

A muscular man with extensive tattoos on his chest and arms is the central figure. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the side. In the top left corner, there is a white speech bubble icon containing the text "TEXT ME YOU LOVE ME 7".

TEXT ME  
YOU LOVE ME  
7

You're only nineteen

Why does my age matter ?

*Texting*  
**THE TATTOOIST**

FLORA FERRARI

# TEXTING THE TATTOOIST

(TEXT ME YOU LOVE ME, 7)



# FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

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## TEXTING THE TATTOOIST

**Pro fighter turned tattoo artist and now, texting buddy. Killian Blaze is as hot as his name and a complete stranger. So why is he texting me back?**

I want a tattoo to honor the only man who ever loved me, my dad. I'm shy, almost a recluse. I find it difficult to leave the house let alone talk to strangers so how can I communicate my desire for a tattoo?

At first, I think Killian won't help me. He's a famous tattoo artist, surely he won't have time, but we start texting and discussing designs. We start texting *a lot*.

Killian is older, experienced, and we have only ever communicated through text. How can I feel such a connection with a stranger?

I'm curvy, and very shy, nothing like the ring girls from his previous life as a fighter. I've never had a boyfriend, never even kissed anybody.

**Can I trust this stranger who sends me hot and steamy texts? Will he lift me up and help me come out of my shell or leave me all alone to lock myself away?**

\* Texting the Tattooist *is an insta-everything standalone instalove romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

## NEWSLETTER

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# CHAPTER 1



*K*illian

I finish the last set of sit-ups, my abs straining and sweat soaking the matted floor of my home gym.

There's this fire in me, burning with each repetition.

Maybe it's age.

My forty-first birthday was a few days ago, and people keep mentioning – sometimes in a friendly way, sometimes with a tinge of jealousy – that my body will begin slowing down soon. But I haven't felt it, only more swelling rage inside of me, the feeling that's never left me ever since I first stepped into a boxing gym.

My coach used to say, *there's a devil in you, and we need to harness it.*

Walking through my penthouse apartment, I find Speeder lying on the couch, his greyhound body stretched out, his orange fur sticking out here and there from where he's been rolling over.

He rises as I enter, walking gracefully over to me.

“How are you doing, boy?”

I stroke the top of his head, telling myself Speeder's the only companion I'll ever need. But ever since my birthday, I've been thinking about *her*.

Walking over to the floor-to-ceiling windows, I look down at the city. A shock strikes me every single time I take in this view.

It seems so recently that I was on the far side of the city, the grimy part of town, with dreams of boxing, success, and money, escaping the drudgery that surrounded me. There's a poison to being a poor boy surrounded by poor grownups with no end in sight.

It can drain the hope out of a person.

But I kept on, and now here I am... with nobody to share it with.

Speeder makes a soft grumbling noise, tilting his head up at me.

Ever since I found the scrappy rust-colored boy in the alleyway behind my tattoo studio three years ago, he's been able to read my moods.

He's even more perceptive when he's been heavily exercised, as he has today with countless laps in a large field on the city's outskirts.

I know what he's saying.

I could find a woman if I wanted.

Last week, one of my tattooing clients offered herself to me. Once I was done tatting the butterfly on her wrist, she turned her hand over, grabbing my arm.

She was, on some level, attractive. Not that I found her attractive, but I could see why other men would.

She was the sort of woman advertising executives put on billboards, with her styled hair, seemingly perfect features, and gym-honed body.

But she left me cold.

I yanked my arm away.

She pretended not to be offended.

*“You’ve done such a good job, Killian. Oh, I love that name. Killian. I could say it a thousand times. Is there any way I can repay you?”*

I told her bluntly, *“The cash is fine with me. Thanks for choosing my studio.”*

She left with a pout, looking at me over her shoulder with an almost hurt look in her eyes. It was like she couldn’t understand how anybody could tell her no.

I’m sure not many men have.

But the woman I want....

Laughing gruffly, I open the glass door and walk onto the balcony. It’s cold out here, the winter wind whipping against my bare chest, instantly cooling my sweat. I’m surprised it doesn’t freeze and become as frosty as the rest of me.

*The woman I want.*

I think that as though there’s a specific idea of a partner I’m chasing.

As though I could type in her specifics into some machine and produce her in the shape I long for. But she’s hazy in my mind, or maybe she doesn’t exist.

It could be a case that I’m so broken no woman would appeal to me or be able to fix me.

Speeder whines, and I turn to find him sitting in the doorway.

“Too cold for you?” I ask.

He whines again.

I switch on the fire in the grill. It flickers to life, bathing the stone tiles of the balcony in warm orange light. Speeder approaches, the light mixing with the rustiness of his fur, and curls up on his blanket.

“Just me and you, eh, boy?”

Leaning down, I scratch him behind the ear.

Then my phone vibrates in my pocket.

I've always got it on me. It's probably the poor kid in me, secretly thinking somebody will somehow take all of this away – the apartment, wealth, and success.

The *career* success, at least.

On my website, my cell number and my email are listed. So I never know when a new client will contact me. This could be a regular client call, a high roller, a celebrity, or a sports personality – somebody who wants to splash some real cash.

I read the text.

***Good evening, Mr. Blaze.***

I smirk at the formality of it.

***My name is Mia Nelson. Unfortunately, my father passed away almost a year ago, and I'm considering getting a tattoo in his honor. Looking online, I see you've got countless positive reviews, and I also see you offer a service where you help the client design their tattoo. I'm very interested in this.***

Since she's given me her full name, I might search for her online. It's a callous thing, my business, but I get so many requests for this service I have to be selective.

A man has to take his business seriously.

Nothing comes up for a few results, telling me she's not a public figure.

But then I hit upon a search result.

*Mia Nelson, Fiction Editor.*

I click on it.

Her photo appears.

Suddenly, I'm on my feet, rising so quickly it causes Speeder to follow me as I pace up and down the balcony, staring down at her photo. It might not be her, I warn myself.

It's probably a common name. Not like mine.

*A name made for boxing, my coach used to say. A name we can use....*

Mia is honest in her bio on the freelancing website, explaining how she doesn't have much experience. However, she also mentions that she's written several poems in honor of her late father, and she's included these in a section where users can offer samples of their work.

It has to be her. It's too much of a coincidence.

I return to her photo, immediately feeling my world change shape, *take* shape, as I stare down at her. I imagine the sound she'd make if I kissed her from behind on the neck. Possibly wrap my arms around her body as my hands indulge in all her curves.

She's young, with flushed red cheeks and dark brown hair – almost black – wavy down to her shoulders. Her eyes are wide and somehow startled, like the world's a shock to her, like she needs her man – *me* – to guide her.

Green, jewel-like, those eyes....

She's wearing an airy white shirt that seems to float around her body but can't hide her shape.

Her breasts made for massaging, for pleasing....

And for feeding my children.

*Our* children.

I lean against the balcony railing, squeezing the chilling metal, knowing I have to slow down. And also knowing it will be the greatest challenge of my life, tattooing this woman, the needle trembling in my hand as I struggled not to lose control.

My balls swell.

My manhood is hard already, pushing against my gym shorts as if telling me to find her.

To tear off her clothes.

To guide my throbbing helm to her young entrance and drive deep, hard, and possessively.

“She's mine.”

I offer the words to the whipping wind.

“She belongs to me.”

Speeder whines and starts running in circles. He was doing that when I found him, and I know it as a sign he is agitated, sensing my mood as usual.

“Sorry, boy.” I kneel and offer him my hand. He ducks his head and nuzzles into it. “I just don’t know how....”

I can feel this way so fast, and with such urgency, I finish silently.

Staring into her eyes, I study her smile, only a small one, as if she can’t force herself to smile fully. Her eyes seem to see me as nobody else ever has, seem to care, and tell me that if I *am* broken, it won’t stop her.

No, it’s *me* who needs to stop.

What sort of madness is this?

I’m losing my mind.

She seems overly honest from her profile, sharing that stuff about her customer service job, and she hasn’t offered the best samples for her business.

Writing poetry and editing books aren’t connected.

I want to help her, explain this gently and patiently, and support her in every way I can.

But no – I have to slow down.

Text her back, and be *professional*.

If I told her the truth of what I really want – the inexplicable and undeniable desire gripping me – she’d block my number.

## CHAPTER 2



M<sup>ia</sup>

I sit in bed, laptop on my knees, no headphones in though I find it easier to work that way.

But Mom might need me. I have to be able to hear her if she calls.

She had another episode a few hours ago, packing a bag and telling me she was leaving. *“I’m no good for you. Look at me. Holding you back. Making it so you can’t even be a kid.”*

I told her I was not a kid. I’m nineteen, and life has made me grow up fast anyway.

It was the wrong thing to say. Instead, Mom started to cry, dropping her suitcase.

As I held her, she moaned about how much she missed Dad. I cried too.

Of course, I miss him, but I can’t let myself sink too much into the grief. I can’t let it swallow me as it’s swallowed my Mom. It’s my job to keep paying rent on this cruddy apartment, to somehow do it without leaving the house.

The joys of the modern world.

With a laptop and a chat program, I’m able to work as a customer service representative, dealing with complaints for several travel companies. It’s all for less than minimum wage, meaning I work around seventy hours or more some weeks,

and then there's the meager editing work that comes in, my dream....

My dream is to help people realize *their* dreams of improving their work or helping *them* improve it.

Now, I respond to two customers at the same time, following the company script. My laptop is split into thirds.

Two windows show the chats.

The third shows the image of Killian Blaze.

For his website, he's leaned into the *Blaze*. Flames lick all around him.

He stands with his arms folded, sleeves of tattoos disappearing into his black T-shirt. His arms are thick and stretch the sleeves of the shirt, his chest bulging, so powerful and huge it makes my body tingle all over.

The flames of the website glow against his silver hair, seeming to make it sparkle, his ice-blue eyes staring like an unflinching winter.

Something is captivating about the smirk on his lips like he's telling me....

*Don't worry, Mia. I'm here for you. You don't have to go through anything alone ever again.*

There are other photos of him online from his boxing career with his hulking shirtless body soaked in sweat.

But I prefer him here, with his silver hair, experience, and maturity dripping down every inch of him.

His website appeared when I started searching for a possible tattoo artist in my area.

This was yesterday.

The day my life changed.

I clicked... and everything hurt for a searing second as if my body and soul were taking a new shape. I've never been interested in boys, maybe because of the hell Dad put Mom and me through.



But Killian isn't a boy.

He's all man.

In childish dreams – dreams I should be far above at this stage in my life – I think about him being *my* man.

Yeah, me.

A woman who can barely leave the house, whose heart hammers like fists against cage bars every time I'm forced to talk to somebody in person or even over the phone. The confused woman who hated her Dad on one level and loved him on another.

My cell phone buzzes, the cracked screen causing sweat to slide down my body when I see the name.

*Killian.*

I've already saved his number, knowing it's the closest I'll ever get to owning a piece of him.

The chill in the room seems less severe as I pick up the phone like Blaze is heating me up.

***I'd be happy to help, he replies. Would you like to arrange an appointment?***

My heart does its familiar hammering routine at the thought of seeing him in person, with him looming over me, six foot four of pure experienced muscle. His height is listed everywhere online since it was relevant to his boxing career.

I wonder what it would be like to be pressed against his hard body to feel safe and protected.

***What sort of details would you need? I type. We can arrange some things beforehand so we don't waste time during the appointment.***

My belly cramps even as I type the words. Since this routine is so familiar to me, I find excuses to avoid the things other people seem to take for granted.

Seeing people in person, talking with them, existing in the world.

It's not just because I was homeschooled.

In the early days of my homeschooling, I knew other kids. We had a community.

But then Dad got worse. The socializing stopped.

It's just Mom and me now.

*You're not going to waste my time*, he replies.

A tight smile spreads across my face as I read his words.

*How could you possibly know that?*

I send the text quickly, wondering if this is what flirting feels like. There's no reason for him to flirt with me, especially since he doesn't know what I look like.

