her chest, just staring at nothing, her hands behind her, tucked beneath her. I couldn't tell if she was scared or nervous, but I didn't want her to feel either of those emotions at seeing me. Why couldn't her face light up when I walked into the room? That would be nice.

"Hey," I said, crossing the room. I sat down next to her on the bed, leaving my shoes hanging over the edge. "How was your day?"

"Fine," she said quickly, pulling away from me. She swiveled slightly toward me, like she was afraid to even slightly turn her back toward me. "I'm fine."

"That's good." I waited for her to ask me how my day had been, but she didn't say anything. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." She shrugged, but I could tell by the drawn expression on her face that that wasn't the truth. "Nothing's wrong."

"It sure the fuck seems like something's wrong," I argued.

Elisa's mouth moved slightly, like she wanted to say something, but she didn't. Her blue eyes were wide, unblinking.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to be a little bit softer. "What is it?"

"Honestly?" she asked. I nodded, encouraging her to tell me whatever it was. "You scare the shit out of me." It was my turn to stare at her, but it was all I could do to keep from laughing. "You're a beast. You killed that guy yesterday."

Turning away from her, I stared at the wall in front of me. "Well, I guess you've seen the real me now, huh? And it's fucking alarming."

"It's nothing new to me." Her voice sounded melancholy, haunted. "Every man in my life is a savage. Except for my brother Drake. He's the only guy I know who has never ripped a guy's throat out with his bare hands. Or something of that nature."

All humor left me as I pondered what she was saying. It wasn't fair that she was born into this. She hadn't asked for this life, but she'd been presented with it anyway. Even going to get her degree in law to get out of here hadn't worked out for her. She just kept getting sucked right back in.

I wanted to comfort her, to reach over and take her hand in mine and tell her everything was going to be okay and there was no reason for her to be worried. She was safe now.

But I couldn't make that promise to her. After all, my life was just as dangerous as the one she'd lived before with her father. And if someone caught wind of the fact that she was with me, they could try to take her, either in an effort to hurt me or to hurt her father.

Once again, I was looking at her. "I'm sorry." I meant it. At least, I thought I did. "But life is savage, and if you're not strong, you can't survive."

She shook her head. "I don't think that's true. I know plenty of people who aren't in this world who don't have to worry about the same shit I do. My roommate hasn't ever seen someone kill another man with his fists. No, I don't think that's the case for everyone."

"Maybe not," I admitted. "But it is for us, and there's nothing we can do to get out of this life. You've tried, right?"

She nodded, and I thought I saw tears forming in her eyes. "Yeah, I tried, and I just got pulled back in."

Not knowing what to say, I stared at the wall again for a moment. It was my fault she wasn't able to escape this time, mine and her father's.

"Growing up, everyone around me was strong. Everyone but me. Even my mom was tough." Swiping at her eyes, Elisa took a deep breath, clearly trying to hold her emotions in check.

"No one is born strong," I told her. "People become strong when they're forged in the fire. You have to let the fire break you, and then, when you rise from the flames, you'll be stronger."

She scooted slightly closer to me, and I realized she wasn't afraid of me anymore. I found myself moving closer to her, too. This was the first real conversation we'd had about anything of substance. I still wanted to pleasure her, to let her see another side of me in bed, but talking to her was also interesting, so I didn't want to interrupt the discussion.

"I was always the weakest, softest one. I wanted to be stronger, but I didn't know how," she said, her tone sounding a little less sad, as if this was something she'd accepted a long time ago. "If it hadn't been for Drake, I probably would've gotten killed a long time ago. They would've found no reason to keep me around, and I probably would've found myself looking down the wrong end of a barrel."

I wanted to assure her that that wasn't the case, that her father loved her, but I couldn't say that because, from what I could tell, the bastard had never treated her right.

I had no idea what it would be like to have a daughter, but I knew if I ever had one, I would treat her like a princess. Alexander La Rosa treated his daughter like an expendable nuisance. He could try his best to convince me that she was important to him and that she was here because he wanted to earn my trust, but I was pretty sure that was bullshit. I didn't think he hated her or anything, and having her here was probably keeping the truce alive, but if something happened to her, I didn't think he'd be beside himself with grief.

She seemed to know that.

Reaching over to Elisa, I used my thumb to brush a tear away from her eye. I understood how it felt not to be loved by your parent, at least one of them, and I could feel her pain.

I stroked her cheek. "I wish I could make it all better for you, but honestly, I can't. I can help you toughen up, and I can protect you, but that's about it."

Her smile was soft and gentle, and I thought she meant it when she said, "It's okay. I know this is your life, and I don't expect you to change it for me."

Leaning toward her, I planned to press my lips against hers in a soft, gentle kiss, but as we moved toward one another, I saw something over her shoulder that had me freezing. “What the fuck is that?”

Elisa’s eyes were closed as she moved toward me. At my question, she froze, and her eyes opened. “Wh-what’s what?”

“That!” Flying up off the bed, I ran around it to the trashcan tucked between the bed and the nightstand. Inside, I could clearly see a takeaway coffee cup that hadn’t been there before. “Who the fuck has been in here, bitch?”

Elisa was frozen in fear. Her expression told me she was even more terrified than she had been when I’d first come into the room. “N-no one,” she said, her hands up, shaking her head. “I mean, someone, but no one.”

I didn’t want to hurt her—even though I did want to hurt her. Grasping her by the chin, I forced her to look at me. “Who. The. Fuck. Was. In. Here?”

“My brother,” she said. “He just came for a visit and brought me some coffee. He was only here for about an hour. The guys downstairs didn’t seem to mind.”

“Did they even fucking notice?” Letting go of her, I ran my hand through my hair and tried to calm down, but fire coursed through my veins. To think, I’d been sitting here, chatting with her, opening up to her, and the entire time she’d been keeping secrets from me.

“Daemon—” she began, her tone pleading.

“Shut up, you fucking bitch!” I waved my finger in her face. “You’re not supposed to have anyone in here. How the fuck am I supposed to know that it was your goddamn brother anyway? What if it was some dick you were fucking, huh?”

The terror in her eyes was replaced by sadness. “No. I would never do anything like that. Why would I need to?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know? But even if it was your brother, how the fuck am I supposed to know that you weren’t just giving him information about me? Maybe you and

your asshole brother are scheming behind my back, huh? Are you giving information to your father about what I'm doing?"

"No, Daemon. It's Drake. He's a doctor. He doesn't even like my father. I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd mind."

"Bullshit!" I spat at her. "You know goddamn good and well you're not allowed to have visitors." Tears were streaming down her face as I continued to cuss and yell at her, not even knowing exactly what was coming out of my mouth.

Eventually, I shouted, "I guess I'm going to have to stop giving you so many privileges, huh? From now on, you can consider yourself under lock and key."

With that, I spun around and headed out the door, locking it behind me and standing in the hallway, taking several deep breaths.

A fucking La Rosa was able to waltz right into my own home, get into a locked room, and none of the bastards downstairs bothered to tell me about it? Did they know, or had they not even noticed? Either way, heads were going to roll.

Walking back to my room, I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed Dezzy's number. He answered immediately. "What's up, boss?"

"Do you remember that Latvian dogfighting ring we shut down?" I asked him, trying not to let my anger show in my voice. My brother didn't need to know how out of control I was a few minutes ago.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "How could I forget? Biggest fucking dogs I ever saw. Why you asking?"

"I need you to do me a favor."

## CHAPTER 24



Daemon was furious when he left my room. I wasn't sure what to make of any of it. If I had known that he was going to be so upset that I'd invited my brother over, I never would've done it.

Or at least, I would've been sneakier about it.

But hearing him blow up and totally lose his shit, accusing me of sleeping with someone else, left me crying and shaking. Sitting on the bed with my knees to my chest, my arms wrapped around them, I tried to stop the tears from falling, but it was futile. As long as I was here, I was completely under Daemon's control. He decided if I lived or died. Having him angry at me felt like a thousand knives plunging into my soul.

About an hour after he left, I finally stopped crying, my forehead resting on my knees, my eyelids heavy. If I fell asleep, I could pretend I was somewhere else. I could escape his grasp. But being asleep only lasted so long. When I woke up, I'd be right back here in this room again.

The door flung open, slamming into the wall. I'd never get used to Daemon's dramatic entrances. I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sound—I was awake now.

"Get up," he demanded, glowering at me from the doorway. "Come."

My immediate thought was to tell him I wasn't a dog, but I said nothing, stepping into my shoes before I crossed the room. I'd learned my lesson about going without my shoes the

last time when he'd scraped my already bloodied feet across the concrete.

Once I reached him, Daemon spun on his heel and headed down the hallway. I walked along behind him, trying to keep up. He stopped at a door about five doors down from mine and opened it a lot more slowly than he had my own door nearly every time he'd entered my room.

Following him inside, I immediately noticed the dark mahogany furniture. Stately and classic, it was lovely, and the dark blue bedding and curtains gave the space a manly presence. I knew at once that this was Daemon's bedroom. Not only did the dark, strong furniture fit his personality, but it felt like him. It even smelled like him.

But the next thing I noticed had my forehead crinkling. In the middle of the room was a large dog kennel. I hadn't been around a lot of dogs because my mother had been allergic, but I knew that smell—wet, dirty dog. Maybe even an accident or two. Why the fuck did he have a giant dog kennel sitting in his room?

It had to be four feet across by three feet tall and probably another two feet from one side to the other. I had a feeling a German Shepherd could fit in that thing, but the door was open, and I didn't see any dogs. So what the fuck was it for?

"Welcome to your new digs." Daemon made a sweeping gesture with his arm in the direction of the dog kennel.

Confused, I just stood there, staring at him. He obviously didn't mean his room. After all of these years of dreaming about being in my dark angel's bedroom, I was finally there. But I didn't feel welcomed and cared for. No, I didn't feel like he even liked me at all.

"Wh-what are you talking about?" I asked, edging only a step or two into the room.

"This is your new room." Again, he pointed at the dog kennel. "I figure, as long as you're in here, I won't have to worry about you fucking anyone else or trying to get away from me."



My mouth opened, but not a single sound came out. “But that’s a fucking dog kennel,” I reminded him. “It stinks.”

He shrugged. “You’ll get used to it eventually.”

“You want me to get into that dog kennel? And stay there?” It seemed like some sick kind of joke, but he was completely serious. I could tell by his expression.

“Yep. You’ll get in it, and you’ll stay in it.”

“What if I have to use the bathroom?” I folded my arms beneath my chest, trying not to completely lose my mind.

“We’ll figure that out. Now get the fuck inside.” He continued to glare at me, his dark eyes narrowed.

I took a step forward but stopped. It was just my nature to want to do what he told me to do. Subservience was a weakness of mine. Still, this was really pushing it. “It smells like dog piss.”

“Fine. I’ll put a blanket down.” Daemon stepped through a door in the back of the room that I assumed was the ensuite bathroom where his closet must be. He came back a moment later with a blanket, which he tossed inside the kennel. “Go.”

Again, he was speaking to me like I was a dog. Was this blanket supposed to make such a huge difference?

My feet wouldn’t move. I just stood there staring at him, wondering if he’d lost his mind. He looked more dangerous than usual. His jaw flexed as he tightened it, relaxed it slightly, then tightened it again. His fingers clenched into fists over and over as he waited for me.

“This is degrading,” I continued, fighting back tears. I didn’t want to cry in front of him, not over this. “I’m not a fucking dog.”

Daemon flew toward me so fast, I slammed into the wall next to the door retreating from him. “You will do whatever the fuck I tell you to do, Elisa, got it?” He dragged a finger down my cheek, but it wasn’t a tender touch by any stretch of the imagination.

Biting down on my lip, I stared into his eyes, wondering how he could be so cruel. He didn't give me the opportunity to respond to his question. Instead, he wrapped one arm around my back and the other under my knees, lifting me off the floor and then unceremoniously tossing me into the kennel where I landed on my ass.

Once he shoved my feet inside, he slammed the door, which was thick enough to keep even the most deranged pit bull from escaping. He slid the lock into place and then took out a padlock and clicked that into place as well. "For good measure," he growled.

All I could do was shake my head. Did he really think I was going to try to break out of the cage? Even though the stench made me want to throw up, I wasn't about to further piss off the deranged mobster. He was seriously beginning to remind me of his brother Vin, he was acting so crazy.

"Now, I have to go because if I stay, I'm going to teach you a lesson—and you won't like it."

With that, Daemon turned and walked away. I couldn't see him out the side of the cage, but when he slammed the door, I knew for certain he'd truly left me locked in here.

What the absolute fuck? I couldn't believe he could do something so cruel because I'd had my brother over for a couple of hours. It wasn't as if anyone had explained to me that I wasn't allowed to have visitors. It was Drake, for fuck's sake, not some dude I was screwing.

I did my best not to cry. Other than the sound of my heart pounding in my chest, I was left completely alone in a silent room with nothing to do but think about Daemon. All I wanted was to find a way to reach this man who could melt me with just one look, just one touch. Yet, he kept pushing me away.

I'd thought we were actually getting somewhere earlier when he'd first come into the room and lay down next to me on the bed. He'd shared some private information that I'd assumed he didn't tell just anyone, and I knew a lot of what I'd said to him was hard for me to discuss. But I'd felt

comfortable talking to Daemon in those few moments. Until he lost his shit over a coffee cup, anyway.

The man had some serious fucking issues. And here I had thought my family had screwed me up, but Daemon's family had clearly done a number on him. I might have felt sorry for him if he hadn't just tossed me in a fucking dog cage.

I should've lied to him and told him that his mother brought it to me or something. It might've backfired if Lillian would've told him later that it wasn't hers, but it might've bought me some time. I sure as hell couldn't have made him any madder than he already was.

A crook in my neck had me attempting to stretch, but I couldn't move enough to do much about it. My knees were pulled up, but I couldn't sit all the way up, and a piece of metal bit into my shoulder whenever I leaned back. I tried lying down, and that helped some, but I had to curl into a ball. Lying down also put my face right against the side of the cage, with only the blanket between my nose and the part of the cage that absolutely reeked of wet dog.

Closing my eyes, I tried to breathe without gagging. Maybe this really was all my fault. I should've assumed he wouldn't want me to have guests over. Maybe I should've asked first.

Every time I tried reaching out to Daemon, he pulled away from me, like he was afraid to let me in. He'd fly off the handle with even the tiniest bit of affection. In some ways, he reminded me of my father. No matter how hard I tried to reach out to my father, he never wanted anything to do with me.

A vivid memory flooded my mind. I was a little girl, six or seven, and I'd made my father a painting at school. The teacher had told me how beautiful it was and how much he would love it. I'd painted my father and me standing in a field of flowers, holding hands, with a rainbow behind us.

As soon as I'd gotten home, I'd rushed to his office, so excited to show him. He hadn't even looked at it before he started yelling at me to get out, that I was interrupting, calling me a useless little moron.

In tears, I'd gone to my room, wondering how I could get his attention to let him know I wanted the picture to be real. I wanted to have a daddy like the other kids at school, a daddy that wanted to hold my hand and pick flowers and didn't hit me.

Since I hadn't been able to take the picture to him myself, I'd wrapped a ribbon around it and left it tied to his doorknob.

The next day, I'd tiptoed back to see if he'd gotten the present. It was gone from his door. Excitedly, I went into his office, knowing he wasn't there but hoping to see it hanging on the wall. When I saw it crumpled inside the trashcan, I'd broken into tears.

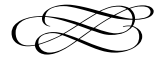
My father couldn't love me. Daemon couldn't love me. There was only one common denominator here—and that was me.

Unable to stop the tears now, I buried my head in the blanket, thankful that Daemon had at least given me that. He was treating me like a dog—maybe that was what I deserved to be treated like. After all, I'd been following him around like a puppy every chance I'd gotten, begging for his attention. At least this way, I wouldn't be able to do any of that. I would only be a part of his life when he let me out of this cage.

The longer I cried, the more exhausted I became until I found myself beginning to doze off, welcoming sleep with open arms. I had no idea where Daemon was or when he might be coming back. If he decided to leave me here indefinitely, then I would die.

But then, at the moment, was I even really living anyway?

## CHAPTER 25



## DAEMON

The club scene really wasn't my thing. Too much noise and too many drunk people running around, bumping into everyone, carrying on like hooligans. No, I was more of a bar man myself. I preferred a quiet, lowkey place where I could fucking hear myself think most of the time.