Unless he's searched for me online, I saw the photo I took a couple of weeks ago when the freelancing website emailed me. They were going to disable my profile if I didn't upload a picture.

Hastily, I took one, balancing my phone on the nightstand and setting a timer.

But I'm wrong. If Killian *has* searched for me online, that's more reason for him not to want to flirt.

Look at him. Look at me.

He probably has countless women throwing themselves at him.

*I get people trying to waste my time*, he texts. *But you don't seem like that type. You seem sincere.*

My smile widens, but then it tremors and falls. This isn't making sense.

*I still don't know how you could come to that opinion.*

*It's simple*, he replies quickly. *The formality of your first text. For whatever reason – perhaps because this tattoo is in honor of a loved one – sending that text was important to you. It matters. You're not going to waste my time..., and I'm not going to waste yours.*

I read his words over twice, trying to work out if I'm wrong to feel this personal note inside of me, this quiver of longing.

It's like he knows me, wants to know me, or is interested beyond the tattoo.

I've got to be careful. I don't have any experience when it comes to men.

Maybe this is how he talks to every client.

***You're right. It matters. But for the design... I'm going to have to explain some stuff about my Dad, and I'm not sure I can do that in person.***

I shouldn't be doing it anyway, not yet. The truth is, I don't even have the money for a tattoo.

I want one, though the idea is still unformed.

But my main reason for texting Killian was because my body was screaming out for him, *is* screaming out for him.

It was like there was this other Mia inside of me, far more confident than I could ever dream of being, telling me that there's a world where I reach out to him, and it leads to something.

Looking around my room, with the faded wallpaper and the spots of dampness across the walls, I wonder what I'm thinking.

Something *more*.

Something more than Mom losing her job because she couldn't stop crying, more than me having panic attacks when I tried to walk into the mall and look for work, more than wondering if anybody would ever want me or *could*.

But even that's wrong.

It's not anybody.

It's just him. Killian.

A man I've never met.

Maybe I'm going crazy.

***I'd really like to see you,*** Killian texts.

I remind myself this is probably part of his business, encouraging people to attend appointments, and doing everything he can to get people through the door.

It has nothing to do with the silly thoughts cascading through my mind.

*You don't have to be afraid, Mia*, he sends a moment later.

*Who said I'm afraid?* I type quickly, rage fueling the movement of my thumbs. *Maybe I'm busy. Maybe I've got stuff to do. Maybe I want to make this process as streamlined as possible. Fear doesn't have to come into it.*

*I'm reading your poetry. That's how I know you're afraid.*

I gasp, my eyes flitting over his words.

So he *did* search for me online.

And he's reading my poetry.

Poetry that talks about Dad and how intimidating the outside world is, that talks about fear and shyness and...

And what was I *thinking*, putting that online?

I go to the freelancing website and remove it quickly, my shame touching me.

My phone buzzes again, but I don't look at it. I won't.

He's overstepped the line, taking the conversation there, where it has no business being. This isn't supposed to be about my terrible poetry.

I try to focus on my work, mundane and routine, as temptation tries to make me look at my phone to see what his latest text says.

## CHAPTER 3



*K*illian

I texted her, *Mia?*

That was it, just her name, to see if she was going to respond.

That was last night, almost twenty-four hours ago.

I'm in the studio now, finishing up a back piece on one of my old boxing buddies. His name is Graham, and his body is covered in tats, the same way mine is.

"Something wrong, K?" he asks.

"No," I grunt, focusing on my work, not thinking about how I lost control last night.

I didn't intend on taking the conversation anywhere except for her tattoo, but then it was like a demon took possession of my fingers, sending the texts before I could listen to reason.

She deleted her poetry, but I'd already read it.

There was, *is* too much longing in me.

Reading her words, I learned about the way she feels when walking down the street, the sensations assailing her, looking at other people like they've got it all figured out, and she never will.

I want to help her.

But can I help her while also claiming her in the most possessive, aggressive way? Can I help her while tearing off

her clothes and throwing her onto the bed, leaning over her and guiding my rock-hard cock up her thigh, teasing her as I get closer and closer?

My work, *focus* on the work....

Once the texting was done, I showered and went to bed, but I couldn't resist downloading her photo and gazing at her, imagining what her voice sounds like, and wondering if her shy lips will part when I kiss her or if she'll keep her mouth closed.

"You sure?" Graham says a minute or so later.

"Eh?"

"That nothing's wrong? You worried me last week, got to be honest."

"I never should've told you that."

Last week, somebody vandalized the store with a *Sante Muerte* statue – a symbol of death. Back in the day, when Graham and I were both coming up in the boxing community, a small group of Cartel members used to do the same thing.

Throw the statues through windows as intimidation tactics.

For us, that meant worse would follow if we didn't throw the fights as they'd ordered us to.

I never threw a fight, refused it, and it became a point of contention – of near war – with a man called Emil Madrigal.

But then the DEA swept into the city, and Emil and his goons ran.

"It was almost twenty years ago, all that mess," I go on.

"Still," Graham sighs, causing his back to shift and the gravestone tattoo to move around. "What are the chances it's a coincidence?"

"If it's Emil, let him come," I snarl. "I don't care. Let him bring as many friends as he wants. I'll fight if I have to. I'll die if I have to."

"Jesus, K," Graham says. "I don't want you to die, man."

I can hear it in his voice – he’s detected the fire in mine.

I’m burning up with even more fury than usual, probably a result of checking my phone several times an hour, waiting to see if my woman has replied.

*My woman, my woman, my woman.*

The phrase plays on a loop in my mind.

“My old man used to say that if I died while fighting, he wouldn’t mourn me. He said it would be a hero’s death. He’d call me a Viking, and that would be that.”

“No offense, but your old man was a dick.”

I laugh gruffly. “No arguments there.”

“You can talk to me,” Graham says a moment later. “If you want. You know that, right?”

Graham never used to talk like this when we were young men fighting to make something of ourselves when all we cared about was training, grit, and determination.

But things have changed.

Graham has a wife, three happy and healthy kids, and a new career as a boxing coach. I’ve established my business, pursuing the passion my old man tried to beat out of me.

*I ain’t having no artsy pansy for a son.*

“If you’re worried about the Cartel, you can be honest with me. No judgment.”

“That *Sante Muerte* stuff was all over the news. My business is doing better than some of my rivals would like. I bet it’s them trying to scare me.”

Before laying eyes on Mia, I honestly didn’t care if Emil had returned, if he wanted to go toe to toe, for I refused him, repeatedly, telling him no when other men wouldn’t.

Before I saw Mia, I honestly didn’t care if it came to blood.

But now it’s like I’d be leaving somebody behind beyond Speeder. Like, if I died, it would matter to her....

Which is madness.

Madness.

It's quickly becoming my new favorite phrase. Or the one I think most, at least.

"Something else, then?" Graham says.

"Tell me something," I reply. "When you first met Lena, how did it feel? Was it like, if you didn't have her, you'd die? Did you immediately know you wanted to have a family with her – to be with her forever?"

Graham laughs. "No, not even close. She hated my ass when we first met. And I didn't care much. I was too busy focusing on my career. But then we started to get to know each other better, and it went from there. Why?"

Graham turns, causing me to raise the needle from his skin. He stares at me.

"Have you met somebody?"

He can't hide the shock in his voice. He's tried setting me up with women before, years ago now – I've stopped trying – and it never worked. I always stopped it before it could go any further, not wanting to inflict my coldness on them.

"Not met, exactly," I say quietly, knowing I should stop.

"What do you mean?"

Graham's one of my oldest friends, and we bled together during training.

I tell him about Mia, about seeing her photo, about wanting her.

I won't go into detail about my absolute need for her, her destiny in giving me children, or her purpose in this world....

Her purpose is that she's *only mine* and will only ever *be* mine. Just as I'll never belong to anybody else, she will always be my woman.

"How can you be sure you like her?" Graham asks.

"I saw her photo. We texted a few times. And I read four of her poems."



Other men might make a joke about me reading poetry, but Graham knows I've always read poetry and literature, even while I was fighting.

*Poets used to be warriors*, and I told him once when I was immersed in the Norse sagas. *They used to be savages*.

"And that's enough?" Graham says, unable to hide the doubt in his voice.

"More than," I tell him firmly.

"Then hell. I think you should go for it. All I know is you're my friend, and I want you to be happy. I want you to find somebody. I've never made a secret about that."

I almost tell him that I *want* to go for it, but she hasn't texted me back. But I've shared enough.

I focus on the tattoo instead.

When this session is almost done, my phone vibrates from the metal table in the corner.

The rattling metal sound is like somebody tugging at my heart. Fantasies begin flooding into my mind of Mia whispering gentle poetry to our first child and the baby cradled in her arms. She looks at me as she speaks, her eyes filled with love, belonging, and contentment.

After saying goodbye to Graham, I check my phone.

***Would you like to win \$5,000,000? Please complete this survey to....***

I throw my phone onto the table in disgust.

Disgust at myself more than anything else.

I only saw her last night, and already she's taken complete control of me, becoming the only person I care about, the only woman I'm *capable* of caring about.

I tell myself the disgust comes from our age gap. According to the freelance website, she's nineteen.

But that doesn't matter to me.

I tell myself it comes from the power imbalance.

I've lived longer. I've seen far more of the world.

I've fought dangerous men and lived to talk about it.

According to the poems she deleted, she's so scared of leaving the house it drives her to scream.

But I don't care about that either.

The disgust comes from knowing she'll never want me with the same urgency I want her. She couldn't because it's downright insane. It's the product of a childhood spent under the fist and then an adulthood spent aiming my fists at other people.

And now this, who I am now.

A man who wants nobody until my angel flies into my life.

I pushed too far. She'll never reply.

Screw it, then.

I pick up my phone and type, *I need you, Mia, and that's the truth. I know this will seem absolutely crazy to you, but the second I saw your photo, I knew I owned you. I knew every single inch of your young curvy body belonged to –*

I stop texting when a message appears.

From Mia.

***Sorry. My phone died.***

The everyday ordinariness of it makes me delete my message.

What the hell am I thinking?

## CHAPTER 4



M<sup>ia</sup>

I sit on the couch, my eyes aching from staring at the laptop for so long. Mom is on the armchair across the second-hand coffee table – we sold all our things when Mom lost her job – her head aimed at her paperback like something terrible will happen if she looks elsewhere.

Studying her, I remember what Andrea Nelson was like before Dad’s death.

Dad’s nature took a toll on her, but her hair was far fuller before. Her body was thicker and sturdier, but now her clothes hung off her. The bones press through her hands.

But her eyes are the same, with light trying to break through the darkness, and when she smiles, it’s like a gift.

She looks up, spots me watching her, and gives me a gift.

“Good book?” I ask.

She nods. “Absorbing.”

That’s what she always says. Never anything specific but *absorbing*, meaning the book is swallowing her, so she doesn’t have to think about other things.

I don’t see anything wrong with that.

After spending the day working, my resolve gone, I felt as if I was compelled to check Killian’s text.

Just opening the message made my heart flutter, with the thought of him reading my poetry, with the idea he could be mocking me.

Just my name.

***Mia?***

I imagined it in his voice. I know how gruff and husky he sounds from an interview last year where he discussed winning an award for his tattooing work.

He didn't seem happy, staring hard at the camera, his silver hair seeming to blaze just like on his website.

I lied to him and told him my phone had died.

When he replies, I stand quickly, like the vibration of my phone has jolted me to my feet.

Mom looks at me sharply.

“Work email,” I tell her.

She nods, and I walk into the bedroom, not daring to tell her the truth.

That just the thought of Killian has got my body aching, tingles dancing up and down my thighs, this man I've never met, this stranger. He's making everything feel so much more sensitive, my panties rubbing against my sex, my lips aching.

It's all so new. I've never touched myself before.

Does that make me weird?

If I wasn't homeschooled – if Dad wasn't who he was – I might be able to ask a friend.

***I was beginning to think I had upset you***, his text reads.

I bite down, wondering how to reply.

***Do you text all your potential clients this much?***

I have to know if this is a regular thing for him.

***No***, he simply responds.

I imagine it in his voice, the husky quality of it, certain I can feel his breath moving over me.

*Then why me? And why did you read my poetry?*

*If I answered honestly, he replied, you'd block my number. You're only nineteen....*

*Trust me, that number doesn't tell you everything you need to know about me.*

*I'm sure you're right.* I imagine him typing fast, eager to speak with me, his tatted arms swelling with muscles. *But it doesn't change the fact I've got twenty-two years on you.*

*Why does my age matter? What exactly are we talking about here?*

I'm sending the texts faster and faster, mostly to stop myself from chickening out. If I let the text sit there for longer than a few seconds, the nerves will overwhelm me.

Is this a trick of some sort?

But why would he speak with me as a sick joke?

He's implying he wants me, though, isn't he?

Ah, I don't know. This is so unlike anything I've ever done.

I try to imagine I'm reading this, not living it. If that was the case, I'd be certain Killian was interested in her, *me*.

But it isn't easy to accept in reality.

*We're talking about what I'd do to you if I was there, Mia. And what it would mean. What would people say if this forty-one-year-old animal let out all his desire on a nineteen-year-old shy thing like you? We're talking about how wrong this would look. That's not how I see it, but that's how most people would.*

I clamp my legs together as I skim over the lines several times.

The things he'd do to me....

A warning signal fires in my mind, telling me he probably talks like this with countless women.

I'm nothing special.

But at the same time, I can't think about that, not when my sex is aching urgently and my entire body is swelling with heat.

I try to think of a good response, something a sexy, confident woman would say.

I can't tell him the truth – that his words are causing my body to pulse as though getting ready to give him a child, that his lust-filled declarations have got my mind leaping to the future.

Anyway, that's just deep-within craziness, thoughts I can't even let myself entertain.

I push my legs together even harder, my pussy throbbing like there's a ball of heat inside of me, expanding with each reread of his words.

***Why me?*** I reply, my hand shaking, making it seem like the phone's trying to leap from my hand.

Maybe it is a form of self-preservation.

To stop me from falling too hard for the blazing bad boy.

But I already *have* fallen.

***I saw your photo on the freelancing website. That's enough to make me wild.***

***That photo? Really? It's just... just a picture of me. Nothing special.***

***Nothing special? That's where you're wrong. I'm looking at it right now, and it's got me thinking about kissing your innocent lips, making your cheeks blush an even deeper shade of red. It's got me thinking about tearing open your shirt and massaging those big creamy breasts, sucking your nipples, making them tingle for me.***

I sit up, panting, knowing he can't do this with every one of his female clients. Or hoping he doesn't, at least.

But what if this is a common thing for him?

What if I'm just one in a long line?

I frantically search for a way this could be a cruel trick, an angle that would explain this as something evil. But I can't find it.

It's not like I'm sending him photos.

Why waste his time teasing me like this?

*I told myself I'd be good*, he texts when I don't respond. *I wouldn't send you messages like this, but the more I look at that photo, the more I want you. Badly. You're making me crazy.*

"That makes two of us," I whisper into the quiet of my bedroom.

My sex is aching. My clit rubs against my panties, pulsating.

My hand – the one not holding the phone – twitches as if a message is coming from deep inside me, the same place the impossible fantasies originated.

*You're making me pretty crazy, too*, I reply, hoping I'm not humiliating myself.

*You've got no idea how relieved I am to hear that. Where are you, Mia?*

*In my bed.*

When I click *send*, I mark it as the hottest message I've ever sent, definitely the most suggestive.

I could've lied and told him I was with somebody, or in public, something to make him stop.

But I don't want him to.

*Are you doing anything?* he texts. *Because thinking about you in bed, alone, has got me imagining I'm there. It's got me thinking about how wet your young pussy is getting... it's got me thinking about tearing off your pants and going down between your legs, ripping your panties off with my teeth, kissing your sex, then grinding my tongue up your lips, focusing on your clit.*

My sex screams out for attention, an entirely new feeling swimming around my body.

I'm not sure I should text him the next bit.

It might put him off.

But if I'm not honest now, he may expect me to know way more than I do.

I force my thumb to press the keys, even as the trembling in my hand swims through my entire body, taking hold of me like a demon of pure lust.

*I've never touched myself before, I send. And... how do I know this is you? What if you're somebody else?*

A minute passes. Two.

I've put him off with my admission.

He doesn't want some immature....

But then he sends a photo.

It's him, his features tight, holding up a piece of paper with today's date on it. He's written my name next to it in his manly script.

*That's fine. I can tell you what to do... and I could say the same thing to you.*

*Do you want a photo?*

*Yes.*

I stare at the photo of him, at my name, the proof.

I'm rushing across the room – my panties rubbing with even more sensitivity against my sex – I scrawl his name and today's date.

I take a selfie with my cruddy camera, just of my face and the date.

I'm fully aware this could be a dream.

I could wake on the couch, Mom's hand on my shoulder, telling me I was moaning about somebody called Killian in my sleep.



## CHAPTER 5



*K*illian

I'm in the bathroom adjacent to my main tattoo studio, the door locked, panting out a beastly breath as I stare at the photo she sent me. Her lips are pursed, the small note covering one cheek, the other flushed with lust.

I read her text again.

She's never touched herself before.

She couldn't have chosen something better to inflame my lust if she tried, my balls full, seed writhing up and down my shaft. Precome leaks out of my helm.

I didn't plan on sending steamy messages. But I can't even *think* about her without wanting to unleash the lust in my body.

*Are you going to be good and touch yourself for me?* I text.

*Do you want me to?* she replies.

I sit on the toilet seat, pull down my jeans, and take out my cock. Some part of me is aware of how wrong this is.

It's late, and Graham was my final client for the day, but this is still my place of work.

I'm not the sort of man to masturbate at work or in public. I never have. The thought would've seemed insane to me before I laid eyes on my Mia.

But now there's this primal drum beating through me, making it feel like I'll die if I don't grab my bulging shaft and think of her, my woman, touching her innocent slit as I guide her.

My cock is massive and hard, thick in my hand as I begin to stroke.

*Slide your hand down your perfect, curvy body into your panties and start gently rubbing your clit, then close your eyes and imagine it's me. Imagine I'm there with you, rubbing that needy clit, so your pussy gets even wetter for me. I'm getting you ready for my hard cock. I'm so hard for you.*

**Really?**

*Are you doing it?* I text right away.

*Yes. I'm rubbing myself. It feels so good... but only because I'm thinking of you.*

*Why have you never done it before?*

She replies, *I've never felt the need before. But I do now.*

The need.

She's driving me closer and closer to the edge, my hand stroking from my helm to my base, spreading the precome as I imagine it's *her* hand, and then her soft mouth, her lips open as she nervously sucks up and down my shaft.

*What would you do next?* she sends.

*You tell me.*

No, she replies. *Could you do it? Please.*

I type furiously. *I'd rub your clit gently until you're ready for me to press down with all the lust burning inside of me. And then I'd make you say 'please.' You'd moan it over and over again, wouldn't you? Like the obedient young thing you are.*

Yes, Mia texts. *I'd do whatever you asked. Please let this be real.*

**Real?**

*Not a trick.*

***It's not a trick.*** I clench my jaw at the thought. ***I'll never trick you. I want you so badly it hurts. I'd come to get you right now....***

***In person? I can't. I'm sorry.***

***Just keep rubbing that virgin slit for me.***

I close my eyes as I wait for her response, picturing her lying beneath me as I slide my finger inside of her, then free her breasts and start sucking her nipples, first one and then the other, sucking them until I can feel the lust shiver through her.

But minutes pass, and I open my eyes.

No response.

I finally see myself.

Just a man jacking off at work.

What's wrong with me?

With the spell broken – no reply coming – it suddenly seems pathetic.

***What makes you think I'm a virgin?*** Her text finally comes.

***I guessed,*** I reply. ***Am I wrong?***

***Does it matter?*** she shoots back.

It would make me want her more, knowing not only has she never touched herself, but no other man has ever stroked her soaked pussy, ever sucked her clit, and then licked down to her slit, pushing his tongue inside of her to taste her tanginess.

***No,*** I text, lying. ***Just keep rubbing your pussy.***

***I am, I am.***

She can tell me the truth when I meet her in person.

***Explain exactly what you're doing.***

Suddenly, any notions of self-reflection are gone. I don't care if I'm at work, only about the thought that somewhere, my eager probably-a-virgin girl is touching her body.

***I've got my hand in my pajama bottoms, in my panties. I'm rubbing my clit, and it feels real, real hot. It feels like all this***

*pressure's building.*

Holy hell.

My heart is hammering.

My cock throbs in my hand, veins pressing against my palm.

*Have you ever had an orgasm before?*

No, she replies. *Do you think that's what it is?*

*Just keep rubbing and imagine I'm slipping my fingers into your sensitive pussy. You're so soaked for me, your young body getting ready to take every inch of my cock. Maybe you're nervous, but you don't have to be. I'll ease into your sappy pussy so gently... at first. And then, when I feel how badly you want it, I'll start fucking you hard, making the mattress whine.*

*Are you doing it too?* she texts.

I stare at her words, but it's like I see her instead, her curvy features bouncing beneath me, big breasts jiggling as I drill my dick into her.

*Yes. I'm jerking myself hard for you.*

*Can you keep saying things?*

I smirk at the way she asks it like she doesn't want to come outright and say it. It's like part of her wants to hold back, but we're both too far gone for that.

*I'm so obsessed with you as I fuck you, I go on. I'm staring down at your big beautiful tits as they bounce for me, and I've never seen a sexier sight. Our bodies are so hot. You're so soaked, and there's so much precome on my cock. I slip deeper and deeper. Soon you feel the pressure building.*

*Yes. I am.*

*I'm close too, I text frantically. I'm going to explode thinking about you. Imagining your tight young pussy is squeezing me right at the base because I'm pushed all the way inside of you, deep into your inexperienced sex.*

*Is that a good thing?*

*It is because I'll show you how sexy you can be.*

*Yes, you'll show me the way. I'm rubbing really fast now....*

*Me too. I'm so close. My body feels like it's on fire.*

*Mine too.*

I close my eyes and picture my woman in bed, the crotch of her PJ bottoms shifting around as her hand moves inside of them, her eyelids fluttering as she sinks into the fantasy and gets closer and closer to orgasm.

A groan escapes me as all the pressure surges to the end of my cock, my seed expanding in my shaft.

A thought touches me just before it explodes.

No. It's a waste.

It belongs in her.

But then it's too late.

The image of my woman rubbing herself, my curvy young princess.

*Mine.*

She belongs to me.

Only me.

"Argh," I grunt, trying to stay quiet as my come erupts out of my helm and shoots out in a hot stream.

***Oh my God.*** Her words appear on my screen, blurry, as my come thunders out of me. ***That was it – the first orgasm of my life. I feel lightheaded.***

Once I finish, I look down at my wilting cock, at the come spattering my shirt.

A waste.

But it was worth it to make her finish.

***Me too,*** I reply. ***I wish we'd been together for real, though... we have to meet.***

***Meet? No. I don't think I can do that. Not yet.***

***Why not?***

Before she can reply, somebody calls me.

The manager of my apartment building.

I'm tempted not to answer, but he never calls.

I think of Speeder.

"Yeah?" I say, swiping an answer.

"Thought you should know, a guy is trying to get into your apartment. Says he's a friend of yours, and you arranged it."

"He's there now?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"What's his name?"

"Emiliano Madrigal," my building manager says. "Shall I let him up?"

I leap to my feet, grab some toilet paper, and clean myself up.

"No, don't let him up."

Emiliano. Emil.

The man who tried to make me throw fights.

The man who wanted me dead.

He *is* back.

"I'll be right there."