But on a night like this, I didn't need to hear myself think. Listening to that voice inside of my head was way too fucking dangerous considering the situation with Elisa. I oscillated between thinking she was the kind of woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life fucking, and knowing for certain she'd had some other guy's dick up her ass all day while I was out working. It was better to just throw back drinks and keep my inner monologue to a minimum.

Besides, this was the place Vin, Dezzy, and Mikel had chosen to go to, and I needed my brothers tonight. A bunch of our other goons were hanging around, drinking and hitting on the pretty girls. Vin had his arm around a blonde with enormous tits, but she was smiling at *me*.

An idea struck me. I could take her, or one of these other bitches, back to my room and fuck her brains out right in front of my new pet. Elisa would have to sit there in that dog kennel, smelling like a reject from the local pound, whining like a bitch in heat, while she watched and listened to the slut scream my name.

"You okay, Daemon?" Vin asked, jostling my shoulder. "If you're worried about Yuri, don't be. I checked on him earlier,

and the doc says he's gonna pull through. He'll be back with his wife and kid before we know it."

"That's good to hear." I snagged another bottle of beer off our table and drank it down, thinking it might be better to just get myself something with vodka in it, but something about the feel of a bottle in my hand was soothing. Like I knew I could crack it over any bastard's skull who rubbed me the wrong way.

We were in the VIP section of the lounge, so chances were no one would fuck with us, but it was so crowded, I wasn't sure what the difference was between where we were sitting and where all of the other numbnuts were supposed to be relegated to.

Around me, the conversation quickly switched from Yuri to the soccer scores. We tried not to discuss business in front of just anyone. My mind managed to slip away, despite the pounding of the bass over the speakers and the peeling laughter of some drunk bitch a few tables over.

Why didn't Elisa just tell me that she'd invited her brother over if that was what had really happened? It didn't make any sense to me. It was like she was trying to keep it a secret from me. And as far as I was concerned, there was only one reason to keep secrets from someone—because you were trying to hide something. So what the fuck was she trying to hide from me?

What was her role in all of this? Did she want me to believe she wasn't working for her old man? It didn't make any sense. She was trying to act all innocent and sweet, but she was a La Rosa, and that meant she had to have something up her sleeve.

Well, if her plan was to come there and kill me, it would be a lot harder for her to do that now that she was caged up.

My arm began to burn a little, right around the tattoo, the image of her I had seared into my body. No, violence wasn't her angle, not Elisa. Even if her father told her she had to kill me, she wouldn't be able to do it. Although she did seem to be turned on whenever she saw me beat the hell out of someone.

Could it be that her getting all hot and bothered watching me throw punches was all part of her act? If so, the woman deserved an Academy Award. My dick twitched beneath the table just thinking of the head she'd given me on the ride home the other night. Fuck, that was amazing. And then I'd taken her rough on the bed, but she'd liked that too.

I'd actually fallen asleep right next to her. Damn. If she'd been an assassin, it would've been the perfect time for her to off me, right there in her bed while I was asleep, my dick hanging out and everything.

"All I know is, when we figure out who is behind this, we're going to make them pay," Vin was saying, bringing my attention back to the group. "No one takes our stuff and lives to tell about it. When this is over, people are gonna be telling stories about how we took every single one of these pieces of shit down."

"That's right. Nobody shoots up one of our guys and gets away with it." Dezzzy puffed out his chest, bringing his beer up for the others to clank their bottles against.

A few of the other guys started chiming in, and I had to raise my voice. "Hey, what are we doing discussing this sorta thing in public, huh?" I asked.

Immediately, they quieted down, but I could see my brothers in particular still trying to look like big tough guys. In my experience, there was no need to act like a tough guy if you were a tough guy. But then, Vin was just unhinged, Dezzzy was the weakest of the bunch, and Mikel was acting like his movie star persona, so he had to be cool.

"Hey, let's have a round of vodka!" Vin announced, getting a cheer out of everyone.

Being Russian, I couldn't say no to that. So we had a round—and then another round—and then another round. Before too long, I didn't really give a shit about Elisa anymore, and I kind of wanted to go see what kind of trouble we could stir up. Now might be as good a time as any to find the assholes who shot Yuri and tried to take our shipment.



Just as I was about to announce to the guys that I wanted to go do some exploring, some frat boy with his baseball cap on backward bumped into me, sloshing his beer all down my suit. Immediately, I jumped out of my seat.

“Watch it, bro,” he muttered, stepping away from me.

“Watch it, bro?” I echoed, grabbing him by the back of his shirt and swinging him around. The beer sloshed out of his glass again and spilled all down his front.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.” He rolled his eyes at me.

That was the wrong fucking thing to do. If I had my way, he wouldn’t be seeing anything else but stars for the rest of the night. And I always had my way.

I punched him right in the nose, sending blood spurting all over the place. He screamed like a little girl, dropping his beer onto the wooden floor. The glass shattered, spraying people who were standing nearby.

“What the fuck?” some other guy dressed in similar frat boy attire shouted, coming at me. Laughing, I ducked his lousy attempt at a punch and shoved my fist into his gut until he couldn’t breathe.

And then it was fucking on.

My boys jumped up from the table as the rest of the crowd suddenly became involved. Girls screamed and ran for cover while some dudes who thought their balls were big enough to get involved with the Petrovs came flying at us.

My eye was on the little turd on the floor, though, the one that had started the whole thing. I went after him, both fists fully loaded. I didn’t stop until he was crying and bleeding from every orifice in his body.

The sound of sirens outside alerted us that we needed to get out. Turning around, I looked for the closest exit and saw Marty, the club owner, standing there with an irritated look on his face. Even though we didn’t frequent the joint, Marty, like everyone in this town, knew who we were, and he knew better than to piss us off. I wouldn’t exactly call him a friend, but we could count on him in a time like this.

“Come on, Daemon,” he said to me. “I’ll take you through the back so the cops don’t see you.”

“Thanks, Marty.” Looking over my shoulder, I saw my brothers and the other guys fall into line. Dezzy had a black eye, and a couple of the other guys were bleeding from various cuts, but for the most part, we were walking out of there with a clean bill of health.

Marty hustled us through the back exit. When we reached the door, he patted me on the shoulder. “I’ll be sure to send you the surveillance tape so you can watch that epic beatdown over and over again.”

“Do that. And send me a bill for any damages.” I thanked him again before we got into our cars and disappeared into the night, just as the cops were pulling up out front.

It probably wouldn’t have been more than a little hassle even if the cops had gotten there before we left since I knew a few guys at the precinct, but still, I didn’t want to bother with that shit, not tonight.

Driving with the top down, flying down the highway, I felt like a million bucks. Completely carefree and uninterested in what anyone else in the fucking world thought about me. It was just like I’d been before this shitshow with Alexander La Rosa had begun. I’d gotten my fight in, and now, I wanted to go home.

Pulling into the garage, my mind went to that angel upstairs in the cage. God, she was so fucking hot. But I needed to make sure she was punished for her bad behavior earlier in the day. If I went up there and went soft on her, she’d think she’d cracked through my tough exterior and found some sort of gooey candy center. Well, that was bullshit. I didn’t know anything other than *hard*.

The scent of wet dog hit me the moment I opened the door. I should’ve had someone spray out that fucking cage before they brought it in here, but I’d been in too much of a hurry. When my temper got going, I didn’t always think straight.

I closed the door quietly and crossed to my bed. Inside the cage, I heard the soft sounds of her breathing. I couldn't see her, and I doubted she would be able to see me, but I was certain she was asleep now anyway.

In the darkness, I could be myself. When no one could see me, it didn't matter if my scars were exposed. Quietly, I unbuttoned my shirt, my eyes on that cage, but all I saw beyond the bars was darkness.

Thoughts of another girl came to mind. Jenny. Fuck, I missed her. It had been so long since she died. We were only children back then. What would she be doing now? Knowing Jen, she'd be successful at whatever she did. Would she even want to have anything to do with me? I probably wouldn't be the same asshole I was now if she'd lived.

But then, Jenny had gotten killed because of who I was, the family I belonged to, and I couldn't ever let that happen to anyone else.

No, in order to make sure it didn't, I'd become exactly the same kind of killer that had taken that innocent life all of those years ago.

Shaking my head, I pushed her image out of my mind, thinking instead of Elisa, trying to remind myself that she was mine to use and abuse—as monsters did.

I tossed my shirt aside and slid out of my pants and boxers before sitting down on the edge of my bed, my dick hard as a rock. Inside the cage, I saw nothing but blackness—just like the inside of my soul.

## CHAPTER 26



**D**aemon didn't seem to be trying not to disturb my slumber when he entered the room in the middle of the night.

I'd finally fallen asleep, curled up in the dog kennel, but when I heard the door open, I awoke with a crick in my neck. Peering out through the slats, I could see that it was him. His dark eyes glanced in my direction a few times, but I didn't think he could see me well enough to know that I was awake.

I could smell the alcohol on him over the stench of dog. Perhaps I'd gotten used to the smell of Fido and could now finally distinguish other odors, or maybe he'd been drinking so much tonight that it was just that pungent, but it was clear he was drunk.

Not off balance, though. The man still had that cadence in his gait, the one of confident self-assuredness that immediately made my panties damp. How could my body respond so completely to a man who'd locked me in a dog cage only a few hours ago? I had no idea, yet I wanted him.

Maybe something was wrong with me too.

Moonlight filtered through the curtains, illuminating his form, not enough for me to see the details—the lock of hair that always arched over his left eye, the dimple that formed when he said something sarcastic near the right corner of his mouth, those were hidden. But I could see his outline, his silhouette opening my eyes to gaze at the man in ways I never had before.

Daemon kicked off his shoes and socks before he began to unbutton his shirt. Catching my breath, I tried not to make a sound. Like watching a wild animal in its natural habitat without knowing it was being observed, I was spying on him, trying to see what he was really about under that exterior.

When he pulled the garment off over his shoulders, the outline of the muscles I'd felt against my palms but had never seen were revealed to me. He was chiseled like a sculpture by a Renaissance-era artist. The man was well crafted, every detail working together to make his biceps, pecs, and abdomen perfect in every way. I wanted to run my hands over his skin, to feel my own flesh sizzle from the heat of his flawless physique.

He unbuttoned his pants next. My eyes stayed focused on his upper torso, though, the parts of him I'd never seen before. Bone white in the moonlight, a story written in scars began to reveal itself to me. The marks on his back and shoulders, jagged and haphazard, spoke of fights he'd won, confirming to me that Daemon Petrov was not the type of man one wanted to tangle with.

But the scars on his left arm told a different story altogether. Lined up in a neat row from his upper arm to his elbow, he had several marks all the same length and width. It would've been impossible for him to do that to himself. They spoke of pain, of torment, of a past I might never be able to unlock. Though this story was written in a language I didn't understand, the message was loud and clear. His scars were as old as mine, though all of my scars were left on the inside.

Daemon Petrov had been hurt before, and his only way of dealing with it was to hurt others before he could be brutalized again.

Tears sprang to my eyes thinking about it. Despite what he'd done to me, I felt for him. My heart ached, and I longed to touch him, to let him know I was that soft place he was looking for—if only he'd allow himself to fall.

His pants were off now, and he was sitting on the edge of the bed, his thick cock standing at attention. My feelings

shifted from longing and despair to a more familiar ache, the want that constantly burned like fire inside of me.

Stroking his cock, he looked in my direction, his dark eyes nothing but shadows in the night. I couldn't see much of anything now, certainly not the details of his tattoos or even the ripple of muscles in his arm as he pumped, but I could see *him*. The way his attention was focused in my direction had me assuming he was thinking about me—that he wanted me.

And god, how I fucking wanted him.

Without a thought, I let my fingers wander, slipping them down below my skirt, inside of my panties. It was hard to do it in this little cage, but I made it work. Slick with need, my fingertips slid through my folds as I rubbed my clit, wishing it was Daemon's mouth on me instead. When I slipped three fingers inside and began to ride my own hand, a moan escaped my lips.

I couldn't help it.

Frozen, I stared at him. How would he react to knowing I was watching him? Would he punish me further?

Daemon froze, too, but only for a moment before he began to pump his hand harder. Excitement pulsed within me. Spreading my legs the best I could, I situated myself so that my pussy was as close to the opening of the cage where the bars were located as I could get it. I wanted him to see me, too. My eyes locked on his as the two of us continued to pleasure ourselves, thinking only of one another.

Before he finished, Daemon flew up off the bed, making his way swiftly to my cage. Somehow, he managed to yank the entire door off the kennel without even unlocking it. Broken hinges hung from one side as the door slumped to the other.

Without a word, he grabbed me and yanked me out of the kennel, his mouth descending upon mine as he ripped my dress free from my body. He didn't even remove my panties as we tumbled onto the bed and he entered me, tugging the wet fabric to the side. His thrusts were deep, desperate, and each one sent me further over the edge.

Before he could climax, he pulled out, tearing my panties off me. Daemon ordered me to flip over, which I did. With him standing at the foot of the bed, he directed my hips and thrust inside me again, this time taking my breath away with his power and ferocity.

My breasts bounced up and down with every plunge, and my fingers splayed on the bedspread, trying to gain some traction, but I ended up face first in the mattress, and I didn't even care. Daemon had already stolen my breath away, so I had no need to breathe.

Within seconds, I was lost to the world as an orgasm ripped through my body, hard. All I could do was slam my fist into the bed and swear, it felt so fucking good. I thought he was about to join me when he slowed down. Rather than pounding away at me like a sledgehammer, he pulled my hips tighter against him and began to grind into me with every movement. My swollen clit hummed in protest and euphoria, refusing to come down from the high he had induced in me.

I wanted him to feel this, too, but I knew, once he came, it would all be over. I wasn't sure how much more I could take. Using my inner muscles, I squeezed against him. The first time, he chuckled under his breath.

"Fuck, Elisa," was all he said, but I knew he liked it, so I kept doing it, sliding around his dick, gripping it as tightly as I could and then letting go.

Within a few minutes, he began to grunt. Daemon picked up the pace then, and it wasn't long until his warm seed filled me.

We were finished now, I assumed. Disappointment settled over me, not because I hadn't had a massive orgasm but because I wanted more of him—I wanted *all* of him.

Much to my surprise, Daemon flipped me over onto my back and lowered his head to my breasts, taking a nipple between his lips and lapping and sucking, hard. Once again, I felt my body tensing up with pleasure. His other hand worked my nipple, pulling and tugging at the sensitive skin until I was nearly tumbling over the edge again.



By then, he was hard and ready to go for another round. Climbing on the bed between my legs, he moved me toward the headboard and then lifted my hips so that he slid inside me at an angle. My knees at his hips, he began to move again, taking his time, building up to what was sure to be a heavenly climax.

I wasn't sure how much more my body could handle. Every brush of his skin against mine felt like a lightning bolt rocketing through me. My craving for him, my longing to feel alive and on fire mingled with the heightened sensitivity of my body, leaving me panting and cursing, wanting him and fearing all that he could do to me.

When I began to spasm again, my mouth dropping open and my eyes rolling back, Daemon pressed his lips to mine, then kissed along my jawline and my neck. He kept me there for so long, my lungs began to burn. Then, once again, his warmth filled me, and a few last grunts from my dark angel left us both lying intertwined on top of the damp comforter.

The connection I'd felt with him earlier in the day was back. I wanted to bury my head in his chest, close my eyes, and fall asleep in his arms. In that moment, he was everything I'd been longing for in my life, everything I'd been missing.

“Get back in your cage.”

His words didn't register the first time he said them. My mind was still foggy from sex, the connection I felt with him so real, I couldn't believe he would actually say something like that to me.

“Do it. Now. Get the fuck out of my bed.”

Realizing he wasn't playing, I turned and looked at him, hoping he couldn't see the hurt in my eyes since it was so dark. “But... there's not even a door.”

“Then it should be easier for you to get in.” Daemon's dark eyes had that sinister glare. He wasn't kidding. He really wanted me to get out of his nice warm bed and get back into that smelly, disgusting dog cage after we'd just had sex.

My mind went back to those scars I'd seen on his arm. Not all monsters are born—some are made. Dameon wasn't like this because he wanted to be. Someone had turned him into this cruel, heartless bastard.