## CHAPTER 6



M<sup>ia</sup>

He asks me why we can't meet, but it's difficult to explain.

Outlining all the stuff about Dad, the fear instilled in me....

Worse, knowing it was all a delusion, knowing I should be able to break those chains as easily as telling myself I don't *believe* in them, and yet they're still there, tightening around me.

I sit up, my phone in my hands, panting as the aftershock of the orgasm rushes around me.

It felt like nothing I'd ever experienced, the warmth surging inside me with the flow of possession.

Right at the end, it was like the fantasy became a reality, as though Killian was here with me.

Like it *was* his hand pressed against my sex, like it *was* his body pressed against mine and not just the phantom version.

We could meet. He wants to.

And yet just the thought makes my head swim as if it's going to send signals to my body, shutting me down.

*I'm not sure how to explain, I reply. It goes back to what I said before. I'd have to talk about stuff involving my Dad. More than anything, you'd probably get bored.*

I leave the end there as bait of sorts, knowing it's probably sneaky of me. But I want Killian to tell me he could never get bored with me.

I want him to reply, *Don't be silly. I want to know everything about you. We're going to be together for a long, long time, after all.*

But seconds pass, then minutes, time ticking until it's almost been thirty.

I stare down at the phone, wondering if I've annoyed him. Or maybe he lost control of his lust.

I remember watching a TV show where one of the characters mentioned *cleaning the pipes* and masturbating so they could think clearly.

Maybe that's all this was.

I try to figure out how it could be a trick. Again.

But I come up with nothing. Again.

I didn't say anything too suggestive. It was all him.

I'm jolted from my thoughts when there's a crash from the next room.

Right away, I'm on my feet, rushing into the living room.

Mom stares across the room as soda drips down the wall, the shattered glass glistening in the dusty lamplight. Her hands are at her sides, her teeth bared, her hair all wild like she's been pulling at it.

Guilt slams into me.

I should've sensed the signs in her instead of retreating to my bedroom to fantasies that will never come true. At least not in the way I want.

"Mom?" I approach her cautiously, my hands raised. "It's okay."

"It's not okay," she says in a numb voice. "Your dad's gone. There's nothing okay about that."



I bite down on my anger. Try my best to put a smile on my face and into my voice. “Smashing a glass won’t bring him back.”

She looks at me blankly. “I didn’t mean to do that. I don’t even remember it.”

Her words make my heart shatter just a little bit more, the way they always do. It’s like she cracks me open an inch at a time as I remember the woman she was before Dad died.

Okay, she always had her issues. Both my parents did.

But she was stronger than this, able to shield me from the worst of Dad’s moods, able to function.

I never knew how reliant on him she was.

It makes me feel lost.

“Let’s just sit down and cool off.”

Approaching her slowly, I raise my hands, feeling like I’m warily walking toward some wild animal. It’s another stab of guilt right to the belly, the tone I’m using, the caution I have to use just to talk with my mom.

She lets me touch her shoulder and guide her to the chair and then looks up at me, her features trembling, eyes shining.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I took another pill.”

I grit my teeth, trying to fight off the anger.

She never responds well if I let out my true feelings about this, but she knows my opinion about her pills... in times of crisis, they can come in handy, but she’s been turning to them more and more frequently since the doctor prescribed them.

“I think you should give them to me for the evening,” I say.

She nods, looking far younger than her age. It’s like I’m the grownup here.

Me – the woman who just had her *first* orgasm.

But at least that means Killian doesn’t find the age gap weird.

Unless this is a trick somehow.

I can't figure out how, though.

My mind's going in circles.

I focus on the simple tasks of going into the kitchen, finding Mom's medication, and pocketing it.

Then I pour her another glass of water, tucking the dustpan and brush under my arm as I carry it into the living room.

She's sitting back, breathing softly. The medication does this to her if she takes too much. It makes her erratic and then sleepy, transforming her into a toddler.

"I'm trying," Mom says softly. "I just never knew who I was without your Dad."

"I know," I reply tightly, brushing the glass into the pan, then wiping the area down with a towel.

Her words would make a sane woman think about how they could relate to my situation. If I'm ready to throw myself at Killian now – and I am, it hurts how ready I am – surely I should be worried about my identity melting away as Mom's did.

Until I'm not sure who *I* am, only who I'm supposed to be when he is around.

And when he's gone....

*Poof*, I disappear.

But my identity doesn't melt away, as miraculous as that is.

That could be because the dream relationship in my mind has nothing to do with real life, no connection to reality. In my mind, Killian supports my editing career and doesn't criticize me or hold me back like Dad did with Mom.

In my unrealistic fantasies, my man smiles whenever I tell him I've accomplished something.

After cleaning up, I sit next to Mom. She hugs me close, and I wrap my arm around her.

My phone's on the coffee table.

It hasn't vibrated yet.

I hinted that I'd have to explain some stuff about Dad if he wanted to understand why I couldn't meet.

Maybe that's too much for him. Way too soon.

But then, I'm not the one who took the conversation to steamy places. I didn't force him to say all those things, to direct my hand between my legs and take hold of my body like *he* was the one touching me.

That's how it felt at the end. Not like my own hand, but my man, my Killian, rubbing at me possessively.

Does he *care* I can't meet? Or is he creeped out by my wanting to talk about family stuff?

"You deserve better than this," Mom whispers, her voice heavy with sleep.

"Just try to rest, Mom."

"I mean it." She chokes away a sob, sounding like she was on the edge of unconsciousness. "You're bright and talented. You always have been. You're so mature for your age. Without me, you'd find your way in the world."

"Every time I leave the house, I have a panic attack," I snap. "I feel like the sky's going to fall on me. My throat gets tight, and I almost choke to death."

"You get the groceries," Mom murmurs.

"From the store on the corner. And I almost collapsed last time."

I'm not sure why I'm spilling out these words with so much rage.

It might be because it's evidence of why I'd never be able to behave in person as I do in text. Not with Killian, not with anybody.

But Killian's all that matters.

He wants a woman he can hold, kiss, and make love to, *real* love, not over text....

But I find life far easier hiding behind words.

I use other people's words when I'm editing, and now my own when texting my man.

No, not *my man*.

Just Killian.

My phone still sits on the coffee table, not vibrating, not making a sound.

He's forgotten about me.

"We ruined you," Mom whimpers. "Why are you so scared? What are you scared of?"

"Everything," I whisper.

"Pardon?" Mom asks.

"I don't know," I say instead, glad she didn't hear. "It's hard to explain. It's more like this instinct the second I step outside the door, like this response I can't control. I want to do better. I will."

"Me too." Mom shuffles closer to me. "We'll both do better."

I silently pray for it to be true while staring at my phone.

Nothing.

I shouldn't have mentioned Dad.

## CHAPTER 7



*K*illian

I round the corner to my apartment building, the sleek, clean sidewalks, and roads completely different from the street I lived on when I first met Emil.

I was an up-and-coming boxer, and Emil thought he could swagger up to me in the local diner and lay down his twisted law. He thought he could tell me to take a fall against my Russian opponent, a fighter many thought I'd lose against anyway.

*"And you see,"* he said, flashing a gold tooth when he smiled. *"You will make even more than the winner's purse."*

I'll never forget the look on his face when I told him no.

It was like ash filled his eyes.

His lips twisted in indignation.

And then he nodded, stepping away. *"You will change your mind."*

But I never did.

And when I started to get more popular, it became risky to take me out. It made Emil look weak in front of his Cartel buddies.

I pull up outside the building, not bothering to use the underground parking, then leap from my car and stalk across

the street.

My underwear clings stickily to me, reminding me of what I did not that long ago....

And I've been so consumed with speeding across the city that I haven't texted my woman back.

I want to meet.

Need to.

But she said she wasn't ready.

Focusing, I push open the glass doors, walking into the shiny lobby.

And there he is. Emil.

He rises from the couch, his hands stuffed in his pockets, a broad grin on his face. The gold tooth flashes at me again.

He's almost my height, just as broad, with thick black hair brushed back slickly. He wears a leather jacket, and tattoos creep up his neck.

"My old friend," he says, with sick warmth in his voice.

I tightly smile as he approaches, my fighter's instincts kicking in, telling me to leap at this man, to lay him out flat for thinking of invading this new chapter in my life.

"Emil," I reply flatly.

There's no point laying out all the vicious things I think and feel about him. He could have back-up with him. I've got no idea why he's here.

I need to be tactical, even as the fire in me roars to be violent.

"No hug for an old friend?" He spreads his arms and drops them a moment later. "Okay, Killian. I get it."

"What do you want?"

"To see an old friend."

I take a step forward, close enough to smell the cigarette smoke clinging to his clothes. He grimaces like he's getting

ready to start exchanging shots, but he holds himself upright with dignity.

“Cut. The. Crap.”

He laughs like the criminals often did back in the boxing days. It’s the sort of laughter that says, *I’m laughing away your disrespect, so I don’t have to kill you.*

“I am a legitimate businessman here to open a laundromat,” he says. “A few *washing* companies, if you get my drift?”

His tone implies he’s using some slick code, but it’s clear he’s talking about money laundering and thinks I should be impressed.

“Good for you. That doesn’t explain why you’re here, though.”

“Oh, but it does....”

He arches his eyebrow, and then I get it.

I start laughing, shaking my head.

“Is something funny?” he snaps.

“I’d never launder money for you.”

“Woah,” Emil grins, raising his hands. “Don’t speak so fast, my friend. Who said anything about laundering money?”

“That’s why you’re here. It’s stupid. Why would I risk my business working with you when I never risked my career before?”

“Maybe I dislike your attitude. Maybe I dislike being made to feel like I am less important than other men. They have a saying about me back home. Emil never forgets. Some men call me the Elephant.”

“Good for them,” I grunt. “The answer’s no.”

“For the record, I haven’t asked you anything. I really am here to open a laundromat chain, among other businesses.”

“Great.”

“If you decide you don’t want to become my valued colleague, you may find your life difficult.”

“Like *Sante Muerte* statues through my window?” I growl, stepping close to him, staring into his eyes so he can see the fury raging in mine. “Is that the sort of *difficulties* I’ll have?”

Emil shrugs, acting like the most innocent man in the world. “I couldn’t possibly say.”

“Leave me alone, Emil. I don’t want this to get ugly.”

“No,” he calls at my back as I push past him. “You really don’t... I never forget, Killian.”

I head upstairs, greeting Speeder and letting him onto the balcony. Leaning against the cold railing, I look over the city, my temples pulsing as I try to contain my fighting instincts.

My body was telling me to flip into fight mode, to unchain myself and throw everything I had at that man for even implying I’d work with him.

Apparently, he has a new nickname. I had never heard it before.

The Elephant.

Or maybe the ass invented it for himself.

Taking out my phone, I send Mia a text.

***Sorry. I was taking care of business.***

I pause before I send, studying the text, wondering if I should add the next bit.

My body can somehow turn the rage to blazing desire, to fiery possession almost instantly.

I add, ***I want to see you. Tell me why I can’t.***

She said it had something to do with her dad.

She might not want to share it, but that’s just got me more curious about her.

Clicking *send*, I know I have to be careful now that Emil’s made his plans known.

When I meet with Mia, I have to make sure Emil doesn’t see her.



Before, when I refused to fix fights, there was nobody he could target.

No wife, no girlfriend, no kids, no family....

But now, I've got Mia, even if she doesn't know it yet.

My phone vibrates. Speeder tilts his head up at the noise, his eyes sparking as though with curiosity.

It's like he wants to know why there's this change in me.

Dogs are smart. He can sense it, buried deep inside of me, this feeling that my life is never going to be the same.

Something shattered and became whole in me the instant I looked at my woman.

***It's difficult to explain. And you'll probably find it boring. It's family stuff.***

I sit on the chair, Emil drifting from my mind, though I know I will have to take steps to combat that ass.

At least I'll need to hire extra security for my tattoo parlor.

***We're going to have to meet when I tattoo you, Mia.***

That's a convenient excuse, a way to formulate this which doesn't include all the hunger pounding inside of me, the starvation, and there's only one thing which could ever satiate me.

My Mia.

***I probably shouldn't have even messaged you about that. I want a tattoo to honor my Dad, but I haven't got the money. And even if I did have the money, I'm not very good at social stuff or at leaving the house at all, really.***

I imagine her sitting up in bed, texting frantically like she thinks I'm going to back away the moment she starts sharing anything personal.

***You don't leave the house?*** I text instead.

I want to ask, *What happened to you, Mia? Who did this? Let me help you....*

She responds. *Not much. I work from home as a customer rep using a chat program. When I have to get groceries or Mom's meds, I rush as fast as I can, and even that's difficult.*

*Difficult, how?* I send.

*This can't be what you want to hear.* The text comes in immediately, meaning she must've sent it before reading my latest one. *After the dirty talk, after what we shared... you don't want to think I'm some loner loser freak, do you? You want somebody fun and exciting, not somebody who will bury you with all their issues.*

I can feel her heartache coming through the message, the agony in each word.

*What I want is to speak honestly with you,* I reply. *I want the truth. I want everything you're willing to give.*

This is skirting far too close to the full scope of my need, to possessing her body as much as her mind, to owning every little part of her.

*It's weird to talk about over text,* she replies.

*Then meet me in person. It can be anywhere you want.*

*I have this idea. In my head. Sort of like a movie scene. Of me driving up to your tattoo parlor, confidently stepping out, and walking across the street. Pushing the door open like it's no big deal, like I'm the same as everybody else.*

*You can do it,* I text. *I know you can. Let's meet tomorrow.*

My body hungers for her, my muscles feeling like they expand, my seed making my manhood hard at the prospect of seeing her in real life.

*Okay,* she responds. *How does midday sound?*

*It sounds perfect.*

I almost smile, but then a thought occurs to me.

Emil.

*Park around the back,* I text Mia.

*Why?*

I want to tell her about Emil, the Cartel, everything, but I'm worried it would be enough to warn her away.

"That would be the right thing, eh, boy?" I say, scratching Speeder on top of the head as he pads over and stands next to me. "Warn her away. Maybe that's what she needs."

She doesn't need to get messed up with me and Emil and all that crap.

*People have been getting tickets. Text me when you're outside, and I'll come and meet you.*

*Okay, Killian... see you tomorrow.*

I sit back, heart thudding, my mind alight as I get ready to see my woman.

## CHAPTER 8



M<sup>ia</sup>

My hands are tight around the steering wheel, my body thumping in time with the city as I drive toward the studio.

The car's a beat-up old junker, but it's the most we can afford, kept as part of the fiction Mom and I entertain.

*"I'll be driving again soon,"* she often says, and I nod like I believe her.

Now, I focus on the mechanics of driving, remembering the lessons Dad gave me, one of the only times he left the house. His father – my grandfather – had been a truck driver, so Dad had some pride about that.

But after the lessons, it was straight back inside....

It's way earlier than Killian and I agreed to meet. It's not even 10:00 am yet.

But when I woke this morning, I knew I had to get to the tattoo parlor as quickly as possible before the nerves wrapped around my body, invisible enemies, suffocating the resolve out of me.

I knew I had to force myself to do this, go out into the world, and *do* something for once.

I've got a short break in my work schedule since I put in extra hours last night.

My eyes are still burning from staring at the screen.

The city gets nicer the further I drive, going from rundown to cruddy to decent and then, as I reach Killian's street, to trendy and presentable.

I drive around the back, remembering the request he made.

He wants me to text him when I'm outside.

Hiding in the back....

Like he wants to ensure nobody sees me, nobody knows Killian Blaze is meeting with a curvy nineteen-year-old nothing.

I shouldn't think about myself like that. It's not healthy.

But compared to Killian, how else am I supposed to think?

The sun shines down from icy clouds, making the world glimmer. Since Killian doesn't know I'm here yet, I take out my phone.

*Are we still on for later?* I text.

It's all a delay tactic, as the world outside seems to spin faster. My heart hasn't stopped pounding since I stepped foot outside.

There's so much *space* out there, but in the car, I'm protected.

What about when I leave the car?

*I can't wait to see you*, he responds. *It's all I've been thinking about all night.*

I squeeze my phone, imagining I'm pressing down on his arm instead, feeling his firmness, his security.

He's been thinking about it because he doesn't know what I'm like, the demons trying to drag me down.

Or is that just melodramatic craziness, thinking in those terms?

*Why?* I text.

*Because I want to get to know you more, and it's difficult to do that over text.*

*It isn't. You could ask me anything, and I'd answer honestly.*

He's probably in there now, texting between clients, no idea he could push open the door of the second floor and look over the

short fence, and see me sitting here in this beat-up piece of junk.

***It's not just about questions and answers, Mia, he replies. It's about wanting to be close to you. To hold you... to kiss you.***

***But I'm a stranger to you.***

My body shudders as I type the words. It's like an alarm is going off in my head, telling me to get out of here as quickly as possible, telling me I'm insane for thinking I could do this.

I'm not angry at him.

But there *is* anger sprouting tentacles inside of me, clawing onto everything, anything, tying me down viciously.

***Fine, we had some steaminess yesterday. But that doesn't mean I will be able to do whatever you want in person. It doesn't mean I'm going to be able to give you what you want, what other women give you.***

***This isn't about other women, he replies instantly. What's with the sudden sassiness? I want to TALK, Mia. We don't even have to touch if you don't want to.***

***But why? I imagine I'm yelling the words. Why do you have any interest in talking to me?***

***Do I have to explain every little thing? Just get here.***

***And park around the back, so your other women don't see me?***

I'm picking a fight so I can end this before it has a chance to begin. It's a crazy thing, being conscious of the fact I'm sabotaging this... and *still* doing it, not having the ability to stop myself even if I want to.

The alternative is to step outside, walk across the street with the icy air kissing at me, look up into Killian's blazing features and see disappointment flicker there, just for a moment.

And then he might be polite, mask it.

But he *saw* my photo and he still wants me...

***There are no other women, he replies. What are you so afraid of?***

Taking a deep breath, I reply honestly. ***Everything.***

***Why?***

***Because my Dad was mentally ill, he and my Mom homeschooled me. He told me for years that the outside was dangerous and that it had to be in short bursts when we went out there. To get groceries, deal with the 'demon world,' as he called it.***

I stop, panting, staring at the words I've written so far, knowing I should delete them.

This will scare Killian away.

Maybe that's why I go on.

My core throbs, begging me not to do this, begging me to entice him, not scare him away with my craziness.

***And the really messed up thing is... I know it doesn't make sense. I know there aren't demons out here, not in the way Dad meant. I know it's just the outside world. But it's hard to accept that when I've spent so long hiding. And ever since Dad took his own life, it's just gotten worse.***

I send the message, then bite down when I realize how far I went, probably too far. Sharing all that stuff about Dad and the way his life ended.

***I'm so sorry, Mia. About all of that. But you don't need to let it define you. I'm here for you.***

***Even after all that? I send. I thought I'd scare you away.***

***Not even a little.***

***Do you always humor every weirdo who texts you out of the blue?***

I imagine him laughing, his voice husky, a smirk on his captivating lips. ***You're not a weirdo.***

***My parents turned me into a hermit and now I live in a cruddy rundown apartment with my mom, who's suffering***

*like crazy, who might never be the same again.*

*You tell me that like I'm supposed to think less of you, Mia.*

*I'm just saying... we don't exist in the same world. We're like different species.*

*We'll talk about all this soon when you get here.*

I swallow, my throat feeling tight, having to tell myself in my head that the sky isn't falling.

The world isn't going to implode.

I have to say that, as though any of that is a possibility. It's just ridiculous how possible it all feels, even while I know it's the exact opposite.

*I'm here now*, I text him, hearing how shaky my breath has become. *I drove here early because I was so nervous. I'm right outside.*

*Wait.*

It's one word, but it's got my mind swirling.

He's going to come out here.

Suddenly, it all feels so real, so different from the digital world.

The fence door opens, and there he stands, my man, Killian, with his sleeves rolled up to show his muscular tattooed forearms, and his hair neatly styled.

His body heaves as he walks across the street.

I'm not sure why I do it.

The impulse to escape grips me.

The beat-up old car chokes to life as I start it.

Killian jogs toward me, his voice just about reaching me through the car window, above the sound of the chugging engine.

"Mia, wait! Mia!"

But I can't wait.



I drive away, part of me screaming to go back, part of me screaming being with him is the only place I belong.

And part of me knowing I'll never be able to shake away the demons.

## CHAPTER 9



*K*illian

That car's going to get her killed.

That's the first thought that slams into me as I watch the junker cough its way down the street. Then my mind flits back to what happened when I emerged from the wooden gate, the way my woman's face dropped, the fear in her wide, beautiful eyes.

I wanted to tear the car door away and kiss her on the lips as tenderly as I'm capable of, kiss her, and tell her that she never has to be worried.

There aren't demons out here.

Or if there are, I'm going to tear them to pieces.

For her.

I return inside, sighing heavily, darkness gripping me and squeezing me tightly. My chest is hammering, and I've got no idea how I'm going to focus on my next appointment.

It's been difficult to focus ever since we arranged this meeting, from walking Speeder this morning, to tating my first appointment.

But now I've laid eyes on my woman, physically *seen* her, I don't know how I'm going to see anything except for her.

*I'm sorry*, she texts, about a minute before I need to go and invite my next client in. *I don't know what came over me. I'm so sorry. I just freaked and felt like I was going to have a panic attack.*

My mind splits down the middle, thinking of my woman in so much pain without me there to help her.

When I call her, she rejects it immediately.

*I'm sorry. I just need to drive home. I'm okay. I know you have to focus on your work.*

*Screw my work. I need to make sure you're not losing your mind.*

*I promise I'm fine. Thank you.*

*Let me know if I can do anything to help.* I send the text feeling powerless in the worst way.

I'm supposed to keep my woman safe from the darkness in the world. I should be able to guide her to security, so she never has to worry about the *demons*, as her dad called them, crushing her.

Soon, it's time to work, meaning I must somehow blot Mia from my mind.

It's like trying to stop myself from breathing, my thoughts returning to the moment I saw her in the car, my woman in the flesh, with her hair spilling around her face, framing her wide eyes, her mouth hanging open slightly as if she was waiting for a kiss.

Or she could see the fire in me, infusing each movement with potential.

Was I part of what scared her?

At that moment, as I surged toward the car, did she see *me* as a demon?

---

A few hours after she speeds away, I text Mia, asking if she's okay.

There's no response which leaves me to drive home once my last client has left.

With the sun now setting, I feel like a jackass, like I've lost something even if we were never together.

Maybe she's working out how best to tell me to stop.

"Surely there's *something* she wants from this," I tell Speeder as I attach his leash once back in the apartment. "Why would she keep texting me if she didn't want anything? And what we shared...."

I'm not going to go into detail with my faithful dog about all the steamy things my woman and I shared yesterday.

But the aftershocks are still pounding through me.

I walk Speeder through the nearby park, my gaze moving to a father and mother, the mother pushing their baby in a stroller.

I've long since stopped myself from filling with longing when I see scenes like that, accepting that family life will never be for me.

I couldn't imagine the woman I'd share so much joy and happiness with....

But that was before Mia.

Now, as I watch them, I can't help but imagine Mia in the woman's place leaning over our child, softly brushing something from our baby's face.

I see myself standing next to her, smiling with joy at my wife, unable to believe just how lucky I am and how perfect life has become...

When I return to my apartment, I check my phone.

She's texted back.

I almost laugh at the response this triggers in me, the pulsing inside of me, the need to see her words.

“Is this what teenagers feel like?” I ask Speeder as he hunkers down with his treat.

Or maybe it’s just what falling for somebody feels like, the feeling I’ve spent so long anticipating but never truly believed would be mine.