Without another word, I slid off the bed, grabbing my dress and putting it back on. Thankfully, only the collar was torn a bit.

I'd almost reached the cage when he said, "Elisa?"

Stopping in my tracks, I turned back to face him, hoping he had just been testing my loyalty and didn't actually expect me to get into the cage.

A pillow hit me in the face as I turned back around. "Take this."

If it hadn't hit me in the face, I might've thought it was a sweet gesture. Well, it was better than nothing. With the pillow in my hands, I crawled back into the dog cage, wrapping half of the blanket around me and lying on the other half. The scent of dog still hung heavy in the air, but I could also smell Daemon all over my body. That was the kind of fragrance I wanted to wrap myself up in and fall asleep.

Lying there, listening to him snore softly, I had to wonder, how fucked up was I that I thought him giving me a pillow to sleep in the dog cage was sweet? He had me wrapped so tightly around his finger, I would do anything he said at any moment just to be with him.

Tears fell from my eyes, but I buried my face in the pillow, not wanting him to hear. If he knew I was crying, then he might have some idea of just exactly what he'd done to me—and that was the sort of knowledge that would allow him to tear me apart.

## CHAPTER 27



## DAEMON

The overpowering stench of antiseptic burned my lungs as I headed down the hallway of St. Mark's Hospital, Dezzy beside me. I fucking hated hospitals, but I needed to see Yuri.

It had been a couple of days since the shootout when he'd been injured, and I hadn't been by yet. I told myself I was busy, and while that wasn't the whole truth, the fact of the matter was I'd hated hospitals ever since I'd seen my first love bloody and lifeless lying on a hospital bed with defeated doctors in tears wishing they could've saved her.

I pushed the image out of my mind. No reason to dwell on her right now. I was there to see Yuri, so I needed to stay focused on making sure that my youngest recruit had everything he needed.

My disposition must've been obvious to Dezzy because he arched an eyebrow at me as we approached the room number the nurse at the front desk had given us. "You okay, Daemon? You look a little irritated."

"I'm fine, brother," I assured him. "Let's just see how our man is doing, okay?"

Dezzy being the smart man that he was didn't ask any more questions and headed into the room with a loud greeting. "Yuri! How you doin', buddy?"

Yuri was sitting up in the bed, his color even paler than normal, except for the dark circles under his eyes. He was wearing an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose. Machines

buzzed and whirred around him, but his smile lit up the room as we entered. “Dezzy! Bossman! Look who’s here!”

We walked over and clasped his hand, Dezzy giving him a partial hug, though I was afraid to hug him because I didn’t want to hurt him.

“How are you?” I asked as the two of us settled into the chairs against the wall for visitors. The room wasn’t very big, so we could hold a discussion without having to yell across the space.

“I’m good, I’m good,” Yuri said with a slight nod. “Bullet went through my lung, but the surgery went well. Doc said I might have some trouble breathing for a little while, but it’s not a big deal. I’ll be back out there with you guys before you know it.”

Something about the way he made that last statement reminded me of a question. Was he unsure as to whether or not we wanted him back when he was healed?

“Hell, yeah. That’s what I’m talking about,” Dezzy said, clapping his hands.

“That’s right, Yuri. We’ll have you back with us in no time.”

Hearing Dezzy say that he could come back was one thing, but when I agreed, he seemed a lot more relieved.

We spent a few minutes catching up, talking in general terms about how everyone was doing and the business without saying anything that might be incriminating, since we all knew that the nurses’ station could check in on us at any time.

There was a camera over by the door that they used to monitor their patient, and while I doubted they had time to sit around and listen in on conversations, who the hell knew for sure? Especially since Yuri was a gunshot victim. We typically tried to stay away from hospitals and had our own doctors we paid on the side, but in this case, if we hadn’t brought the kid in, he would’ve died. Luckily, one of our docs was on staff here, so we hadn’t had too many issues.

“We have any idea who we’re looking for?” Yuri asked. “You guys still think it was you know who?”

Dezzy shook his head. “We don’t know for sure, but we’re gonna find out.”

“You know, I saw something—” Yuri began, but before he could finish, the door opened, and a young woman, petite, with dark hair and a curvy figure walked in, a baby girl in her arms. At first, her smile was wide as she looked at Yuri.

But then she saw us.

My Russian wasn’t fantastic, but I understood enough to know she wasn’t happy with us.

“Inessa, baby!” Yuri said, reaching out to her, though she was too far away for him to even begin to reach her. “Please, calm down.” He continued to tell her in Russian that it wasn’t our fault he’d gotten shot, that she needed to be nice to his employers.

It was clear that Inessa wasn’t happy, though. She scowled at us, and then said something to Yuri about coming back later.

“Inessa, wait. Let me at least kiss Mila, huh?” Yuri pleaded.

With a grunt, the tiny woman took the baby over to him. Yuri pulled the oxygen mask off for a moment and cooed at his daughter, who smiled and pulled on his nose. He kissed her and handed her back to his wife. When he puckered up for Inessa, she reluctantly leaned down and kissed him on the lips before taking her baby and leaving.

Once she was out the door, Yuri said, “I’m so sorry about that. She doesn’t understand that this is my job, what pays the bills. She was just afraid of losing me, that’s all.”

I nodded, not sure what to say. I couldn’t blame her for being upset, though she should’ve been angry at the bastards that shot him, not us.

“I guess this line of work isn’t really for folks who have families, huh?” Yuri chuckled, but then his expression changed. “Not that I think you should fire me or anything.”

I completely understood what he was saying. It had definitely crossed my mind a time or two that if Elisa was my girlfriend—or some other chick—it could always be a possibility that she might never see me again. She'd be sitting at home, fearing the worst every night, while I was out doing my job, a job that I loved.

“We're not going to fire you, man,” Dezzy assured him.

I concurred with a nod, and Yuri's disposition settled again, the look of fear etched on his face replaced with the somewhat pained look he'd worn since we walked into the room.

“What was it you were saying that you saw?” I asked him.

“Oh, right. Well, when I charged the vehicle, I noticed a few things about the guy who shot me. Even with his balaclava on, I could tell he was a white guy. He smelled like cabbage, which was strange to me. And then, there was the symbol on his weapon.”

“Symbol?” I asked. “What kind of symbol?”

“Well, it was something I'd never seen before, but I bet if I saw it again, I'd recognize it. In fact, while I've been laying here doing nothing for the last few days, it's been on my mind a lot.”

“What did it look like?” Dezzy asked.

“It was like a cross—but it had a little squiggly line on it. I noticed it when the bastard went to kick me out of the truck, while I was pulling on his leg.” Yuri shook his head. “I don't know if it means anything or not, but it's stuck with me.”

“Could you sketch it for us?” I asked him. In my experience, people didn't have symbols etched into their weapons for no reason.

“Yeah, I think so.” Yuri nodded.

Dezzy hopped up and opened the drawers in the nightstand, finding a notepad and a pen. Yuri thought for a second and then began to draw, making a few corrections as he went.

“There you go,” he finally said. “It’s like that.”

Looking at the paper, Dezzy and I were both at a loss. I’d never seen that symbol before, and I had no idea what it might mean. But at least we had a place to start.

“Thanks,” I told him. “Don’t worry, kid. We’re going to get to the bottom of this. We’ll find the fuckers who did this and make them pay.”

“I know you will, boss.” Yuri sounded relieved.

“Cops come sniffing around yet?” Dezzy asked.

“No, not yet, but I expect them to,” Yuri admitted. “I know we’re doing what we can to keep them off our asses, but I was shot, after all. Don’t worry. I’ll play dumb.”

I smiled at him as Dezzy and I both stood. “You don’t know nothin’.” We all laughed, and Dezzy and I told him goodbye.

I needed to start investigating this symbol. Yuri might not know anything if the cops asked, but someone out there knew something when I asked.

A few hours later, I found myself back at Ringo’s, Dezzy alongside me. The moment I walked in, the crowd dispersed, everyone taking to the far corners of the bar as if one look from me might turn them to stone. Inwardly, I chuckled. And that bastard Charlie Pritchett dared to say we weren’t the motherfucking bosses in this town.

“If it isn’t the Petrov brothers.” Even Ringo sounded leery of us. “How can I help the two of you tonight?”

“We got a question for you, Ringo,” I began. The bartender nodded. He’d been around this area for a long time, knew a lot of people. Overheard a lot of conversations. He was the kind of guy I went to when I needed information. Pulling out the paper from the hospital, I showed him the insignia Yuri had drawn. “You ever seen anything like this before?”

Ringo took one look at it and started nodding. “Yeah, sure. I’ve seen it before. A few guys who come in here have it



tattooed on their arms. Another guy wears it on his leather jacket.”

“Who?” Dezzy asked.

“Uh, not sure what his real name is. They call him Slepka.” Ringo shrugged, wiping down the bar with a nasty towel, as he always did.

“Slepka?” Dezzy echoed. “What the hell kinda language is that?”

“It’s Latvian,” I answered before Ringo could open his mouth. “Are they all Latvian?”

“I think so,” Ringo replied. “They sit around here speaking some language I don’t know, but he did tell me once that Slepka means killer—in Latvian.”

I nodded. I knew the word, one of only a few Latvian words I’d picked up a few months ago. Turning to Dezzy, I asked, “You remember that dog fighting ring, right?”

“Of course I do. Hell, I just brought you a cage we confiscated from that deal the other night, though you still haven’t told me why.” He made a face at me, but I just shook my head. Now was not the time.

“These guys must be part of that Latvian gang.” I kept my voice down, not wanting anyone to overhear. Ringo liked to gather information for us because he knew he could be helpful, but one look from me, and he strolled away.

“What, the Savages? No way, Daemon. There’s no fucking way those small-time bastards are behind this attempted robbery. They wouldn’t have the manpower to go after us like that. They’re a bunch of amateurs. Fuck, they couldn’t even keep their fighting dogs away from us, let alone drugs or money. No, I don’t think it’s them moving in on our business.”

Ordinarily, I would’ve agreed with him, but there was something he wasn’t considering. “Maybe they’re not acting alone, Dez. They would make a good cover group for someone bigger to move in and invade our territory.”

Dezzy pondered that, rubbing his jaw. “You mean like the La Rosas?”

My first instinct was to say exactly like the La Rosas. But my gut was telling me no, that was too obvious. “I’m not sure,” I admitted. “But what I do know for certain is we need to find these fucking Savages. That bastard in the warehouse might’ve kept his mouth shut, but I guarantee we can find a guy who will talk if we press him enough. There’s always at least one.”

Dezzy nodded. “Then let’s go find us some Savages.”

## CHAPTER 28



The tile on the bathroom floor in Daemon's ensuite was laid out in a grid pattern, twenty-four tiles long and eighteen tiles wide. I knew that because I'd gotten so bored earlier in the day, I'd counted them. Now, lying on his bed, draped over the side, I stared down at the carpet, wondering if I could count the individual threads that made up the area beneath the shadow of the bedside lamp cast on the floor by the sun filtering through the shades before it moved.

I was bored out of my fucking mind.

But I wasn't in the cage. No, since Daemon had ripped the door off, I'd decided I was no longer going to be a good little doggy and sleep in my quarters all day. No, like a pampered poodle, I was lying on the bed. Of course, when my master came home from his long day of whatever the hell he did, I supposed he'd yell at me and tell me to get down, maybe even swat me a time or two, but it would be worth it not to be curled up in that cage all damn day.

Being bored out of my mind had given me plenty of chances to think about what I wanted to be doing—what I should have been doing. Right about now, I'd be working on an interesting case at the firm, sitting at my desk, talking to Heck about the evidence we could use to build our case. I'd be making friends with the other workers, hanging out with Sara in the evenings and watching fucking Netflix on the weekends instead of sitting here cooped up in this damn house with these crazy people.

Sighing, I flipped over so I was now hanging upside down. I needed to find something to do or else I was going to lose my mind.

I'd thought for sure Daemon had to have a secret television in this room somewhere, but I'd come up emptyhanded. I'd already taken a bath and eaten two meals. I could always ask Janis for more food, but I wasn't even hungry, and I refused to be one of those people who put on pounds because they didn't know the difference between boredom and hunger.

"What the fuck am I going to do with my life?" I asked the ceiling. It didn't answer.

But the door did open. Immediately, I sat up, bracing myself for the anger that was certainly about to be unleashed on me the moment Daemon realized I wasn't in my cage. Sure, it had seemed like a good idea to get out of it while he was away before, but now? Well, I didn't need him to make me dead.

"Oh, don't you look all cozy." Lillian glided into the room with a friendly smile on her face. Before I could respond, she noticed the dog kennel. "What in the world is that all about?"

I couldn't tell her the truth. It was too humiliating. But the blanket and pillow were visible, hanging out the door. Still, I played dumb. "Search me," I said with a shrug.

"Really?" One perfectly sculpted eyebrow stayed arched over a dark eye. She didn't believe me, but she raised her hands and lowered them, brushing it off. "What you kids do behind closed doors is not my business."

My mouth dropped open, and I felt my cheeks heat up, but I said nothing. What could I say?

Lillian waltzed over and sat down in a chair near the window. An identical black leather chair sat across from it. She motioned for me to come over.

All I had to wear was the torn dress I'd had on when Daemon had insisted I come with him and his robe, which I'd found hanging in the bathroom, so I wasn't exactly dressed for company, but I didn't have much choice but to do as the lady

of the house asked. I slunk off the bed and had a seat, pulling the robe closed around me.

“That was a birthday gift,” she muttered, eyeing the navy blue plush terrycloth. “From Italy.”

“Oh. It’s very comfortable.” I forced myself to smile and pretend like all of this was normal everyday stuff. “How are you today?”

“I’m delightful, as always,” she said, her smile widening. “I just wanted to see how you were settling in. It seems that you and Daemon are getting along nicely.”

It wasn’t phrased like a question, but the intonation was there at the end. “Yes, I suppose we are,” I replied with a nod. I didn’t think Daemon’s mother needed to know the truth of the matter, how he constantly humiliated me, used me for sex, and then walked away.

“That’s so wonderful to hear, dear.” Her smile continued to beam. “You know, the two of you being happy together furthers the harmony between our two families, and your father and I want nothing more than for the La Rosas and the Petrovs to finally get along.”

Her words made my stomach churn. My father’s happiness was the least of my concerns at the moment, considering it had been his idea to make me come here to begin with. I only nodded, trying to at least look cheerful.

“However, I do have to warn you.” Lillian’s smile faded. She looked at the floor and shook her head for a few moments before raising her eyes to look at me again. “Daemon is a dangerous man. You need to be careful, darling.”

I almost laughed. “Yes, I know,” I told her. How could I have grown up in a crime family and not have had any idea how dangerous all of the people involved in the syndicate were, especially the leaders?

“No, I don’t think you quite understand. My Daemon is a good, strong man, but there’s more to him than you realize. He’s a natural-born killer. Sure, he had a rough childhood, and that contributed some. Wires got crossed or something. I’m

not sure. As much as I loved my boys, I'd be lying if I said I was the one who did the primary rearing of them. No, their father most certainly had the final say when it came to decisions about how our children would be raised."

Confused, I nodded along, listening to what she had to say but not really sure what she was getting at. Of course, I knew Daemon had had a rough childhood. I could identify with that. Visions of the scars I'd seen on his arm came back to me. Was that what Lillian was getting at now?

"But you see, something made him snap, even as a young man, and he hasn't been the same since. You should keep your distance, dear. If you get too close, well, you could end up like poor Jenny." A forlorn look crossed her face as she looked off into the distance, slowly shaking her head.

A chill ran down my spine. Jenny? I'd never heard that name before. Who the fuck was Jenny?

"What happened?" I prayed she'd actually answer my question because if she left it like that, well, I'd have to figure out a way to find out who Jenny was myself, and something told me neither Daemon nor Janis would be willing to say.

"Oh, Jenny was a beautiful girl. A wonderful, sweet young woman. Daemon was in love with her, and even though they were very young, we all thought it was meant to be. I dreamed of sitting at my son's wedding, watching him marry that beautiful girl. Even his father approved of her, which was a rarity, let me tell you. Daemon and his father hardly ever agreed on anything."

Swallowing back the lump forming in my throat, I asked the question I knew I had to ask. "What happened to Jenny?"