*I’m sorry. I’ve been working*, she texts. *And thinking.*

*Don’t play the tease with me*, I reply. *Thinking about what?*

*You don’t like it when I tease you?*

She attaches a winking emoji.

I grin, which adds to this whole thing’s surreal nature.

I’m sitting on my couch as Speeder munches on his treat, grinning at the emoji. Before Mia, that would’ve seemed impossible.

That’s becoming one of my favorite phrases.

Or most common.

*Before Mia....*

Before everything changed.

*You know I do*, I text. *But that means not driving away when I come to say hello.*

*It’s so difficult to explain. But, honestly, you should just run now before the crazy rubs off on you.*

*I’m not running anywhere.*

*Why?*

It’s not the first time she’s asked that, and it’s difficult not to respond, not to tell her honestly everything I felt when I first laid eyes on her photo. When I first saw my woman with her wide innocent eyes and her ready-to-be-kissed lips.

*It would be better to talk in person*, I reply.

*Come on. You saw what happened last time.*

*Then, I’ll have to steal your keys from you this time.*

An email notification appears.

There's no subject, and the address is a seemingly random collection of letters and numbers.

I press it.

Two words.

***Be careful.***

Followed by an address on the bad side of town.

I scan my mind, trying to think of anybody I know that lives around there. There used to be many people when Graham and I started out in boxing, but I can't think of anybody now.

I read the words again.

Who would want me to be careful?

If it's a threat... Emil, it has to be him.

But who could the address belong to?

Suddenly, I stand up so sharply that Speeder cocks his head and lets out a short whine. He leaps up, and I quickly walk over to him, trying to calm him down even if I can't do the same to myself.

There's too much potential pulsing through me.

***Mia, is this your address?***

I copy and paste the address, then pace up and down, Speeder walking alongside me.

***How did you get that?*** she replies. ***It's nowhere online.***

I don't respond, just immediately bolt for the door.

I'm still wearing my work clothes, meaning I don't have to get changed except pull on my sneakers.

Speeder whines in the hallway, walking in frantic circles, eyeing me stubbornly. I know it will drive him nuts if I leave him without explaining where I've gone or what's happening.

"Okay, boy, let's go."

I quickly got his leash. It wouldn't be fair to leave him here alone.

He's not used to me behaving like this.

With so much terror emanating from me.

As we ride the elevator down, I play it through in my head.

Emil must've been watching the building earlier.

He saw Mia, then saw me run out to the car, saw the pain in my features, the longing.

And the sick freak followed her.

That must be what happened or something similar.

Otherwise, there's no reason for him to know her address... or even know who she is.

I don't want to send this text, but I have to.

***I think you might be in danger. Pack a bag for you and your mom.***

***Pack a bag? What?*** she texts back right away. ***You're not making any sense.***

***I'm sorry, Mia, but you have to trust me. Pack a bag. Now!***

I get Speeder into the car, buckle him in and then sit in the driver's seat. My thoughts are clashing.

One second, I'm standing at the end of the aisle, watching Mia walk toward me in a bright dress, her cheeks flushed beneath a light layer of makeup – just enough to enhance her natural beauty – and then next....

There's red everywhere. I'm roaring at my loss.

Speeder throws his head back and howls.

Emil is after my woman.

I drive as fast as I can without breaking the law, urgency forcing me on as I try to push the evil images from my mind.

I've never felt so possessive.

I *own* Mia.

Nobody else.

Any man who threatens her or thinks he has a claim to her in any way – good or bad – will pay the goddamn price.



## CHAPTER 10



M<sup>ia</sup>

Standing outside Mom's room, I wonder what I will say to her.

She's asleep in there. I can hear her snoring through the closed door, something Dad used to joke about on his good days, something he used as an object of catastrophe on his bad ones.

*"She's going to die in her sleep."*

The memories are always there, clinging to me.

I push them away.

How can I explain to Mom that a man I've never even met, not properly anyway, wants us to pack a bag because we're in some kind of danger?

Just thinking through it like that has me almost laughing at the insanity of it, at how absurd it really is.

Stepping away from the door, I let out a groan.

*I don't know how to explain this to Mom*, I text.

*I'm almost there*, he replies. *I'm at a red light. Wait for me. I'll explain when I'm there.*

I read over the last part of his text. He'll explain when he's here.

In person.

Maybe standing in this apartment seems much more depressing now that I've got the prospect of somebody else seeing it.

But that's if I can even let him in here.

I ran from him this morning.

*My mom might freak out if I have you up here*, I text.

That part is true, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm looking for more excuses, more reasons my life has to be difficult, and more ways to blame other people for my inability to *be normal*.

Whatever *normal* is.

I know what it's not – almost hyperventilating at the thought of seeing this man.

Or maybe I'm overanalyzing.

Women in the books I read get nervous before meeting men.

It's regular. Normal.

I'm overthinking.

*Stop, stop, stop*, I sing in my mind.

A while later, Killian texts.

*I'm outside. Do you want to come down here and speak to me, or am I going to come up there?*

*You can explain over text.*

*No, Mia.* I imagine his voice husky and furious. *I have to explain this in person. It's too messy. And I need to see you. To make sure you're safe.*

*I'm clearly safe.*

*I don't know if this is you, and a photo won't do it this time.*

*You're not making any sense.*

*Answer the question*, he sends. *Am I coming up? Or are you coming down?*

***I thought it wasn't safe?*** I retort like my defense mechanisms are flaring one final time.

***I won't let anything happen to you. I'm here to protect you.***

I almost ask him why again, but no matter how many times I throw that question at him, he never gives me a clear and satisfying answer.

***I'll come down,*** I respond. ***Just give me a few minutes.***

***I hope you don't mind dogs. I've got my greyhound with me. His name is Speeder.***

That gets me smiling.

I often asked Dad if we could have a dog when I was growing up. Sometimes, he was enthusiastic about the idea, making my world light up as we made plans.

But then the darkness would come, and he'd decide there were too many risks.

It was too dangerous to have a ferocious animal in the house.

Even if the dog we were discussing were a chihuahua or something similar, the most docile, harmless creature imaginable – not that chihuahuas are always docile *or* harmless – Dad would inevitably decide I wanted to invite a ferocious predator into the home.

Going into my bedroom, I study myself in the mirror, my brown hair messy around my shoulders, my eyes seeming even wider, more shell shocked, more like the *weird girl*.

I was never bullied – because I was always at home – but I find myself studying parts of myself, wondering what any potential bullies might say. It's a sick thing to do, especially now when I should be bolstering myself up and making it possible to feel good about myself.

So that I can go down there and face him.

Pulling on my sneakers, I head for the door, telling myself it's just a trip to the store on the corner.

Or that I'm walking down to the safety of the car.

*My car, not his.*

There's not a whole horrible world out there, armed with the words Dad gave it, about all the evil he said lived out there.

There's just the regular world that everybody else lives in without causing an issue about it.

Down the stairs, my legs shaking, I keep walking, even as my head starts to cloud and every instinct in me screams at me to turn back, to get out of here.

*Now.*

It's the same way I'd feel on the rare occasions I tried to sneak out at night, longing for the outside world even as the apartment promised safety.

As long as the walls of the house were around me, I didn't have to worry about the things Dad talked about.

But it also meant I didn't get to experience any of the good either.

*Mom is in danger.*

I repeat that sentence over and over as I walk down the stairs, as my entire being feels like it's shaking.

Killian said Mom *and* I should pack a bag, meaning whatever this danger is, it extends to her.

That's enough of a reason to keep going.

I have to keep her safe.

No matter what.

I suck in the bracing evening air when I push the door open, as though I've been drowning and have just caught my first breath.

It's icy on my chest, filling me up.

Across the street, a car door opens.

A dog yaps.

There he stands, the man I fled from earlier, the man who bathed my body in steaminess yesterday.

He's wearing the same shirt from earlier, and the sleeves are rolled up. His jeans are faded and blue and his boots are chunky. He looks ready to drag me into the car and kiss me firmly, to whisper possessively in my ear that he'll never let anybody hurt me.

The backseat of his sleek sedan makes a yapping sound.

Killian smirks as I get closer. It's like my feet are carrying me, not at all like I'm directing my footsteps.

I feel my ability to think disconnecting itself from my body, like I'm floating away.

It's not fair.

I want to stay here with him, but my anxiety pushes me to the edge.

"Mia," he says huskily, taking my hands.

Suddenly, I'm back in my body.

He pulls me close to him and wraps his arms around me. I sink into his warmth and....

And I don't know what it is, this feeling.

But it erupts inside me.

His touch sparks something.

I'm blazing inside, the flames smoldering and burning like a freshly applied tattoo.

Not that I would know what that feels like.

Yet.

But *this*....

He kisses the top of my head, then pauses, as if inhaling my scent, all of me.

I squeeze onto his back, struggling to believe this is really happening, that I've got my arms wrapped around him. He's no longer separated by a website, a phone, or any of that.

His dog yaps from the car again, making me laugh.

I've never felt so weightless.

So carefree.

It's like contact with him has triggered a drug in me.

A release unlike any I've ever experienced.

Leaning back in his embrace, I am beaming, glowing from inside.

He's got the same light in his face, especially in the gleaming of his intense eyes.

"I think somebody's trying to get my attention," I murmur.

"He'll have to wait just a little bit longer."

Time slows as Killian leans down toward me. In the back of my head, thoughts tick along, wondering if the whole *danger* thing was a trick to get me.

Something amazing happens as his mouth gets closer, as his breath moves over me.

I realize I don't care.

Even if it *was* a way for him to get me here, I don't care, not when his lips make contact with mine.

Heat explodes across my mouth.

It's like we're not outside.

We're wrapped in blankets and blankets of warmth as he groans through the tight press of our lips, then pushes against me with more firm urgency.

His hands slide down to my hips, and he pulls me right up against him, close enough to feel how hard he is, a long thick length pressing through his jeans.

He wants me as badly as I want him.

Our tongues clash together, buzzing hotly, sizzling sensations dancing around my mouth. He glides his hands around my body slowly, getting closer to my ass.

I know I should probably tell him to stop.

We're outside.

It's dark, sure, but there are street lights.

Anybody could see.

## CHAPTER 11



*K*illian

I didn't plan on kissing her the second I saw her.

I took Speeder for a walk around the block first, scanning the area as I did so, looking for any sign that Emil was hanging around.

I should have the same caution now.

But as my hands glide toward her ass, I find I can't tame the beast in me.

My manhood pushes firmly against my pants, the lust in me howling as she makes the cutest moaning noise, her tongue moving nervously, like she's never kissed anyone before.

Maybe she hasn't.

She said she was homeschooled. She said her parents didn't let her out.

That should make me feel like I'm taking advantage, shouldn't it?

But it doesn't.

The animal in me just wants to grab her thick juicy ass and massage it as my mouth burns with her pushed right up against me.

Speeder barks from the car.

My woman smiles through the kiss.



It gives me space to lean back, to break off the kiss. If I don't do it now, I won't be able to during this interruption.

"Do you want to say hello?" I ask.

She nods fast, and her cheeks are flushed completely red, her breath coming quickly.

"Yes. And Killian?"

She trails off and looks down with Bambi eyes. She couldn't seem more innocent, sexier, beautiful, or enchanting if she tried.

My hands linger on her hips, even if I should pull them away, end this desire inside of me.

"Yeah?"

I smooth the hair from her face.

"I thought you should know. That's the first time I've ever kissed anybody."

I smooth more hair from her cheek, and she turns toward my touch as if savoring her.

"Are you glad you waited?" I ask.

She meets my eye with a glimmer of bravery. "Yes. There's no question about that."

"Come on."

Placing my hand on the small of her back feels natural since I own her, and I always will. I guide her to the back seat and open the door.

Speeder leaps out, panting happily, as I take his leash, and he eagerly greets Mia.

"Careful, boy," I say.

"I don't mind," Mia responds, leaning down as Speeder jumps up, keen to be close to her.