Lillian sucked in a deep breath, and when she let it go, her bottom lip began to quiver. "She died. It was awful. I still remember seeing her body in the hospital. The doctors did everything they could to save her. But she was too far gone. God, there was blood everywhere. It was like something out of a slasher film, really."

Bile rose in the back of my throat. "God."

“Yes, I know. It truly was terrible. Jenny was a lovely girl. I cared very much for her, Elisa. I can see a lot of her sweet, unassuming qualities in you. And I have to assume my son sees some resemblance as well. But that’s what frightens me, dear.” She leaned over and put her hand on my knee. “I would hate for him to do the same thing to you that he did to her.”

“Daemon?” Confusion washed over me again as I tried to decipher what she was saying based on the parts of the story she was leaving out. “He did something to her?”

Withdrawing her hand, she nodded. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. “He killed her, Elisa. Daemon killed Jenny.”

My mouth fell open. I didn’t know what to say, what to think. Was he actually capable of doing such a thing? Killing a young woman that he allegedly loved? “Why?”

“No one knows, not really. He claimed it was an accident, of course. But, well, we all saw the body. That was no accident.” Her eyes were glossy as she stared right into mine. “Do yourself a favor, sweetie. Don’t make Daemon feel emotions he doesn’t know how to handle. Whenever that happens, he loses control, and when he loses control, there’s no telling what might happen.” She stood, walked over to me, leaned down, and put her hand on my shoulder. “You’re far too beautiful to be turned inside out.” With that, she patted my shoulder and headed out of the room.

With her hand on the doorknob, she said, “I’m going to tell Janis to come and clean that thing. It smells awful.” Then she left.

It took me a moment to realize she meant the dog kennel.

Stunned, I crept back over to the bed, pulled my knees up to my chest, and lay there in the fetal position, trying to comprehend what I’d just been told.

Obviously, I’d figured out by now that Daemon could be a monster. But I’d always figured there were lines even monsters wouldn’t cross. Never in a million years would I have thought him capable of killing his girlfriend.



But why not? When I thought back over the way he'd treated me, how he'd humiliated me, treated me like a dog, yanked me around barefoot, used me for sex, and then discarded me—why wouldn't he be capable of killing me?

Still, thinking about his scars, the way he'd been raised, how his parents hadn't been there for him the same way mine weren't there for me, sadness enveloped me. It really wasn't fair for me to blame him after all he'd been through.

For the last five years, I'd been looking for a man who could make me feel what Daemon Petrov, my dark angel, elicited from me, and no one had come close. If I couldn't have him, I knew I'd never be happy with anyone else. No one else compared to him. No one.

Yes, he was dangerous, maybe even a little bit deranged, but didn't everyone deserve to be loved and cared for? Especially people like us whose parents had fucked us over?

There were times recently when I'd actually thought I might be falling in love with him, like when we were lying on my bed talking, before he flipped out about the coffee cup. I wanted to give him a chance. I wanted to see if there really was something more beneath that tough, dangerous exterior.

But then, I couldn't love him very well if I was dead, now could I?

Maybe it would be for the best if I took Lillian's advice and kept my distance.

Jenny's name would forever haunt me. Did she haunt Daemon, too, or did he even remember she'd ever existed?

If I died, would he remember me?

## CHAPTER 29



## DAEMON

Pulling into the garage late at night, Yuri was still on my mind. After speaking to Ringo and gathering as much information about the Savages as possible, I still needed more information on what was going on with these lowlifes. They shouldn't have had the muscle or the balls to steal from us in broad daylight. There was more going on there and I wanted to know what. But the day-to-day work of running the syndicate also took up my time, so there was still work to be done.

A plan had been formulating in my mind all day for how I could find out exactly what was going on. The biggest questions I had were whether the Latvians were acting alone and who, specifically, the jackasses who had tried to take our drugs and shot Yuri happened to be. I had to find them to make sure they all faced justice.

Walking into the house, I hung my keys up and headed down the hall to the stairs, trying to put thoughts of work out of my mind. That shouldn't be too hard to do considering there was a beautiful woman waiting for me in my bedroom, but then, she reminded me of work. How could a woman whose last name was La Rosa do anything but?

The lights were off when I entered the room. Since I'd ripped the door off the dog cage, I expected to see her lying on my bed. But she wasn't. Like an obedient pet, she was in her cage, and from the looks of things, she'd even managed to get the door back on.

Irritation bubbled up inside of me. I wanted her to disobey me and prove I'd been acting like a dick by getting out of her

cage. Having her stay in there, probably all day, just proved that she was an angel, one of the sweetest women in the world, and I'd been a bastard for ever doubting her.

I'd been hoping for another round of sex. When we'd fucked the other night, it had been unbelievable. That wasn't going to happen. I could see that now. Elisa was curled up, the blanket wrapped around her, probably already fast asleep.

If I made enough noise, she'd wake up. Then, maybe she'd let me know she wanted me, too. God, seeing her finger herself the other night while she watched me jack off had been enough to make my nuts explode. I wanted to watch her make herself come so bad.

I'd have to wait for another time, though. Reluctantly, I dragged myself into the bathroom to take a steamy shower. Fatigue caused my shoulders to slump beneath the hot water. All alone again, my thoughts went back to the syndicate. I needed to establish myself as the true boss. Everyone treated me like I already was now, even called me that, but it wasn't my title. Not yet.

Maybe if I figured out what was really going on with the Savages, I could claim that title for real. I'd still have Alexander La Rosa's ass to deal with, but that could come later.

At least I had the serenity of the hot water pouring over me to help lighten the load. I finally managed to push my worries aside and let things go, feeling the scalding heat of the water splashing over my skin. In my turbulent world, I needed an island of peace like this every once in a while. Unrushed, I took my time staying there long enough to drain at least one of the hot water tanks.

Clean on the outside but not completely unburdened, I got out, toweling off and drying my hair. I preferred to sleep naked, so I didn't bother to put any clothes on. Since Elisa was still asleep, I wasn't too concerned about her seeing my tattoo, but just in case she opened her eyes, I flung the towel over my left arm and headed out to the bedroom.

Elisa hadn't moved while I was gone. The hope that she'd be awake now faded. Going to the minibar across the room, I poured myself a whiskey and knocked it back, letting the sting in my throat settle before setting the glass down and heading to bed.

The peaceful retreat of the shower gone, even with my eyes closed, reaching for sleep, I couldn't find any solace. Something told me the night would be full of unsettling dreams—like usual.

The sun was already streaming through the cracks in the blinds when I opened my eyes the next morning. Light, even breathing from Elisa's cage indicated that she was still asleep. I sat up in bed, resting my elbows on my knees, trying to see if she'd even moved. The light didn't quite reach the back of the cage, so it was hard to see in, but I didn't think she'd even rolled over once. Maybe she couldn't. Was it that cramped in there?

Shaking my head, I bit back the hostility rising up inside of me. Why wouldn't she just wake up so we could fuck? The urge to make some noise was overwhelming. I could toss some shit around until she was awake.

My temper had a way of getting the best of me, and I needed to find a way to control it.

So I didn't storm around the room as I got dressed and prepared for the day. Once I was ready, I took one last look into her cage. She was either still asleep or one hell of an actress. With no need to say goodbye to someone who was out cold, I left.

With the top down on my favorite convertible, the spring breeze blowing through my hair, I decided to head over to the part of town where the Latvians tended to hang out. It wasn't quite established enough to be called Little Latvia, but it may as well have been. They owned a few restaurants, bars, and other shops within a few block radius north of the city center. Most of them lived in apartments or small houses around there as well. I had an idea of a guy who might be able to get me some answers.

It was still fairly early in the morning, so it might be hard to locate him. But Jimmy Popsicles usually hung out at the neighborhood diner. I had no idea how to pronounce his real name, and outside of the Latvians, neither did anyone else, but he answered just fine to Popsicles.

The scent of their popular porridge dish hit my lungs as I walked in, as well as the more common smell of fried eggs, which seemed to be a staple around the world. Taking a glance around, I looked for Jimmy's familiar face. When I saw him with a newspaper in hand, sitting toward the back of the diner, I couldn't help but grin. If anyone had answers for me, it would be this guy.

Another guy was sitting across from him in the booth at the moment. When I saw him pull his wallet out, I knew Jimmy was handling business as usual. It almost made me laugh. With Jimmy, you could place a bet on anything just about any time of day.

As soon as the other guy slid out of the booth, I headed over, taking his place. Jimmy was writing in a notebook, shoving whatever the guy had given him into his pocket. I had to assume it was cash, but I had no idea. Out of habit, I pulled my gun from its holster beneath the table, subtly, just in case. I didn't think Popsicles would give me any problems, but in a place like this where I was outnumbered and knew no one else, I couldn't be sure.

"Well, Mr. Petrov," Jimmy said, looking up at me with a grin on his face. "What kind of bet does a man like you want to place?"

Shaking my head, I told him, "I don't have time to watch sports, Jimmy."

He shrugged. "Doesn't have to be sports. People bet on all kinds of things. I'm always willing to accept a wager. Could be a celebrity death or the horses down at the track. A person doesn't have to know anything about sports to bet on a horse."

Again, I shook my head.

His smile widened, showing his discolored back teeth. “Or maybe you’d like to place a bet as to which location you can best find the gang that hit one of your trucks, huh?”

He had my attention now. “I’ll bet on that one, after you answer one question for me. How the fuck do you know about that?”

His laughter echoed through the diner, causing people to turn their heads, which I didn’t appreciate. “I’ll tell you as soon as you put the gun away.”

Keeping my eyes on his for a long moment, I slowly slipped the gun back into its holster. I could get to it fast enough if I needed it anyway.

“Everybody but you Petrovs knows who hit your truck. It’s no secret around here.”

“And why is that?” I had to ask.

“Because there are plenty of Latvian mothers mourning their stupid sons who didn’t come home, that’s why.” His eyes traveled around the room. I saw a few middle-aged women who might fit that description, but none of them were looking in our direction.

“That’s on them,” I reminded him. “We have a right to defend our property.”

“Sure, sure. I don’t disagree.” He folded his hands atop his book. “Business is business.”

“I know about the dog fighting, but there has to be more to it for a group so small to even attempt to pull off a heist that big.” I kept my voice low, leaning forward across the table. “We were under the impression the Savages, as they call themselves, were nothing but a bunch of small-time bastards.”

Shaking his head, Jimmy said, “Nah, not anymore. Not since they started bringing a bunch of pretty young Eastern European girls over. Fuck, they’ve got enough money to do whatever the hell they want to now.”

I understood. Sex trafficking. My stomach rolled. I’d done a lot of bad things in my life, but sex trafficking definitely

wasn't one of them. Even a guy like me had to have some kind of line. Apparently, these bastards didn't. Jimmy was describing *Taken*, but Liam Neeson was never gonna show up.

"If you want to find them, you'll need to go to the underground strip club, which is also a brothel," he told me. "But go in armed because the place will be heavily guarded."

I swore under my breath. All of this was good information to have, but it changed the scope of the problem. "Why are you telling me all of this, huh?" Surely, Jimmy wasn't playing me, was he?

"Are you kidding me? These sons of bitches are causing chaos. Chaos is not good for business, my friend. Besides, if you come in here tearing up the neighborhood looking for information, that's a problem for me, too. I may as well tell you what I know." He looked around. "No one in here is going to think it came from me. Especially if you place a bet." He chuckled, making me grumble under my breath.

"Fine." I reached into my wallet and pulled out some bills. "Put that on whatever horse is projected to win the next race."

Happily, Jimmy did as I asked. I had no idea what horse I was even betting on. "There we are," he said when he finished writing, putting my money in his pocket. "Now, you go fix this, Petrov. If you're half the bastard people say you are, I know you'll wipe these assholes out, and the world will be a much better place for innocent people like me."

Shaking my head at him, I thanked him for his help and got out of there. I had a strip club to scout out.



## CHAPTER 30



Pacing back and forth across Daemon's bedroom, I wavered back and forth between asking him point blank whether or not the story his mother had told me the day before was true to the other extreme of completely pretending Lillian had never entered the room.

Dressed in some clean clothes Janis had been kind enough to bring me, I felt better physically, but I was bored out of my mind and had nothing but time to think about everything that Lillian had said.

When Daemon came home, should I ask him point blank about the girl? No, that would probably be a mistake, and the last thing I needed was for him to attack me. I couldn't do anything dead.

Perhaps a more subtle approach would help me solve the mystery of whether or not Daemon was truly capable of killing the girl he loved when he was truly only a child himself.

Muttering aloud to myself, I asked, "What if I just asked him where he draws the line? What if I said something like, 'Hey, you'd never kill a child or an innocent woman, right?' No, then he might think I was on to him. He has no idea that his mother's been coming in here, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't figure it out."

Sighing, I dropped down on the bed, staring at the carpet. Nothing I thought of seemed like the right way to go, but I felt compelled to do something. I couldn't just stay here, locked in

this room, when the man who controlled my destiny may have actually killed the girl he allegedly loved.

He didn't even have those kinds of feelings for me, so who knew what I might do to piss him off and end up in the same boat Jenny had been in?

I wanted to know more about the situation, like what had happened between them and how he had done it, but it was too morbid to think about. Lillian described a graphic scene from a horror movie, which somehow made thinking that Daemon was capable of such a horrendous act even worse.

Either way, what had happened was atrocious, and Daemon simply couldn't be trusted if he would do something like that to an innocent girl.

"I could just run away." It wasn't the first time I'd thought about doing so, but this time, I knew I was fooling myself. The man had the sort of control over me that forced me to sleep in a giant dog kennel. What the fuck made me think I could just waltz right out of here and he wouldn't be able to stop me—or track me down? Nope. That really wasn't an option either.

"Fuck my life." I fell backward onto the bed, getting reacquainted with the ceiling. By now, we were old friends.

Maybe I couldn't run right now, but there were times when I might be able to. He did take me out from time to time. Whenever we were out in public again, maybe I could find a way to get away from him.

I doubted any of those signals girls were taught to use when they were caught by sex traffickers would work for me since no one would want to call the cops on Daemon Petrov, but maybe I could literally run away while he and his goons were distracted, beating a dude to death.

I wasn't sure, but I did know that running couldn't be completely off the table. Especially if I did something to make him mad again. A shiver went down my spine as I wondered how close I'd been to dying the other day when he'd put me in the dog cage instead.

A soft knock at the door had my head spinning. That could only be one person. “Yes?”

“Miss Elisa, I have your dinner.” Janis’s voice was soothing in the way an old melody might remind one of nicer times.

“Come in,” I called, standing.

He brought in a tray and set it on the table across the room. “I also brought a magazine I found that I thought might give you something to do. But if you don’t mind, please be sure to send it back with the dirty dishes. While I’m certain Mr. Daemon wouldn’t mind you having something to look at, perhaps we’d better not let him find out?” Always the distinguished gentleman, he stood with his shoulders back, chin up, back straight, and his hands folded behind his back.

I almost laughed because we both knew Mr. Daemon would, in fact, mind. “Thank you so much, Janis.”

“Of course. Will there be anything else?” he asked politely.

I looked around the room. A long list of items I’d love to have come to mind, but none of them were going to be easily brought to me. It wasn’t as if Daemon was going to overlook a television, my phone, or a laptop. “No, thank you.”

He nodded and left. Waiting for him to get down the hallway, I made sure no other footsteps could be heard before I approached the table. Relief washed over me as I saw the magazine he’d brought was one I actually liked. A fashion magazine with interesting articles—the best of both worlds.

I sat down to eat my spaghetti and read every single page, cover to cover, studying the pictures as I went. I must’ve spent two or three hours looking over it before Janis’s familiar knock on the door reminded me that time was up. Reluctantly, I tucked the magazine away and told him to come in.

He had a wide grin on his face. “Was everything to your liking, Miss Elisa?”

“Yes, thank you,” I told him. “The dinner was delicious. And the magazine was perfect.”

Janis laughed. "I'm glad you liked the dinner, but as to the other item, well, I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about." He winked at me and lifted the tray, carrying it all out of the room as he bid me goodnight.

It was getting late, although not by gangster standards. No, it could be another three or four hours before Daemon came home. Lately, he had been coming in around two in the morning.

I'd been pretending to sleep the night before because I didn't want to talk to him, but I was awake. The same with this morning. If he thought I was asleep, maybe something would change. Perhaps he'd grow bored of me and let me go, or maybe he'd find another pet to make his own.

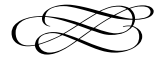
I found myself pacing again, trying to decide what to do, but I knew there were no clear answers. As the hours wore on, I contemplated getting back into my cage, but I didn't want to. It had been cleaned out, so the dog smell wasn't as bad, but still, it was demeaning.

Daemon had done that to me, treated me like a dog. Fuck him. And not in the fun way.

"Maybe he's dead," I thought to myself as three a.m. rolled around and he still wasn't back. "Maybe he got killed in a shootout, and this entire nightmare will finally be over." That would fix everything. I'd be able to start my life again, be free, and I wouldn't have to worry about the possibility of him killing me.

But then, if Daemon died, I knew a little part of my soul would die, too. Was it worth it? Every moment I spent with him when we were happy together made me think it wasn't. Other times, when he hurt me or threw me in the cage, fuck yeah. I'd trade my soul to see him dead.

## CHAPTER 31



## DAEMON

Wednesday morning, I called my brothers into the family meeting room in the mansion, grimy and tired from being up all night. Mikel joined us on video conference since he was back in Cali finishing up a movie. I almost rolled my eyes, thinking about how much easier his job was than the rest of us.

“Why do you smell so bad?” Dezzy asked, sitting down in a chair next to me. I glared at him. “Sorry. It’s just... didn’t you shower?”

“Fuck no, I haven’t showered, asshole,” I said, grabbing him by the back of the neck and roughing him up a little bit.

Vin laughed. If he hadn’t been on the other side of the table, he probably would’ve gotten a blow or two in as well. Vin didn’t need any excuse to punch someone.

“What’s going on, brother?” Mikel asked, rubbing his eyes. “Do you have any idea what time it is here?”

“No, I don’t know, and I don’t fucking care,” I told him. Honestly, I was surprised he’d even answered, but then, judging by his attire, he’d probably just gotten in. The sun had barely risen in Chicago, so it was probably the end of a long night out on the town for our youngest brother. So much for making a movie. “Listen, I spent the night staked out across the street from a strip club over in the Latvian part of town, so I’m really not in any mood for bullshit, all right?”

“Geez,” Dezzy muttered, everyone growing serious now. “Where the hell were you staked out? A dumpster?”

“It wasn’t a fucking dumpster. It wasn’t glamorous, but it got the job done.” They didn’t need to know I’d been in an alley that had an exceptional view of the back door of the club. I’d learned that was where the johns came who were looking for the girls who were being held against their will and forced to entertain these pricks. “We need to establish exactly what we’re up against here, what their manpower is, how much firepower they’re packing. They’ve grown quite a bit recently, so it’s hard to say, but I think I’ve got an idea of what they’ll bring against us now.”

“We can handle ‘em, no problem,” Vin said with a shrug. “I ain’t afraid of nobody. I’ll rip all of their fucking heads off.”

Dezzy raised his fist for a bump, and Vin obliged. Dezzy might not be as much of a cold-blooded killer as Vin, but he was supportive, that was for damn sure.

“What’s the plan, boss?” Mikel asked, and I cringed a little at that title, like I always did.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you guys about today. We need to come up with a plan. The quicker we handle these Savages, the easier it will be for us to move forward with the next steps in growing the syndicate. These assholes think they can move in on our territory, and we need to make sure they’re shut down real quick.”

All of my brothers nodded in agreement, Vin making his hand into a gun and pretending to blow the fuckers’ brains out.

“But there’s something else I wanted to talk about.” The next topic was a delicate one for me, although I didn’t let that stop me. These were my brothers, my best friends. If I couldn’t trust them, I couldn’t trust anyone. I knew all three of them had my back, though. “It’s time for me to officially take over the syndicate.”

Vin and Dezzy exchanged glances, eyebrows raised. I waited, wanting to hear if either of them would object.

They didn’t.

“Fuck yeah,” Vin said. “It’s about time.”



“You know we support you all the way, brother,” Dezzzy added.

“You give the orders, and we’re your guys.” Mikel nodded with a crooked grin.

I couldn’t let them see the relief flooding through me. Growing up, our father had always pitted us against each other, and that competitive spirit came out sometimes even now. But none of them were looking to challenge me for the spot they knew I had earned.

I nodded. “All right then. Here’s my concern. Ever since Dad got his ticket punched, I’ve been running everything anyway. I figure, with the La Rosas acting all dicey, Ma being wishy-washy on exactly where her loyalties lie, and new groups attempting to move in on our territory, we need someone to take complete control and establish himself as the boss—once and for all.”

All three of them nodded along as I spoke.

“I still can’t figure out Ma’s angle,” Dezzzy said, all of us agreeing. “Her marrying our worst enemy just doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

“She’s lost her damn mind,” Vin offered. “Dad took a dirt nap and she lost it.”

“Regardless of what’s going on with our mother and La Rosa, we have to make sure that there’s no question who is in charge here. Otherwise, the old bastard might take it as an invitation to try to establish himself as the one in charge, and that’s not going to be him. Six months ago, when I took the old man out, I didn’t feel the insistence of making things official. Let’s just say that now I do.”

Dezzzy cleared his throat. “Having Ma making decisions has muddied the waters a bit for some of the other capos and lieutenants. Some of the old guard. Our guys all know without question that they answer to you, but she’s got a few guys that seem loyal to her, and then there’s the guys a couple of levels down who get confused. They basically follow any order

anyone gives to them. Hell, Vin could tell them to kill someone and they would.”

We all snickered at that. Vin pretended to shoot Dezzy with his hand. He was either a ruthless killer or an eight-year-old playing cops and robbers—sometimes I wasn’t sure.

“I agree. That’s why my being in charge will make everything clearer for everyone,” I replied.

“But what about Ma?” Mikel asked, quieting us all down. “You know I support you. That’s not why I’m asking. Is she going to go for this, or is she going to fight us? I really hope she’ll just give you her blessing. It would make it a whole lot easier.”

“Honestly, brother, I don’t give a fuck. She can fight me if she wants to.” I shrugged like it was no big deal, even though I didn’t want to tangle with her, especially if she had La Rosa’s backing.

“I’m just saying, things could get messy,” Mikel reiterated. “We don’t want a war on two fronts if we can help it.”

“I get it,” I said. “I just don’t care.”

“Bring it on,” Vin said. “None of us have ever backed down from a fight. I’ll fucking kill all of them.”

“Even Ma?” Dezzy asked.

“Even *you*,” Vin said, completely straight-faced. But then he started laughing like a maniac. Dezzy kicked him under the table. Vin hid a grimace, but I knew that it hurt.

Turning to me, Dezzy said, “With those lieutenants that may stay loyal to Ma, it could get messy, but we do have to think about La Rosa. If he comes in on her side, that makes things complicated.”

His words pissed me off, not at Dezzy, but just in general. I pounded my fist down on the table. “Fucking La Rosas. Always in the way, always fucking everything up.” I ran a hand through my hair, wishing I didn’t have to try to figure this out. Alexander La Rosa was supposed to be my enemy,

and now he was technically my stepfather. What the fuck was she thinking?

“It has to be a tactical move,” I told them. “She didn’t explain to me what she was thinking, but it’s got to be the only way. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer kinda bullshit.”

“Listen, like I said, I support you fully, Daemon. We all do,” Mikel said, leaning closer to the camera. “I’m just suggesting we figure out Mother’s intentions before we go making declarations, that’s all.”

Gritting my teeth, I bit out, “I’m not backing down from anyone.”

“And I’m not saying I think you should,” he clarified. “But at the end of the day, we’ve got to do what’s best for the family. Of course, that’s you as the boss. There’s no question in my mind about that. It’s the *how* that I’m worried about. You know, sometimes Ma has to think things are her idea.”

I continued to glare, not sure what to say.

“We can’t go off half-cocked,” he continued. “You’re a great leader, Daemon. And as you know, that means you’ve gotta be thoughtful, take your time, make good decisions.”

“I’ve been thinking about this a long time, Mikel,” I reminded him. “About six months.”

“I have no doubt about that. I’m just saying we need to consider the timing. Maybe use the Savages issue to cement your position as the boss, rather than taking on both problems at one time?”

“It will be harder to fight Mom and the Latvians at the same time,” Dezzy agreed.

Anger boiled up inside of me, but I pushed it back down. It wouldn’t do to start shouting when we were discussing whether or not I would make the best leader. I needed to show them that I could make calm, unemotional decisions. Right now, I wasn’t doing that.

I took a few deep breaths and tried to stay composed. I'd waited this long. What was a bit longer?

It felt like a fucking eternity.

"What about the girl?"

Vin's question had my head spinning to face him. "What about her?"

My brother raised his hands in defense. "Whoa. Someone's touchy." I continued to glare at him, daring him to say something else objectionable. "I was just thinking, do you think there's a chance the girl knows more than she's said?"

"If she did, don't you think he would've gotten it out of her by now?" Dezzy asked, scoffing.

"She doesn't know anything," I assured them. "Her old man didn't tell her jack shit."

Mikel shook his head on the screen. "You're sure? She doesn't know why they got married, none of that? She's not just yanking your chain?"

I shook my head, and Dezzy chimed in. "What about her brothers? Is she close to any of them? Maybe if she is you can get her to talk to one of them and see if they can tell her anything."

Immediately, my insides twisted as I thought about how angry I'd been that she'd spoken to her brother Drake. Now, I was supposed to go back and ask her if she could contact her brothers to see if they knew what was going on? Fuck, no.

Shaking my head, I assured them that she knew nothing. "Elisa's been away from the family for five years. The only brother she's close to is a doctor, and he's been away from the family business for even longer than her. I guarantee, if she knew something, she would've told me by now."

"That sucks," Dezzy mumbled. "Under other circumstances, she would make the perfect spy."

"We might not be able to get any insider information on the La Rosas, but we can send someone into the Savages' brothel to poke around," I told them. Looking at Vin, I said,

“Get Lanny on it. I trust the guy. Have him gather intel for when we go in and make those assholes regret ever even thinking about crossing the Petrovs.”

“Sure thing, bo—buddy.” Vin chuckled, knowing his change in direction would piss me off. I tried not to show it. I’d been called boss a thousand times since I murdered my father, but I’d actually prefer to be called just about anything else until it was official.

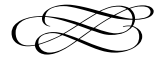
“All right. Let’s get that done. Once Lanny has some intel, we’ll meet back to decide our next move. Then, we’ll do whatever it takes to wipe these wannabe mobsters off the map.” I gave a definitive nod, ready to go to bed. I was exhausted and smelled like garbage.

“So, what are you gonna do now?” Dezzy asked with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Shrugging, I said, “I think I’ll get some sleep. But first... maybe I’ll help my new pet get a little exercise.”

Dezzy, who’d brought me the cage, knew exactly what I meant and started laughing like a patient in a psychiatric ward in a horror movie while my other two brothers gave me puzzled looks. Getting up from the table, I headed back to my room, ready to walk the dog.

## CHAPTER 32



I must have dozed off. I didn't even realize I was asleep until I heard the sound of Daemon's bedroom door opening. Startled, I sat up, rubbing my eyes. Daylight filtered through the curtains, but I didn't bother to glance at the clock. I just knew that it was morning.

He wandered in, looking disheveled, grimy, and a bit disoriented. Immediately, I slid off the bed. Worry from the night before that something might've happened to him had morphed into a hope that he was dead, but I'd never really meant that. It just seemed like it would be easier if he was dead.

But now, seeing him standing there, lost and in a daze, I swiftly covered the distance between us, ashamed of myself for missing him after what he'd done to me, but I couldn't deny my feelings.

I'd thought he might be mad that I hadn't been in my cage, but it was clear when I wrapped my arms around him he didn't intend to say anything about that. *He's home*, was all I could think as I continued to hold him tight.

He let me, which was surprising, but he had a look in his eyes like a deer discovered in the forest, like if I did anything too loud or quick, I'd startle him, and he'd run away.

Dameon smelled a bit like garbage, but his own personal scent that I was familiar with was also overwhelming. He wore the same outfit he'd put on the day before when he'd left. Without thinking too much about it, I began to undress him.

Afraid to speak, I peeled his jacket off, thinking if I spoke to him, he might break out of his trance and yell at me.

Moving along with me, he let me remove his jacket and tie. I then moved to his belt while he kicked off his shoes. I unbuttoned his pants, tugging down the zipper. Thoughts of how he'd kept his shirt on before when we'd had sex made me think I should wait until last for that.

I still wasn't sure what he didn't want me to see, but after having caught a glimpse of his scars in the moonlight the other night, I understood why he wanted to keep his shirt on, and I'd respect that. At the same time, I wanted him to know he could trust me.

As I unbuttoned his shirt, he caught my wrist. "Turn off the light." His voice was husky, exhausted sounding almost.

I nodded and quickly moved over to the lamp I'd left on the night before. The curtains in his room were thick enough to block out most of the sunlight, so I wouldn't be able to see any details. Once the lights were off, I came back to him and finished unbuttoning his shirt.

Daemon's hands settled on my waist, our eyes on one another as I finished unbuttoning and then slid it down off his shoulders. He pulled his hands out and let it fall away before pushing his pants down and stepping out of them, as well as his boxers.

He was naked, while I still had on the dress Janis had brought me the day before. He didn't seem bothered by it, though. Daemon let me run my hands along the hard muscles of his arm, my fingers tracing over his scars. He didn't flinch away from me as my hands became my eyes, running over the story etched into his skin.

His eyes were closed, though, as if every touch reminded him of a time in his life he'd been trying so hard to bury. I didn't want to cause him pain, but at the same time, seeing him vulnerable like this, watching him open up to me, made me feel connected to him in a way I never had before.



This was a side of Daemon Petrov the world would never see. Maybe my eyes would never view these scars close up, but he was letting me touch him, and that was more than I'd ever expected from him.

It was evident to me that Daemon was exhausted, though I had no idea where he'd been. His hair was mussed, and he was covered in grime. Not knowing what else to do, I whispered, "Should we take a shower?"

His eyes opened as he focused on me for only a moment. I tugged gently on his arm, leading him into the adjoining bathroom.

Instinctively, I reached for the light switch, but Daemon's hand covered mine. "Off."

One word was all I needed. I nodded and then opened the glass door to the shower and turned on multiple showerheads so the water was flowing from all sides. Instantly, the water was warm. Daemon grabbed my dress and yanked it up over my head, tossing it aside. My panties came off even quicker. Since I wasn't wearing a bra, we were both naked now.

He stepped into the shower while I grabbed a washcloth from the cupboard and then followed him inside. Leaning against the tile, one arm up, I could see the outline of his rippled muscles, which made the ache between my legs rev up again, but his posture also made it clear that Daemon was tired, and I didn't want to bother him.

I just wanted to make him feel better, one way or another. It seemed ironic considering all he cared about for me was humiliating me by shoving me into a dog kennel, but I'd always been a pleaser and now wasn't the time for me to stop and evaluate why that might be.

Taking the pump of Daemon's masculine-smelling shower gel, I squirted it onto the washcloth and carefully began to wash his body, starting with his neck and face and then moving down, over his chiseled biceps and abs and lower. When I got to his dick, he grunted a little, hardening with each swipe of the washcloth, but he hadn't made a move toward me

sexually yet, so I finished cleaning him, taking my time going over every body part, slowly, including his feet.

When I was done, I set the washcloth aside and took my time washing his hair. I lathered it up with shampoo, waited for him to rinse it out, and then used conditioner as well. We let that sit for a few moments before Daemon rinsed it out.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Daemon asked, his voice hoarse.

In the dark, I almost felt like we were on equal footing. He wasn't being his normal, bold self. Instead, he seemed vulnerable for a change, and I almost felt like I had a tiny spark of power, though I was sure it would go away as soon as the lights were on or he wasn't so tired.

“I'm trying to take care of you,” I said with a shrug he probably couldn't see in the dark.

“But why?”

I wasn't sure how to answer that question. What did he want me to say? The truth? That I'd spent all night wondering if he was dead or if he was just out with another woman? That even though he often treated me lower than shit, I still had feelings for him I couldn't explain or eliminate?

“Because I want to.” It was a simple answer, and it would have to do because I didn't have another one.