Mia runs her hands over his head, neck, and back, trailing her fingernails. I know there's a monster in me, a seed-driven beast intent on making this woman pregnant.

Because even now, during this tender moment, my gaze flits to her ass.

She's bent over, and her pants hug her ample ass tightly, outlining it perfectly.

My cock gets even harder, which should be impossible.

I ache for her.

"Let's talk in the car," I say once Speeder has settled down somewhat.

Mia looks over her shoulder. The bravery from her eyes is gone, and there's something else there, something skittish. She's acting like she's suddenly realized she's outside.

I rush to her, taking both her hands as she stands up.

She clasps hers around mine, pushing Speeder's leash handle into my palm, squeezing me so tight like she never wants to let go.

"I forgot about the danger," she murmurs.

"You don't have to worry," I tell her, stunned. I only met this woman recently.

And stunned that this is the first time we've spoken.

With our voices, at least.

It feels so natural. It's almost enough to make a man like me believe in fate.

After getting Speeder back into the car, I open the passenger side door for Mia. She takes a moment before climbing inside, a long breath, like part of her thinks I'm going to lock the door and drive away the second she's in.

In the car, I look across at her, her gentle features, the beauty in every inch of her face. It's so easy to imagine her smiling in joy as she cradles our first child.

Or her mouth opening in euphoria as I glide inside of her

"What is it?" she asks.

"I think you might've been followed today," I say, knowing I can't delay. "I got your address in an email that seemed like a

threat.”

“But who would want to threaten you? And why would they pick *me*?”

“Earlier, when you left, I... I chased you.”

Mia’s eyes snap open.

I don’t care how long I live. I’ll never get tired of the sight of her eyes widening like that, the shock rioting through her.

It reminds me of how much she needs her man to protect her. How much she needs me.

“I think he saw me chasing you and figured out I care about you. Of course, that’d be a shock for him since I never cared....”

“Killian?” she murmurs.

Just my name, but there’s so much expectation in it, so much wonder, so much emotion.

Or am I imagining the last part?

“He’s never seen me chase after a woman in a car before,” I say, tone dark and snappy even if I don’t mean for it to be.

Mia sits back, folding her arms.

Speeder whines from the back seat.

*I’m sorry*, I almost say, but something stops me, some jackass instinct.

Speeder whines again, drawing my gaze, and gives me a look.

With a sigh, I tell Mia, “I shouldn’t have snapped. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she says quietly. “I just don’t know why you’re so interested in me.”

Reaching over, I gently touch her chin, guiding her gaze to mine. “You’re beautiful. You’re magnetic.”

*You’re mine.*

“Don’t talk about yourself like that... like it’s a mystery why any man would want you. The mystery is why any man *wouldn’t*.”

Her smile twitches as she reaches up and touches my hand.

But then her lips flatten.

“What about this man, then? This person you keep mentioning. Why would he go through the effort of following me to get to you?”

I drop my hand and the moment shatters.

I wish I didn't have to tell her about Emil.

But I owe it to her.

It would be so much sweeter to simply exist in this moment. To not think about all the other stuff trying to smash its way into this car, to tear apart the closeness we're building and make it ugly.

But if there's anything I want to make sure to be with my woman, it's honest.

And possessive....

And protective....

“Emil works for the Cartel. At least, he did. I don't know if he still does. Back in my boxing days, he was heavily involved in fixing fights. He tried to get me to take a dive more times than I can count.”

“Tried?” Mia mutters, her eyes flitting all over the place.

It's like she's existing in a place of simultaneous anxiety and confidence, as if she's not sure of how at ease she is in my car... but also like there's nowhere else she'd rather be.

Or maybe that's projection, what I *wish* she'd feel.

“I thought if the Cartel wanted something, they got it.”

“Usually, they do,” I say gruffly. “But I refused to do it. I wouldn't cheat. I hated the idea of it. Breaking the law, breaking the fighter's code, breaking anything that wasn't my opponent's nose in a fair fight.”

Mia cringes a little, making me smirk.

“That's the point of a fight, Mia. Beating the other man to a pulp.”

“I know, but I much prefer what you do now. Creating art.”

“Me too,” I tell her. “I never wanted to be a boxer.”

She tilts her head. The curiosity in her eyes makes me feel so seen. I’ve been waiting my whole life for a woman to look at me like that.

But not just *a woman*.

It’s been Mia this whole time.

Only her.

“This is the other thing. My Dad was in the mob. He was a belligerent drunk, an abuser, and he basically forced me into the fighting world. That’s another reason why the Cartel didn’t want to take me out. Old mob ties, old alliances that might turn bad. But I never wanted anything to do with *any* of it.”

My voice gets savage.

Mia leans back, pressing herself against the window.

I smirk again, leaning toward her. “Are you afraid of me?”

She looks me directly in the eyes, biting her lip, looking so sexy and beautiful I could howl just to let out some of the tension.

“I’m afraid of everything,” she whispers.

“No. You’re tougher than you think.”

I’m supposed to be talking, but the temptation to kiss her is simply far too powerful, my body pulsing with the need.

She makes that adorable whimpering sound when I fiercely claim her lips with mine, pushing against her like I own her... because I *do* own her.

Her hands rise cautiously to my shoulders, as if she’s afraid of how I’ll react if she squeezes on too tightly.

Our tongues flair against each other, tempting me to do more.

My hand is sliding up her leg.

She shifts, and moans through the muffled press of our lips.

I can read the moan. She’s telling me to stop.

But my cock is hard, the helm pushing against my pants,  
precome leaking as I realize something.

I can't stop.

I need to touch her soaked pussy, just like we talked about  
over text.

She moans again when I'm almost at her pussy, then she  
presses her legs together, trapping my hand.

## CHAPTER 12



Mia

“Wait.”

I gasp, forcing the word out as I lean away from Killian’s lips. The deep want from within my core screams at me, demanding to know what I mean by *wait*. What possible reason could I have for saying or even thinking something so absurd?

*Wait....*

When his hand is nearly at my burning sex, my mind flaring with all the stuff he said over text, my chest aching with all it could mean.

His hand pauses, his flaring eyes eating into me, consuming me.

It’s like he’s going to tell me *no*.

The way he’s looking at me, I can imagine him saying....

*“I’m not waiting for anything. I’m going to pleasure your soaked pussy right now, and you’re going to be good and take every moment.”*

“We’re in public,” I whisper, voice wavering.

He shakes his head slowly. “It’s not that.”

“Killian....”

“It’s what you hinted at over text. Your first orgasm... and I’m your first kiss. Is there another *first* you want to tell me

about?”

“Can you back off?” I say, even if most of me doesn’t want him to.

Even if most of me is screaming out for him to kiss me again, we need to slow down for his hand to claim my body.

He leans back slowly, nodding.

Invisible chains wrap around him, restraining him, but I can tell he could snap them at any moment. He could throw them off and then throw *himself* at me; and this time, not stop.

Part of me almost wants it. For him to claim me so possessively, I’m left with no choice but to melt into his touch.

He’s right. He’s guessed the truth about me.

But I can’t say it.

He’s staring expectantly.

“Maybe I’ll tell you over text,” I say, trying to make my voice sassy.

But it comes out laced with indecision.

“Anyway... *you* haven’t finished telling me everything.”

“I’m holding you to that promise,” he says. “Over text.”

My heart shudders. The fact of what I am, of my inexperience, should make this impossible. Just me being here, sitting opposite this man, should be unthinkable.

I don’t say anything.

It’s like the outside world is pressing through the car windows and the doors, threatening to crush me. I have to remind myself of Dad teaching me to drive, one of our only activities together, and how I was able to trick myself into believing *inside the car* was the same as *inside the house*.

“Hey, it’s okay.” He wraps his hand around mine with surprising tenderness, warmth enveloping me. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“I’m not scared,” I tell him in a blatant lie. “I just don’t want to be in this car.”



He nods, squeezing my hand. I can still sense the urgency trying to spill out of him, the pounding deep in his body, something trying to break free.

It can't be the same need I feel for him.

Can it?

"I'm sorry about your Dad," I murmur, trying to get the conversation back on track.

Killian sighs, nodding. "He wasn't a good man. The booze got him when I was in my early twenties."

"If he was the one who made you box...."

"Why did I continue?"

I nod.

Killian's hand is still on mine. It feels so natural for us to sit this way, as though we've been close countless times before, as though there's something magical happening between us.

An instant connection, an instant fusion.

When I first embraced him, I felt it all drift away, the fear and the wondering.

And it's the same now, the melting of the anxiety.

"I promised him I'd become world champion. Told him that on his deathbed. Parents are complicated. I didn't like my Dad, but I loved him. And even if his lessons came with fists, some of them were worthwhile. You know, like the importance of keeping your word... so I kept fighting."

"And this man, Emil, he didn't touch you because your Dad was in the mob?"

"Maybe. I never knew for sure. By the time he really started to get pissed – he was taking my refusal personally – I was beginning to become famous. It would've been logistically difficult for him to take me out."

"But you're not famous anymore?" I ask.

"Not *as* famous," he says. "Or maybe Emil is just losing his mind and doesn't care anymore."

We sit in silence for a while, our hands embraced as if we never want to let go of each other.

There's a hunger inside of me, flaring from my core, as images of the future spark awake in my vision, of Killian's hand sliding up my legs and me moaning, twisting my body, so it takes shape against his desire.

Not fearing or backing away.

And all that comes after the lust, the wonderful life we could share...

"That's why you have to come with me," he says.

"What? Where?"

He stares at me firmly.

On the surface, he seems calm, but with Killian, it's as though there's a bomb beneath the top layer, ticking as though he could snap into action again.

"My place," he says. "You need to stay there for a while."

"I can't do that," I reply.

"Why not?"

"Mom wouldn't agree to leave, for one thing," I say. "And we only just met. How do I know you're not making all of this up? How do I know I'm safe with you? How do I know I can trust you?"

He looks at me steadily. "Do you think I'm lying to you?"

"No," I answer honestly. "But you *could* be."

A voice hisses in my mind, telling me this is Dad's paranoia coming out, Dad's doubt about the world. I shouldn't let it rule me.

But no – that's crap.

I *don't* know Killian.

All I know is he's the only man I ever want, my future husband and father to my kids. And that he would freak if I mentioned any of that to him.

“Mia,” Killian growls, leaning forward, gripping my hand with both of his. “Emil is a violent man. He’s clearly unhinged. Think about it. I last saw him almost ten years ago... and he *still* cares about me refusing to fix fights for him. Instead, he went through the effort of following you home.”

“Mom wouldn’t agree,” I tell him. “After Dad....”

I trail off, not wanting to venture into that complication.

“She became even more of a... of a hermit, I guess you’d call it. She became less likely to leave the house. I don’t see how I will magically make her leave to stay in a stranger’s house.”

Just saying the words aloud hammers home how ridiculous they are.

“I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Killian’s eyes refocus, waking from a dream. “No. I get it. We’ve only just met. You’d be crazy to come with me. But I have to keep you safe. If Emil did something to you....”

“Do you think he would, just to get to you?”

“That was the one thing he always wanted. To find somebody I cared about and use them as leverage. My only friends were fighters, and they could take care of themselves. My Mom died even before my Dad did.”

“I’m so sorry, Killian.”

“We’ve both got our fair share of tragedy,” he replies, holding my gaze.

He’s silently asking about my Dad.

“You have to call me if anything suspicious happens,” he says. “Day or night, I don’t care. And if you need to leave the house for any reason, you can call me then, too. I’ll come running.”

“You’d really do that?”

His answer is to kiss me again, our lips magnetizing as though we don’t have control over it. Mine are attracted to his with the same velocity, the same compulsion.

He groans through the kiss.

I can feel his animal nature awakening, the deep-rooted hunger in his savage soul.

But then he breaks it off.

“You’re making it too hard to be a gentleman,” he says gruffly. “And the answer is yes. I am *going* to do that. I have to ask you again.”