The warm water flowed down my hair, leaving it trailing down my back. I was clean before I got in the shower. I'd taken a bath the day before and hadn't gotten in the dog kennel or even left the room, so I didn't need to wash myself, but when Daemon took the shampoo and began to wash my hair, I let him.

His touch was gentle and kind for once as well. It would've surprised me that he could even be this tender, except I'd caught a glimpse of it the other day, when he'd first come into my room right after my brother had left. We'd had a heartfelt conversation then, for a few minutes, before his guard went flying back up and he flew off the handle.

Thinking about the different sides of Daemon was bound to give me whiplash. Seeing no reason in dwelling on the dark side of him, I decided to enjoy the feel of his strong fingers gliding through my hair.

While the conditioner set in my long locks, he took the washcloth and began to wash me as well. It was soothing, feeling him run it over my arms and stomach. When his hand caressed my breasts, even through the fabric, I felt my nipples harden, and a small moan escaped my lips. I tried to bite it back because I didn't think that was what we were doing here, but then, his hand went lower, sliding between my legs, and his fingers played between my folds. More than a moan escaped me then. His lips descended upon mine, and I pushed up on my tiptoes to run my tongue over the top of his.

I wanted him to take me right then and there. To lift me up and press me against the tile of the shower, to plunge deep inside me while my fingers splayed on the shower wall, the warm water raining down on us while we both tensed and spasmed, unable to control our bodies because of the incredible sensations the other sent through us.

Once I was clean, Daemon set the washcloth aside and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me to his chest. Leaning my head on his shoulder, I let the water continue to run all down my body, content to stand there with his arms around me.

I had no idea where this was going. With Daemon, he could be kind and loving one moment and completely lose his mind with anger the next. But for now, I felt safe and cared for with his strong arms wrapped around me. I wanted him to feel the same way. He needed to know that he could trust me.

Whatever scars he'd been hiding, whatever tattoos he didn't want anyone to see because they told a story he wasn't willing to share with the rest of the world, I wanted him to know that I would be there for him—if he would let me in.

Daemon ran a hand through my hair, caressed my back, and pulled me even tighter against him. His lips grazed the top of my head. I lifted my mouth to his, hoping he'd kiss me. But

it wasn't the deep, powerful kiss I'd been expecting. No, it was soft and sweet, gentle even.

My hands settled on his hips, and his erection was evident between us. Now didn't seem like the time for me to drop to my knees and swallow him whole, even though I would've done so. Rather than breaking the mood, I continued to stand there with my arms wrapped around him, the water washing all of our pain down the drain.

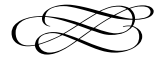
If he would let me, I'd continue to be here for him, continue to be the one to wash the grime of the world away from him, to help set him free from all of the worries and concerns he encountered on the outside.

But Daemon Petrov was a complex fellow, and even now, wrapped in his arms, I had no way of knowing if he would ever fully let me in.

How many years had I dreamt of finding my dark angel? Now that I had found him, it was evident I'd had no idea just how dark the man truly was. So many times I'd thought about running from him, leaving him behind, starting over, but now, I knew I didn't ever want to do that. In the dark, even a dark angel's true pain can be revealed—revealed and resolved.

If only he'd let me.

## CHAPTER 33



## DAEMON

Standing in the shower with Elisa, more than just my body seemed exposed. Her washcloth wasn't only brushing away the filth from my night of surveillance, she was washing away my defenses.

Whether it was exhaustion that kept me from fighting her or something else, perhaps the knowledge I held deep down inside of me that I could trust her, I couldn't say for certain, but I let her. Allowing Elisa to wash me clean freed my soul in a way I would never be able to express.

Plenty of women had touched me. Fuck, many of them had seen and touched my scars. With them, it was easy enough to play it off as if my scars were from a fair fight, a battle where I'd likely gotten the best of the other guy. I had no way of knowing if Elisa could see deep enough into my soul to recognize that the scars she'd run her fingers over earlier, the ones notched into my arm, were not from a battle waged on equal footing but that they were etched there by a monster.

It didn't matter, though. With Elisa, I didn't have to worry that she'd judge me for being weak. Elisa had scars just like mine. No one like her could grow up in a family like ours and avoid them.

I shouldn't be standing here with her now. When I came in and saw her free from her cage, I should've raised hell and ordered her around. After all, the woman was sent here by her father. She didn't want to be here. All I was doing now was placating her, making her think that we could have some sort of relationship where she either manipulated me to get

information for her father—or that I would let her in so that we could actually have a life together.

Feeling her hands through the wet cloth as she washed me had been something I couldn't turn down. She had a soft touch, a loving touch, and as her hands had glided over my sore muscles, I'd been like a dog in a trance, obsessed with being scratched in the perfect spot.

The more she'd cleansed me, the more I'd felt baptized by her touch. It was almost a religious experience for me, purification in the truest form. I hated that I hesitated to return the favor.

She'd had total control over me. The longer she washed me, the more I relaxed. All of my worries washed away, spinning in circles and disappearing down the drain. My worries about the Savages, Yuri's injuries, my brothers, my mother's unbelievable act of treason in marrying our enemy and what that might mean, even my concern about becoming the next boss of the syndicate—all of that melted away under Elisa's expert touch.

With her head on my shoulder, my hand trailed lower until I couldn't help but play over her perfect ass, my fingers caressing her, gripping her. She moaned into my chest. I hadn't meant for this to turn sexual, even though I was obviously attracted to her. I couldn't control my erection, though I'd tried to. My dick was growing harder by the second. Those little moans she'd released when I'd been cleaning her earlier had only spirited me onward.

Knowing I could take her here or anywhere else I liked, I decided to go out to the bed. I wanted her to enjoy herself, but I was so tired, I also wanted her to do the work. As hot as it would be to press her up against the wall right now, my bed was calling. After an impossibly long night and an emotional meeting with my brothers, I just wanted to lie down.

But that didn't mean we couldn't have some fun.

Letting go of Elisa with one hand, I turned off the water and pushed open the shower door, reaching for the towel that always hung right nearby. I wrapped it around her, drying her

off a bit. Her hair was soaked and would need a separate towel.

Elisa moved toward the cabinet where the towels were kept without a thought, grabbing one for me and taking another to wrap her hair up and keep it out of the way. Then, she came back to me, and my mouth was on hers, searching, exploring, as I walked her backward toward the bedroom.

Elisa responded to me like she always did, wanting me as much as I needed her. Lifting her onto the bed, I slid her out of the way and then dropped the towel I'd slung around my waist. Climbing onto the bed, I sat with my back against the headboard and reached for her.

Elisa let her towels go as well. Her hair was still wet, but I didn't care about that. I wanted her, and I wanted her now.

Pulling her on top of my lap, I found her mouth with mine again, my hands settling on her hips. Elisa seemed slightly confused as to what I wanted her to do, so I released her mouth and said, "I'm yours, baby. What do you want?"

She stared at me with big blue eyes, unblinking. Realizing she was confused by my unwillingness to take control, I took my dick in one hand and held it for her. She slid her hand down it, her eyes closed.

"Do you want to ride me, baby?"

Elisa nodded, lifting herself up off the bed on her knees. I helped her position herself on top of me, and then she sank down on me slowly, gripping me with her amazing pussy as she went. Already, I felt like I could come, filling her up with the seed I'd been collecting for the past half hour while we were naked together in the shower.

But I didn't. Taking a deep breath, I focused on what would make *her* feel good.

With me buried to the hilt inside her, she started moving her hips up and down, her hands on my shoulder. I moved my hips as well, grinding against her, trying to hit her in every place I knew would bring her pleasure. She moaned, tossing her head back, letting me know she liked this.



Leaning forward, I took one of her nipples in my mouth, running my tongue along it first, teasing her, before I began to suck. She liked it when I sucked her tits hard, so I put all of my energy into that, ignoring how good she felt wrapped around my dick.

Elisa began to increase her pace, little whimpers slipping between her lips as the sensations intensified. I slid two fingers between us, finding her clit and rubbing it. At first, I was gentle, taking my time, but the more she got into it, the harder I rubbed until she was gasping for air, begging me not to stop.

“Oh, God, Daemon. Oh, fuck.” Hearing her say my name like that, in the midst of an orgasm, was almost as good as coming myself. Still, I held on to it, though. I wanted her to come at least a few times before I collapsed.

She wasn't making it easy on me, though. Her breasts looked amazing, bouncing up and down in my face. They tasted even better. Once I let her down from her first orgasm, I kissed her lips and then trailed my mouth down her neck. Her nails sank into my back as more pleasure washed over her.

Suddenly feeling more energetic, I flipped her over so she was on her back. Her eyes flew open as she stared up at me, startled but amused. A smile lit her face as I began to move inside of her.

Taking my time, I established a rhythm that would feel good to both of us, plunging in deeply with each thrust, but also making sure I hit her clit every single time. Elisa wrapped her arms and legs around me so she was pulling me tightly to her. For the first time in my life, I felt truly joined to someone, like she could feel every sensation I was feeling, like my pleasure was her pleasure, and later, when we returned to life, my pain would be her pain.

After several minutes, she began to come undone again, her arms flying off me as she tried to gain some traction on the bed, but she failed, tossing her head backward and crying out over and over again. Unable to stop myself now, I went ahead and let an orgasm explode out of me as well. Grunting and groaning, I shot into her, my head spinning with release.

Both of us were panting by the time we were done. I could hardly open my eyes, I was so tired. All I wanted was to go to sleep. I fell off her, lying on the bed on my back, trying to work up enough energy to climb beneath the blankets and go to sleep.

Elisa didn't move for a long moment either. I didn't know how to tell her I wanted her to stay. Surely, she wouldn't think after that kind of sex, where we'd just connected so deeply, she had to go back to the dog kennel—would she?

After a few minutes, she stirred, starting to get up from the bed. I grabbed her arm and tugged her back toward me. “Stay.”

It was the only word I had the energy for. I hoped she didn't think I sounded like I was still treating her like a dog, but I couldn't form a more complete sentence at the moment.

“Stay?” she repeated.

My eyes were closed, but I nodded.

A soft chuckle escaped her lips. “Okay.” Elisa worked the blankets down and coaxed me onto the pillows. With the blanket over the top of our naked bodies, we curled together. The scent of her hair filled my lungs as I reached for sleep.

Her hand resting on my chest and her knee inserted between mine felt heavenly. Despite my physical exhaustion and all of the worries that continued to creep into the corners of my mind, I couldn't remember a time when I felt more relaxed or at peace.

I still didn't know if I could trust this woman who'd been ordered to join me by her father, my biggest enemy left standing. I had no idea whether or not I was currently in the midst of falling into a trap. But right now, I couldn't care about any of that. All I knew was, when I was with Elisa, I felt like a real person—not a man driven solely by rage, walking around like a devil. I didn't have to pretend to be someone else with her because she understood who I was on the inside, and she didn't judge me for it.

All of this was an assumption, though. I might be wrong. It could all be an act. I prayed it wasn't, though, because if that was the case, I didn't know how I'd ever recover.

"Thank you, Daemon," she whispered, her finger trailing down my cheek.

A smile formed on my face. "Thank *you*," I murmured. "Your body is amazing." I'd worshiped her body, and I hoped she felt like I'd appreciated every curve, every dimple, every limb.

After what might just be the longest day of my life, I finally felt sleep overcoming me. I hoped that my dreams, whatever they might be, could be as good as the reality I'd just experienced, but it would be fucking hard to top that.

If I could dream of this amazing woman and then wake up with her still in my arms, then I'd know I really was a lucky bastard. Despite my past, Elisa could be my future. That would make all of the trouble worth it.

## CHAPTER 34



The feel of hardened muscle beneath my cheek confused me at first when my eyes fluttered open. The sun wasn't as high in the sky as it had been when Daemon had first come in. I wondered how long we'd been asleep.

Then I realized we were still tangled together, naked, in his bed. My heart began to thump against my rib cage. This must be how a mouse felt when it woke up next to a cat, a paw "protectively" wrapped around its tiny body. Was Daemon going to eat me alive?

"Are you awake?" His voice was soft, not at all what I'd been bracing for.

"Yeah." Lifting my head, I met his dark eyes. His face looked serene, unlike the angry scowl I was used to seeing whenever I looked in his direction.

Running his thumb along my cheek, he asked, "What am I going to do with you?"

I assumed it was a rhetorical question, so I didn't plan on answering it. Rather, I was content to lie there in his arms for as long as he could stay in bed. For once, I felt warm and safe here, even though the shadows still held his secrets.

Before either of us could say more, a loud banging on the door had us both jumping up at full alert. Neither of us was used to polite quiet knocking, but this was vicious. "Daemon! Open the fuck up!"

“Who is that?” I wasn’t actually asking him because I figured it was none of my business anyway, but I wanted to know if it was friend or foe.

“Fuck,” Daemon mumbled. “It’s Dezzy.”

He slid out of bed, and I followed, looking for my clothes as he slid on his crumpled pants and shirt from yesterday. Stepping into the bathroom, he tossed me my panties, like a gentleman. I climbed into those and barely made it through the door to the bathroom to grab my dress when the door to the bedroom opened.

“What the fuck do you want?” Daemon asked, sounding just as irritated as his brother.

Poking my head back into the bedroom, I saw Dezzy standing there looking like he wanted to burn the world. In my experience, it was Vin who was always angry, but now, Dezzy might’ve swapped attitudes with his brother.

“I need to talk to you.” His eyes were narrowed, and his words came out with force. “Alone.” Feeling his glare on me made me back up a little, running into the doorjamb.

Daemon turned and looked at me, nodding toward the door where Dezzy was still standing. I didn’t have to be told twice. Immediately, I walked out of the room, abandoning my shoes. I had to squeeze past the angry brother, and when I brushed him, he grunted, like I should’ve transformed into a mist and floated out.

Once I was in the hallway, I had no idea where I was going. Did I even have permission to be out of my cage, let alone the room? Daemon had gestured for me to leave, though, so he couldn’t get mad at me for this. At least, he *shouldn’t* get mad at me. He would do whatever the fuck he wanted.

It only made sense for me to go back to the room that I’d originally been locked in. The door was ajar, so I walked inside, closing it behind me. Collapsing on the bed, I pulled my knees up to my chest, thinking about what had just taken place.

We would never be allowed to truly rest. I'd thought, for a split second, I could bask in Daemon's arms for a few minutes, feeling his happiness radiating off him if only for a little while. Images of the two of us lounging around, enjoying one another's company had quickly been shattered by that pounding on the door.

I thought about the types of lives my friends might have, the kind that some of them had had growing up with normal parents who made them pancakes on the weekend, where everyone had lazy days enjoying one another's company. Daemon and I would never have that.

We would never sit on the balcony, sipping coffee, reading the newspaper, or whatever the fuck people read these days, while we talked about our lives—what kind of wallpaper we wanted for the guest room, whether or not to get a cat, if the hydrangea bushes were getting enough sun. We could never be those people because he was a mobster, a mob boss, and his life would always be chaotic and disruptive.

Tears sprang to my eyes just thinking about it. None of it was fair for either one of us. We'd been born into this existence. We hadn't chosen it. How many of my birthday parties had been surrounded by men with guns? How many times had I asked to have a sleepover only to be told that girl's family couldn't be trusted?

The day I'd gotten my period for the first time, I'd run in to tell my mother and she'd been busy talking to some of the underbosses. Everything I did was saturated with this violent lifestyle, and nothing about it would ever change. I'd been a fool to even allow myself to entertain the idea that Daemon and I could have even a few moments of magic before the spell was broken.

Lying in bed, staring at the wall, I debated what I might do today. Daemon was clearly busy. What were my options? I had none. Eat, sleep, bathe, lie around. That was my life now, and I hated it.

At least when I was asleep, I could dream. I could find my freedom there. In my dreams, Daemon and I were not bound

by our family members' choices. We could do and be whatever we wanted to.

With that in mind, even though I'd just slept for several hours, I closed my eyes and reached for sleep—my only solace in this violent life.



## CHAPTER 35



## DAEMON

I wished I would've had a chance to put clean clothes on my clean body, but with the news Dezzy had given me, there simply wasn't time for that. I'd called a meeting as soon as he'd given me the information. Now, I was ready to act.

All of my brothers and their lieutenants assembled in the conference room with the large fish tank. Mikel was on Zoom, but other than that, they were all present and accounted for.

With Lanny, Vin's lieutenant, and Dezzy's guy Terrance coming in to take their seats, I stared at the fish swimming lazily in their aquarium, wishing for that kind of tranquility. What I wouldn't give to be a goddamn fish without a care in the world. I'd had a few seconds of that with Elisa earlier before Dezzy pounded on my door. Now, reality was slapping me right in the face like the coldhearted bitch she was.

"What's going on?" Mikel asked, concern in his voice.

Standing at the head of the table, my fingers splayed across the surface as I leaned forward, I took a deep breath. I hadn't quite processed everything yet, so I said, "Dezzy, tell them what you just told me."

I'd never seen my kid brother so worked up in all of our years of organized crime, which was *all* of our years. "The cops told Yuri they were coming by the hospital to talk to him today," he began.

Instantly, he was interrupted by Vin. "The kid is gonna talk to the cops?"

“He wasn’t gonna say nothin’,” Dezzy assured them. “Yuri was young, but he wasn’t stupid. He was a solid kid. He knew we’d take care of all of it without going to the cops, but when you’ve got a bullet hole in you, cops start poking around.”

Despite our best efforts, the police insisted on speaking to him and getting an official statement. I wish I would’ve done more to keep that from happening.

“Was?” Lanny said, looking at Terrence. They both shrugged. “Why you speakin’ in the past tense, Dez?”

“What happened next, Dez?” Mikel asked, all of them hanging on the edge of their seats.

“Yeah, so that’s the thing.” Dezzy got emotional and needed a second. He’d never let these other bastards see him cry, but at the same time, he was a human after all. “The fucking Savages caught wind of it and broke into his hospital room, thinking he was going to rat them out. When the cops showed up to interview Yuri, he was dead. Bullet right through his brain.”

“Son of a bitch!” Vin slammed his hand down on the table, causing the whole thing to vibrate. “They killed our Yuri? Those assholes!”

“Yeah, they killed him in cold blood.” Dezzy’s jaw was set as he desperately tried to keep from letting his emotions out.

Rage mixed with sadness welled up inside of me as well, but I let my anger take the lead. “We’ve got to find these bastards and make them pay.”

“How do we know it was the Savages?” Terrance asked. “Did the hospital cameras pick them up?”

“Who else would it fucking be?” Dezzy demanded. “The camera in his room was taken out. We don’t have access to that shit anyway, but no one else would walk into his hospital room and kill him in his sleep. Only the bastards who put him there to begin with.”

Guilt joined my other unpleasant emotions. I shouldn’t have left the kid alone. I should’ve known better than to trust

hospital security. Images of his angry wife holding their baby filled my mind as the others began to argue.

“We need to get those fuckers, kick them in the balls hard,” Vin said, just spouting off in frustration. “I wanna kill every single fucking one of them.” He slammed his hand into the table again. Though I agreed with him, that was getting annoying fast. I glared at him, but my brother ignored me.

“We can plan a huge takedown,” Lanny offered. “I’ve got information about that sex trafficking ring. I spent the other night over there. I’ve seen the whole operation. Waltzed right in the back, so that’s one way we can get to them. That’s their bread and butter right there.”

“How fucking long will that take?” Dezzy asked. “I wanna make these guys pay right away. If we’re going to sit around on our asses and plan this out like a mother planning her kid’s first birthday party, I’m gonna get antsy, and when I get antsy, I get shooty.”

“We could wait until next Saturday night. That’s their most popular night,” Terrance suggested. “Based on what I’ve heard from nosing around the neighborhood.”

“That’s not that long to wait,” Mikel chimed in.

I was listening to their suggestions, their back and forth, their ideas about when and where to hit them, but after a few minutes, I finally cut them off. “All right. That’s it. We don’t need days to figure out how to hit them, when or where. These bastards don’t get to keep breathing when they killed Yuri. It’s simple enough. We’ve got a couple of hours to come up with the details and make sure we aren’t running in there like a bunch of fucking headless chickens, but the bottom line is, we’re acting tonight.”

The room went silent as everyone turned to stare at me. I remembered what the last conversation I’d had with my brothers had revealed, that they didn’t think I should jump in with both feet and not have a well-thought-out plan.

This was different, though. I’d been thinking about how to handle this. Now, we had to strike. It had to be a decisive,

deadly blow, one that the Latvians would never recover from.

“We’re going to teach them a lesson,” I explained. “We’re going to make sure these assholes and everyone else know that if you mess with the Petrovs, you’re going to fucking regret it. So, get your men together. Get ready for a fight, and get ready to wipe these jackasses off the face of the fucking earth.”

CHAPTER 36



Worry settled over me the longer I sat on my bed waiting for Daemon. I had no idea what Dezzy had been so worked up about, but I wanted to know. Curiosity was one thing, but I had a feeling if Dezzy was that upset, Daemon would be, too, and I'd worked so hard to get him to calm down.

A soft knock on my door pulled my mind away from Daemon. I knew it wasn't him because he didn't knock that way. Lillian generally just came waltzing in, too. That really only left one person. "Come in."

The door opened, and Janis came in, rolling a tray with a silver cloche on it. My stomach rumbled at the scent of roasted chicken coming from the platter. I was starving and hadn't even realized it. But all that sex could do that to a person.

The butler greeted me and set the tray on the table. "How are you today, dear?" he asked, always polite and sweet.

"Fine. But I'm worried." As much as I wanted to dig in, I hesitated. I wanted to ask Janis a million questions, but I wasn't sure where to start, and I doubted he'd answer me anyway.

"Is something wrong?" He pulled the lid off, revealing the chicken I'd been smelling as well as some roasted vegetables, mashed potatoes, and a delicious-looking piece of chocolate cake.

"I was just wondering if everything is okay with Daemon. Dezzy was awfully upset earlier. Do you know what's going

on?" I sat down at the table, waiting for him to respond.

He was taking his time. Pouring me a glass of wine, he finally said, "You know I can't speak about the family business, Miss Elisa."

"Right." I did know that. As a butler for a mob family, Janis would have the opportunity to overhear a lot of information that could get the family in trouble if it leaked, and that would put him in danger of losing his job—and his life. One word came to mind, a code word for loyalty to the family. "*Omerta*."

"Exactly," he said, stepping away from the table. "However, I will say, I wouldn't go anywhere near Little Latvia tonight. Once the sun goes down, that's not going to be the best place to hang out."

My eyebrows lifted as I considered what he was saying. I didn't even know that Little Latvia was a place. "Where's that?"

"Well, it's not official, but a lot of Latvian folks live in a specific part of town. There's a club there that's covering for other businesses, or so I've heard. I've already said too much, though, so I'll stop talking now."

"I understand." I didn't want him to get in trouble, and I had been around mobsters enough to understand what he was saying. Daemon was going to hit this part of town tonight for some reason, but I still didn't know why. Janis might not even know. "Thank you. Do you know if Daemon ever loosens up?" If I couldn't find out about what was going on, maybe I could at least get some insight into Daemon.

He chuckled. "Not in my experience. This is a rough life, dear. You know that already, though, right? You've been around this sort of life since you were born, haven't you?"

I nodded. "Yes. Can't seem to escape it."

His mouth turned down in a frown. "If I were you, I'd strongly consider leaving this place, Miss Elisa. Go back to your previous life. It might've also been hard, but at least you knew what to expect."



Shaking my head, I assured him that wasn't an option. "I can't leave. My father sent me here. I have a duty to him, to my family, and to my syndicate. My father is an asshole and most of my brothers are ogres. Believe me, if I could've gotten out of this, I would've done it a long time ago. But I'm not planning on walking away from Daemon. Not now, anyway."

"Well, if you do find a way to leave and decide to do so, there's no shame in it. I think your aversion to this sort of life is a testimony to your character, dear. You're too kind, too loving, to let a life like this influence you." He smiled softly at me.

I felt my heart warm. "Thank you so much." I couldn't help but dig into the chicken, even if I felt rude eating in front of him. "I just wish I could do something to influence this world."

He nodded. "I know how you feel. When I first took this job, I thought perhaps my disposition might rub off on others, but I think we both know that's not going to happen. Not to this generation, anyway. Perhaps in the next?"

I wasn't sure what he was getting at, so I just nodded, sort of lost in my dinner anyway. I hadn't eaten all day, so I was practically swallowing the food whole.

In the back of my mind, I knew I didn't want to leave Daemon because of the sweet moments we'd had. If we could have another day like the one we'd had earlier, when we woke up together and he was so kind and thoughtful, I would never want to leave.

After a few moments of silence, Janis cleared his throat. "Well, if you're staying, please let me know if there's anything I can do to make your stay here more comfortable."

The thought of being uncomfortable immediately reminded me of that damn kennel. "You don't happen to know where I can find a little mattress do you?" I hoped we were done with that now, but knowing Daemon, it was hard to say.

"Pardon?" he asked, but just as the question came out of his mouth, the door flew open, slamming against the wall.

Why did he always have to open the door that way?

Daemon looked as angry as Dezzy had earlier in the day. I dropped my fork and hopped to my feet. “What’s going on?”

“Janis?” Daemon’s voice was clipped, storm clouds dark enough to block out the sun brewing over his head.

The butler didn’t need further explanation as he turned and walked out the door. He didn’t even take the cart with him.

“Daemon? What’s the matter?” I took a step toward him, but he didn’t move, his hands forming into fists.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on. One of our guys died in the hospital, a kid. Someone who never even had a fucking chance in this life.”

I stared at him, not sure what to say. I wanted to tell him I was so sorry, to run to him, and wrap him in my arms. Instead, I stood there gaping at him, afraid anything I said or did would be wrong.

Under his breath, he mumbled, “Fuck. I should’ve made sure he knew the plan. Why didn’t I tell him the goddamn plan?”

Obviously, Daemon held himself accountable for what had happened to this other guy. I had no idea why. Did this have something to do with Little Latvia as well?

Mustering my courage, I stepped toward him. “Daemon \_\_\_”

He cut me off with a shake of his head, his eyes narrowed. “You have to get the fuck out of here. Now.”

## CHAPTER 37



## DAEMON

Elisa stared at me with her beautiful lips agape, her eyes wide with shock and horror. “Leave? You want me to leave? Why?”

My emotions had been bottled up inside of me for so long, I could feel the spark from the heat between us threatening to ignite the wick. This blast would be catastrophic, so I did my best to contain it. For now.

Staring at Elisa’s icy blue eyes reminded me of my own heart. Left out in the cold for so long, it had frozen years ago. I’d become numb to everyone and everything around me, unable to feel the sting any longer.

But then this woman had come along and fucked everything up. With her kindness, with her tenderness, she’d warmed me just enough so that now, I could feel the sting. Like a fucking limb exposed in a blizzard brought back inside, the warmth of her caring left me tingling, aching, writhing in a pain I could no longer bear.

It had also left me vulnerable. I’d lost dozens of guys over the years. Some of the losses hurt worse than others. Some, I didn’t give a rat’s ass at all. With Yuri, my heart was heavy, and rage threatened to burn my insides. That wouldn’t do.

Yuri’s young, unblemished face wasn’t the one that continued to haunt me, though. Not for the first time that day, I saw the image of his wife in my mind’s eye, how upset she’d been when we’d encountered her in the hospital. She had

shouted at us in Russian, her baby clinging to her, also upset and afraid.

Dezzy and I had wanted to assure her that everything would be fine, but we couldn't do that then, and we sure the fuck couldn't do it now. Sure, I could make certain that she was taken care of, that the baby had food and diapers, that kind of shit, but that wasn't what the woman wanted or needed. She wanted her husband back, and I couldn't give that to her.

And I shouldn't give a flying fuck, but I did. That had to be because of Elisa. She was the only variable that had changed. She had to be the one making me soft.

“Daemon?” My name coming off her lips, as she stood there looking so small and meek, pricked me right in the heart. I wanted to tell her never mind, I'd lost my fucking mind for a moment.

But I couldn't. “You have got to get the fuck out of here, now,” I told her, my tone even but that gurgling feeling of an impending explosion right beneath the surface.

Her eyebrows furrowed further as confusion washed over her. “But I don't understand why.”

Shaking my head, I reminded myself that I was on the verge of war. There was no time for love right now anyway. I had to be focused on what was about to head my way. She would only be in the way. She would only continue to fuck with my head.

With no time to explain, I allowed a bit of that dynamite to ignite, letting myself lose control. My fists clenched as I stared at her. “You are a fucking La Rosa, that's why,” I reminded her. “You're working for your father.”

She shook her head. “No, that's not true.”

But I wasn't capable of listening to her now, not since I'd allowed the anger to surface. “At best, you're a distraction. At worst, you're a spy. You're here to cause as much damage as you can. You don't give a fuck about me. You're here because of him.”

“I have done everything you wanted me to do, Daemon.” Tears began to roll down her face, dripping off her chin. She didn’t wipe them away. “Not once have I purposely disobeyed you.”

“Bullshit!” Taking a step toward her, I let my hand fly, but I didn’t strike her. Elisa whimpered and backed up, hitting the table. “You haven’t been doing what I told you to do. You’ve been doing what *he* wanted you to do. You know that’s all you’ve ever done, whatever the fuck daddy dearest asks of you.”

Her bottom lip quivered. “It’s true that I agreed to this because of my father, Daemon. But things have changed since then, haven’t they? Between us?”

What was she trying to imply? That she had feelings for me or some bullshit like that? Shaking my head, I turned around, running a hand through my hair. “Fuck no, things haven’t changed. Sure, you were my fucking dog for a little while, but that’s nothing. I can go to the pound and get another one of those. Maybe the next one won’t be so full of piss and shit.”

Turning around, I looked into her eyes again. She crumbled, covering her face with her hands.

Seeing her cry over me only made me angrier. Storming across the distance between us, I leaned in close to her face. “You can tell your goddamn father he doesn’t have to worry about me starting a war with him. Not now, anyway. I’ve got other shit to handle first. Stop trying to change my mind, Elisa. You’re leaving. Now!”

Picking up her dinner plate from the table, I flung it across the room. It hit the glass frame of a picture on the wall, both of them shattering, glass raining down all over the carpet. Elisa yelped and jumped a bit. Her reaction only made me more outraged.

I grabbed a lamp off the dresser and threw it against the wall, sending another spray of glass into the carpet. “Get the fuck out of here. I don’t want to see you ever again.”

Despite my insanity, Elisa remained calm. “Please, Daemon. Can we just talk about this? Can you try to calm down, and then we can talk about it? I want to be with you—”

“No, you don’t. You want to spy on me. There’s nothing to talk about.” Picking up a vase from a shelf, I hurled that into the wall as well.

“Daemon, please?” Her pleas were almost enough to get me to stop my gorilla-like rampage, but I already had a candy dish in my hand. I threw that into the mirror above the dresser, splintering the glass and breaking the dish into a thousand pieces.

Flinging the bedroom door open, I stared into her tear-filled eyes. “Get. The. Fuck. Out.”

For some reason, Janis was still standing in the hallway. Perhaps he hadn’t left, thinking Elisa might actually be in danger. Or maybe he was just a nosy bastard. He stood against the far wall, his hands folded, shifting his weight uncomfortably.

“Good, you’re still here. See that Miss La Rosa gets home.” With a sweeping motion, I gestured for Elisa to get the hell out of my house.

“Of course, sir.” Janis’s voice had contempt in it for the first time I’d ever remembered. Elisa rushed past me to the older man, and he opened his arms to her, pulling her against his side. He didn’t dare look at me, but I knew what he was thinking.

Yes, I was a fucking bastard.

Elisa lifted her head from Janis’s shoulder, her blue eyes still overflowing with tears. Her lips continued to quiver, but she didn’t say a word. My glare had to be enough to scare her away from me forever. If she knew what was good for her, she’d forget that Daemon Petrov ever existed.

“Come along, Miss Elisa,” Janis said. “I’ll drive you home myself.”

I stood in the doorway, barring them from going back into the room to get any of her belongings. I’d worry about that

later. Besides, she hadn't had much with her when she'd arrived anyway, so she wouldn't have much to miss.

With Janis's arm around her, Elisa walked away from me, down the hallway toward the stairs. Perhaps I should've considered what sort of ramifications my actions might have, but I didn't. All I could think about was the anger that continued to fester inside of me.

I'd wanted her to leave, but I'd also wanted her to stay, and I didn't know how to process any of that.

With a loud growl, I spun on my heels and headed down the hallway to my own room, my ugly rampage not over. The moment I walked into the room, I thought of how we'd made love only a few hours ago, how I'd held her in my arms as I fell asleep, drifting into one of the deepest, most soothing sleeps of my life. Now, she was gone, but her scent lingered here.

Opening the window, I thought perhaps I'd air the room out, but it didn't work. I could still smell her here, and it only served to make me even more irate. Grabbing the pillow she'd slept on, I threw it out the window, as well as the towel and the sheets. When I was done, I ripped my bed apart, throwing anything that would fit out the window.

Still in a rage, I stalked over to the dresser and used one arm to swipe everything off onto the floor, the satisfying crunch of glass breaking from a few decorative items my fucking mother had placed there only alleviating a bit of my anger.

Then, my eyes fell on the dog cage. The madness I'd been able to keep slightly at bay completely took over. Like a triggered lunatic, I lunged at the large metal container, grabbing the bars and ripping them out. One by one, with my bare hands, I pulled them loose, ignoring the pain from cuts or the bite of twisted metal. I ripped off the sides, the top, the bottom, all of it. When I was finished, the cage was unrecognizable, just a pile of scrap metal and debris that belonged in a junkyard.



Picking the pieces up, I carried them to the window, hurling them out into the yard with the bedding. With each toss, I let go of a primal roar, each shout originating from deep in my soul.

Blood trickled down my arms, my hands cut and bleeding from dozens of cuts of various sizes and lengths. When the last piece of the cage went out the window, I looked down to see the carpet sprinkled with droplets of blood making a trail back to the cage.

My fury was beginning to die, but it wasn't completely gone yet. Stomping across the bloodied mess of a carpet, I reached the bar and poured myself a whiskey, filling the glass to the brim. The burn of swallowing it down scorched me deep. With a satisfied sigh, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, likely smearing blood all over my face. I probably looked like a fucking vampire. Well, I was a monster, but I wasn't the blood-sucking kind.

With one final act of rage, I tossed the glass against the wall, shattering it.

The pain in my chest was only exacerbated by the sound of my heart thumping against my rib cage. Leaning against the bar, I struggled to regain control. War was on the horizon. I had shit to do, shit I needed to be in control of myself in order to handle.

A thought occurred to me, something one of the guys had said in the meeting. All of the Savages were going to pay for this bullshit, but I needed to make sure some specific ones knew not to fuck with the Petrovs.

Finding my phone on the floor next to the bed where it had ended up in the one-sided fight between me and the room, I picked it up and dialed. A moment later, I heard a sharp, "Hello?"

"Detective Wallace, this is Daemon Petrov."

He was silent for a second before he asked, "How the fuck did you get this number?"

With no intention of answering him, I plowed straight ahead. “I need information about some Latvians.”

## CHAPTER 38



The highway blurred out the window as much from the speed we were moving in the black sedan Janis was driving me home in as from the tears that still stung my eyes. At the forefront of my mind as we raced away from the Petrov mansion was the idea that at least I'd had a chance to put my shoes on this time.

Janis had asked me the address of my apartment before we left the driveway, and I'd given it to him. That had been the last we'd spoken. In my mind, I kept going over everything that had happened between Daemon and me, not just tonight but since the beginning, all the way back to that night five years ago when he'd taught me that sometimes love is pain.

I hated him. So many reasons came to mind as to why I was justified in doing so. All of the heartache and torment he'd put me through since that night when I'd met him in that club gave me all of the reasons in the world to wish he was dead. At the moment, I only had a few fading marks on my back to show the torture he'd caused me, but on the inside, the bruises were black and blue. The scars were deep.

At the same time that I wanted him to die and be out of my life forever, I knew that I actually also loved him. Funny how a person could both love and hate someone at the same time. All of the tender moments we'd shared together rippled through me, pushing their way through the chaotic undercurrent of his cruelty, bringing them to the surface.

It wasn't his fault. That was what I'd been telling myself all along. He wasn't born to be a monster. He had become that

way because of life's circumstances. If he had actually killed that girl when he was a child, something had to have driven him to it. Someone. And I would wager it was the same bastard who had cut those neat little rows of scars in Daemon's arm.

But not everyone who lives through the kind of abuse he'd been through became the evil son of a bitch that Daemon Petrov had developed into. Comparing my own brutal life to his wasn't fair since I didn't know the details of all he'd gone through. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but think that he could've made different choices.

He could've responded differently. He could've done what I did and become the exact opposite of what his family was forcing him into. Instead, he embraced the darkness, and now, he was this feral, animalistic creature who lashed out irrationally and crushed everyone around him without giving it a second thought and with no regrets.

I wished I could shake him and shout at him that he needed to be bigger than that, that if he really wanted to, he could keep the darkness out.

I would never have the courage to say something like that, though. No, that wasn't me. Meek, mild, tiny little me. Even if I ever did come face to face with Daemon again, I wouldn't be able to speak those words to him. And I'd probably forgive him for being such an asshole. Because that was what I did.

"I bet you'll be happy to be home." Janis's voice broke the silence, causing my head to turn in his direction.

"Oh, yes. I will be." It hadn't been that long since I'd been in my apartment, not even two weeks. Yet, it seemed like an eternity ago.

"Would you like to text your roommate and let her know you're coming?" Janis asked, reaching into his pocket.

"That's okay," I told him. "I don't know her number, and I don't have my phone." I assumed he was looking for his phone to give it to me, but the device he extended in my direction was my own. "How did you get this?" I asked him.

Janis shrugged. “Mr. Daemon asked me to get rid of it. I hadn’t quite gotten around to it yet.” He wore a mischievous smile on his face as he continued to stare out the windshield.

Immediately, I unlocked my phone, planning to send a text to Sara to tell her I’d be home soon, but before I could do so, the phone began to ring. It was as if it knew I had possession of it again and needed to remind me it was all-knowing.

The name that popped up wasn’t Sara’s as I’d hoped, though. It was my father’s name, which caused my breath to catch in my throat. Paralyzed, I stared at the vibrating object in my hand, willing it to just stop.

He was the last person on earth I wanted to speak to. Well, second to last. The thought that it could’ve been Daemon calling sent an unexpected shiver of pleasure through me which I quickly squashed. He would never call me anyway. He probably didn’t even know I had my phone if Janis was supposed to dispose of it.

“Everything all right?” Janis asked me, concern lacing his voice.

“No. It’s my father,” I explained. “I don’t want to speak to him.” I could just tell him later that I didn’t have my phone. He would accept that, right?

Janis nodded. “I can’t blame you there.”

I wondered what his opinion was on all of this. How many discussions had he overheard about how Alexander La Rosa needed to die, and now, the wife of his former boss, now deceased, was married to the bastard? That had to be confusing for everyone, even the butler.

The phone finally stilled, but my heart continued to thunder. What the hell had he wanted? Had he been calling me all this time, thinking I was just ignoring him?

Checking my missed calls, I saw plenty from Drake and Sara, and a few from the guys at the office, but nothing from my father. Not until now. And rather than just having a missed call, the notification that I had one new voicemail popped up, scaring the living shit out of me.

I had to listen to it. I didn't want to, but if I didn't, well, there would be consequences.

Bracing myself, I hit the correct buttons and raised the phone to my ear. My father's voice sounded angrier than I'd ever heard him before, and that was saying something. Each word he bit out was full of disappointment and disdain.

"Well, Elisa, I hear that you've failed me once again. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You have always fucked up in the past whenever I've asked you to do something for me, for the family, so why would this be any different?"

Tears stung my eyes as a crippling fear crawled up my spine. This was different than angering or disappointing Daemon because I had absolutely no love for my father. All I felt when I thought of him was hate—and terror.

My father continued. "I just got back into town. It's a good thing, too, I guess, since Daemon kicked your ass to the curb. I don't know where the fuck you think you're going or what your plans are, but they're about to change. Get your scrawny, useless little ass to my house now, or else I will find you and drag you back kicking and screaming." With that, the message ended, and the terror I'd felt earlier tripled.

"What's the matter, Miss Elisa?" I could hear that Janis was genuinely worried about me. He reached over and put his hand on my arm.

"Change of plans." I took a deep breath and wiped away my tears, not wanting to give my father the satisfaction of knowing he'd made me cry. "We need to go to my father's house instead. Do you know where it's at?"

"I do," Janis said, the reply almost a question. "Is everything okay?"

"No," I admitted. "He's very angry that I failed him."

"Oh, dear." Janis patted me a few times before he took his hand away and placed it back on the steering wheel. I could almost feel him trying to think of something encouraging to say, but what was he supposed to tell me? He couldn't do

anything to protect me against my father, and it was clear Daemon didn't intend to.

Janis pulled the car off the highway, taking a few side streets over to the other part of town we needed to reach. It would take a few minutes to get to the right highway, and then we'd have to head in another direction. I had some time, but it sort of felt like being on death row and knowing I was having my last meal.

How had he known I'd gotten kicked out? It didn't make sense. I'd only left the Petrov mansion half an hour ago. Obviously, Daemon wouldn't call him. Did my father have spies working in the Petrov's home?

Probably not. It could've been Lillian. Maybe she was concerned for me and gave him a call so he'd know that Daemon and I had had a fight—or whatever the hell it was.

Lillian had been so kind to me while I was there. Sure, her stories sometimes scared the shit out of me, but she wasn't the woman I expected her to be. It made sense that she would be worried and called my father, expecting him to also be concerned. She probably didn't know him well enough to understand how he would truly react.

"Maybe this will be a good thing, and you'll get to see your brother again," Janis offered. "Drake, is it?"

"Yeah, that's my favorite brother. The rest of them hate me," I explained, not sure why I was telling him. I put my phone in my pocket. "The rest of them are too much like my father." I wondered how he'd known Drake's name, but then, he'd been at the house. Maybe Janis knew more than I'd given him credit for.

"Your father is a scary guy, huh?" Janis asked me, finally reaching the correct freeway to take me to my father's part of town.

"Yeah. And he hates me. But then, he hates everyone. He's an asshole, a selfish bastard." I couldn't win for losing. Everywhere I turned, I was crowded by horrible men who only wanted to use me for their own personal gain.



“Well, I do hope that he is too busy trying to run the world or spending time with Ms. Lillian to do too much,” Janis offered. “Perhaps he was upset at hearing the news that the situation with Mr. Daemon didn’t work out but he will think on it and come up with a new plan, one that will be better for everyone involved.”

“I love your optimism, Janis. I really do,” I told the kind-hearted butler. “But I seriously doubt that will be the case. My father isn’t the sort of man who considers other people’s feelings, especially not mine.”

“Maybe being married to Ms. Lillian will change that.” Janis continued to smile at me with reassurance, but I didn’t think that would be the case.

“I don’t know. I guess when I moved to Chicago by myself, I’d hoped this would be the start of a new life for me, but he’s so controlling, he refused to let that happen. It’s the same bullshit I’ve dealt with my whole life.”

“This life can be difficult, as you know. I do hope that you find happiness, Miss Elisa. You deserve it.” A haunted look filled his eyes. Whether he was thinking of someone else, someone who had also deserved happiness and hadn’t found it, or he was just concerned for me, I couldn’t say.

“Thank you.” With that, I refocused my attention out the window. There was nothing more to be said.

When we reached my father’s neighborhood, the sense of dread I’d been feeling ever since Daemon kicked me out reached the boiling point. What was Alexander La Rosa going to do to me this time?

Janis pulled up outside of the house in the circle drive. “I can walk you inside, Miss Elisa.”

“No, that’s okay.” I didn’t want him to get sucked into whatever my father was going to do to me. “But thank you so much for your kindness.”

With sadness in his eyes, he nodded, and I got out of the car. My feet like lead, I shuffled toward the ominous, dark home that towered above me, like a dark creature, ready to

swallow me up. Like a child, I stood there, shivering in the breeze, hearing the sound of Janis's car pulling away and feeling so very small. And alone.

And terrified.

# EPILOGUE



LILLIAN

The scent of sweat filled my nostrils every time I inhaled. As pissed as I was, my nostrils flared with each inhale, making the stench even worse.

Under the dim light of a single lamp, I sat at the expansive oak desk in my office, the one I kept across town where no one ever fucking bothered me. Across from me, Edgar, the leader of the Savages, and his second in command, Ivar, stared at me wide-eyed as I stewed.

“I don’t know how the fuck you messed this up,” I spat at them, my red fingernails tapping incessantly on the table. “I gave you that goddamn shipment on a silver platter, and you still managed to screw me over.”

Behind me, my large companion shifted on his feet, making the floorboards creak. He was just as pissed off as I was, wanting blood.

“We are sorry.” Edgar’s voice shook with each word. “Give us another opportunity, and we will not disappoint you.”

A growl from over my shoulder was enough answer for me. My sentiments exactly.

“Who is this gentleman?” Ivar asked, nodding at my bodyguard.

“This is Ragno, my bodyguard. A personal gift from my new husband. Ragno La Rosa, meet Edgar and Ivar, the biggest fucking disappointments on the planet.”

Edgar and Ivar were not small men. Both of them were over six feet, muscular, and ugly as hell. But Ragno made them look like dainty little schoolgirls. Well over six and a half feet, three hundred and fifty pounds of muscle, and hideous as fuck, with droopy eyelids and the jowls of a pit bull, when I'd first seen the bastard, I'd had nightmares for a week. Now, I was glad he was the one standing behind me, doing all of my dirty work for me. My husband had good taste in bodyguards.

Opening my drawer, I pulled out a cigar, bit the tip off, and lit it, taking a few puffs and blowing the smoke in their faces. Edgar didn't look as apologetic as I would've liked. Ivar, on the other hand, looked scared shitless. I knew exactly what I needed to do.

“Ragno?” I said, gesturing at Edgar.

My bodyguard grunted, and before Edgar could even raise his hands or shout out in protest, a bullet splattered his brain against my filing cabinet.

“Fuck.” Ivar's eyes bulged. “Please, Ms. Lillian—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Ivar,” I said. “You get one more chance. Show me that you're capable of doing what I ask, and I'll let you live. You understand, you bastard?”

His eyes continued to protrude from his skull as he nodded gratefully at me. “Yes, Ms. Lillian. Anything you say. Thank you for letting me live.”

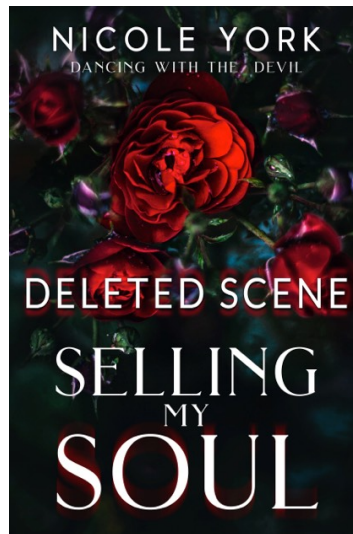
Puffing on my cigar again, I gave him a satisfactory head tilt. “All right then. Let's move ahead with our discussion. Tell me, Ivar. What are your plans now? What are you going to do to take care of my problem, hmm?”

His mouth moved, but no words came out. Not fast enough anyway. Setting down my cigar in the ashtray, I worded my question more clearly.

“What the fuck are we going to do about my son Daemon?”

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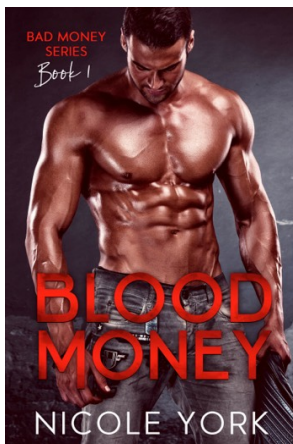
Did you want to see the clue scene with Elisa and Michael?  
We left it out of chapter 7 and you do NOT want to miss it!  
Grab that deleted scene here...[Get your copy HERE!!](#)



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole York is a woman that loves the thrill of suspense. Whether that be flipping upside down on a roller coaster or sitting on the edge of her seat watching the latest thriller movie, she's all in. If you see the sports car on the freeway flying by you, take a pic, because you probably just saw her!!

She is the one that always figures out the plot in the movie and comes up with the ending that no one else ever saw coming. It just serves her right that now in the books she writes sometimes the characters take the book a direction the author had not planned on.



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