“Mom won’t come. She hasn’t left the house in months.”

“Jesus.” Killian sits back, sighing. “What if I stayed with you?”

“She’d freak. She doesn’t trust anybody. Dad saw to that.”

“But here you are, anyway.”

I summon some sassiness. Maybe it’s how close he is, our noses tickling each other, sensations dancing over me.

“I guess you’re the exception to the rule.”

My cell phone blares from my pocket.

It’s Mom.

“Hello?” I say.

“Where are you?” Her voice is taut. “Are you okay? What’s going on? Is something happening?”

“I’m fine,” I tell her. “Just downstairs.”

“Doing *what*?”

I close my eyes, reminding myself of how much I love this woman, of how much she’s suffered.

“Checking the mail. I’ll be up soon.”

When I hang up, Killian is staring at me. “Is she always like that?”

“It’s not her fault. She took Dad’s death even harder than I did.”

“Has she been to therapy?”

“It’s too expensive. I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“I mean it,” he says, his hand curling powerfully around my wrist. “You call me for *anything*.”

“I will. Thank you.” Reaching into the back of the car, I scratch Speeder on top of the head. “Nice to meet you, boy.”

Climbing from the car, I feel the safety blanket of Killian’s presence slipping away. It slides loose, and I’m left with the cold fact of the outside....

With added danger now.

Somebody’s out there if Killian’s telling the truth.

Somebody is hunting me.

## CHAPTER 13



*K*illian

“We don’t allow dogs,” the receptionist tells me.

I’m at a motel just two streets over from Mia’s address, the lobby stinking of cigarette smoke and musty carpet.

The receptionist looks like he’s fused to his heavy armchair, his glasses big and chunky, magnifying his eyes.

Speeder sits patiently at my side.

Reaching into my wallet, I take out a fifty and place it on the desk.

The receptionist eyes it, then looks at me again.

When I place another fifty down, he scoops both up and leans forward with a grin, his chair making a whining noise.

“I’m sure he’s a well-behaved little guy, right?”

I know this could cross into stalker territory, but I don’t care, not when the taste of my woman is still on my lips, not when I know how much is at stake if Emil decides to go the whole way and try to take her from me.

As I walked Speeder across the parking lot, I remembered the closeness just ten or so minutes ago... the feel of her lips, her hands, and how easily all that stuff about my dad spilled out of me.

The mob. My dark past.

I didn't go into detail about the evil stuff my dad did, the violence, and the pain, but I didn't feel like I needed to. It was as if my woman understood without me needing to crack open the vault of *me* and let it all out.

The room is rundown, the sheets clean but clearly old, the wallpaper peeling here and there. But it's the closest place to Mia's apartment block where I can rent a room.

If she called me, I could be over there in minutes.

***I meant what I said***, I type, sitting on the mattress and causing Speeder to cringe away as it whines. ***Call me if you need to leave the house for groceries or anything else. If anything suspicious happens, call me.***

“What am I going to do about work, boy?”

Speeder sits on the carpet, head tilted, looking at me like I'm crazy.

My cell phone rings. I answer it quickly, assuming it will be Mia.

It's not.

Emil seems too proud and might need somebody to teach him some manners.

“How's your lady?”

*If you touch her, you're a dead man*, I almost say, but that would be giving him extra ammunition, letting him know how much I care.

“You must have more important business than spying on my studio, Emil,” I say. “What is it? You're not the top dog anymore.”

He was always easy to rile up.

His silence tells me I've succeeded, and his voice is low and vicious when he speaks again.

“I could have lots of fun with her.”

“We both know how that would end.”

He scoffs, but he can't mask the tremor.

But my fighting ability would only matter if he was stupid enough to step up to me in a fair contest, which he would never do.

“Careful,” he says, voice weak.

“I don’t get why you care about this so much,” I snap. “It was a different lifetime. I haven’t stepped foot into the boxing ring for almost ten years. I’m a tattooist, nothing more – a business owner. That’s it. I don’t have anything to offer you.”

“Maybe I’m in the mood to settle old scores,” he grunts. “Maybe a man gets to a certain place in his life and, looking back, he realizes he let too many people get away with too much crap.”

“I can’t throw a fight for you now.”

“No, but you should have when you were offered the chance. You’re going to regret that.”

I sigh through gritted teeth, my body aching as if with the need for violence. Or maybe it’s from how recently I was pushed up against Mia, every instinct roaring at me.

“Do you realize how goddamn petty this is?” I snarl. “You’re thinking about the people, who, in your mind, wronged you. You need to move on.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” he snaps. “You weren’t made a laughing stock.”

“A laughing stock?”

“Don’t act like you care.”

I lean back at this. There’s a vulnerability in his voice.

It’s never been there before, not at any point I can remember. Emil sounds twenty or thirty years younger, a kid eager for a friend to share in his pain.

*I don’t give a single damn*, I almost say, but that wouldn’t be smart.

“I never had anything against you personally,” I tell him.



It's a lie. He threatened friends, forcing them to throw fights and sabotaging careers.

Speeder tilts his head at me again as if annoyed at me for lying. But it's not like I've got any obligation to be honest with this asshole, especially after he threatened my woman.

"I never wanted to embarrass you," I say.

He scoffs. I wonder if he's been drinking. "You know what they did?"

"Who's they?" I ask.

"My Cartel *friends*."

The emphasis is enough to tell me I'm right. His status has fallen in the Cartel.

"They'd bet *on* you every single time. They knew you wouldn't throw the fights. They'd brag about it to me – how betting on you, *against* me made them more and more money each time."

"Hurting me won't change any of that."

It's a struggle not to shout at this man, to roar at him that this is the pettiest stuff I've ever heard.

But certain men can't help but fixate on things, laser in on moments that made them feel small, and think if they correct those particular moments, their lives will somehow be better.

Like the boxer who lost the big fight and relives it in the bottom of a bottle every night, I've met a few of them in my time.

"Maybe you're right," Emil whispers. "But it'll make me feel a hell of a lot better."

He hangs up, and I see a notification on my screen... with a text from Mia.

She messaged me while I was on the phone.

***Thank you. I'll call you if I need to. And I haven't forgotten what you said about me admitting something over text.***

My heart hammers so hard as I read her words, my body aching like there's an animal in me attempting to break free.

I know what she's hinting at, the *first* I mentioned.

First orgasm, first kiss, and first....

If I'm right, I know there's no turning back.

If no other man has ever touched my woman, it will mean she belongs to me with even more certainty, if that's possible.

It will mean not only has no other man ever touched her, but no other man *gets* to touch her.

She belongs to me, just me.

***Is there something you want to tell me?*** I text.

Emil could be outside her apartment right now.

But the address he left me only had the street number, not her specific apartment.

He didn't follow her inside. So he doesn't know which door to bash in.

Yet.

My mind's flaring all over the place.

The closer I get to discovering how much she means to me, the fiercer my need to protect her becomes.

***I feel like there's a lot I need to share after you shared so much. About my Dad. About my past. About everything. But I know what you're hinting at... it could change the way you see me.***

***It won't,*** I reply. ***Or, if it does, not in a bad way.***

## CHAPTER 14



M<sup>ia</sup>

It's so much easier in my bedroom with my knees pulled to my chest and my phone clasped tightly in my hands. It brings me a sense of security, being able to communicate through the digital world.

I don't have to think about how close he came to mauling me.

He was on edge in the car, and I was too stunned or, let's face it, too inexperienced in responding correctly.

A different woman would've known all the best ways to tame her man.

But with the newness of it all....

Now, my thumb moves over the letters, one by one. I could be signing away any chance I have at him wanting me.

But it seems like he's already guessed.

*V*, I type. *I-R-G-I-N*.

I stare at the word. *Virgin*.

That's me, and not just with sex. I'd never kissed, touched, or done anything before Killian entered my life.

I send the message quickly, telling him I'm a virgin.

All the while, I'm listening out for sounds from the next room, from Mom, who might need my help. Or possibly noise from

the hallway beyond, where Emil might be lurking, wanting warped revenge because my man wouldn't break the law.

Killian doesn't respond.

Minutes pass.

Still no response.

I know I could talk to myself and explain that there's no need to freak out. But anxiety is like a hamster wheel sometimes, with a hamster running on it who's all hopped up on stimulants and never stops once he gets going.

My heart thuds as I pace the room.

How long can a person pace?

Well, *I* spend a long time walking back and forth.

Ten minutes – I check the time from when I sent the text.

Why isn't he responding?

Maybe I misread the entire situation, and now he wants nothing to do with me. He wanted something in exchange for him helping me against this Emil person....

If he even exists.

No, he *does*. I trust Killian, even if I probably shouldn't trust a savage, experienced, tatted stranger.

It's like somebody else takes me over as I grab my phone, texting quickly, wanting him to understand the nuances of the situation, not just the whole of it.

***My dad suffered from a mental illness for as long as I can remember, but he was able to hide it from the world, mostly... He held a job as an electrician and presented a good face to the world. Mom and I were made to pose for photos and, when I was younger, to go out into the community from time to time, pretending we were normal.***

A small voice hisses inside of me that this is too much oversharing and that I should wait until he replies, at least.

But I can't.

I press on, texting frantically.

*As I got older, he became more and more paranoid. He'd hole Mom and me up for days, explaining something terrible was going to happen to us if we stepped outside. Part of me always knew it was wrong, but it's hard, when you're a kid... and hell, it's hard now too. But Mom bought into it entirely. She told me Dad was right that I couldn't trust the outside world.*

I need to stop. This is way too much.

But Killian told me about *his* Dad, his family, and his history.

*So I stayed inside. I started to get terrified of going outside. Dad taught me to drive, and do you know what he said? It was in case I needed to run away from all these dangers. All the threats that were apparently out there. And then, he took his own life once he'd given us that gift.*

Tears cloud my vision. I rub them away angrily, not wanting to give into this, not wanting to succumb to the pain.

It's all way too much, with far too much agony in my words.

I should wait for his response.

*So that's why I'm a virgin, I've never kissed anybody, and I ran away from the tattoo studio. I don't know how to be the woman you want. I only know how to be me.*

Something in me snaps my thumb into action. I click *send*, then stare at the message and how long it is.

It's like something a crazy person would write.

More time passes.

There's still no response.

Then a loud banging noise comes from the living room.

I rush out there, expecting to find Mom, something terrible must have happened to her. But she's sitting up on the couch, hands clasped together in anxious prayer, body twisted around to stare at the door.

More pounding from the door.

"Hello?"

The voice cuts through me. It's a man, and it reminds me of something Dad used to say about how trusting a bad man is the worst mistake we could make.

Trusting a bad man – even if his good guy routine was convincing – would lead us to hell.

“It's Lionel Peterson.” He pauses a moment. “Your landlord.”

He might add the last bit since we handle everything through email and pay our rent through Mom's bank account. I've never heard his voice.

“I need to speak to you. It's urgent.”

I look at Mom, a question in my eyes. I expect to see mirrored confusion on her face. But instead, there's this other look, a bleak drop of her features.

She knows something.

I force my feet across the room, even as every impulse tells me to remain quiet, to retreat to the room.

My throat is closing up by the time I reach the door.

I wish Killian was here, with his firm body, his sure hands, and that smirk on his lips that tells me nothing would ever rattle him.

“H-hello?” I call.

“Hello.” Lionel sighs. “Is this Mia or Andrea?”

“Mia,” Mom hisses, keeping her voice low.

I get it. She doesn't want me to tell him which one I am.

“I've had reports of a possible gas leak,” he goes on when I don't answer. “I've got inspectors coming by to check all the apartments. I know it's inconvenient, but you'll need to exit the premises for a couple of hours.”

Leave this place. With Mom?

“No,” she whimpers from the couch.

*We can't do that*, I almost say.

But what can I do?

“Listen, I know you two...,” he trails off, maybe thinking of the best way to phrase it.

*Are freaks*, I fill in the blank.

“Prefer to keep a low profile. But there’s nothing I can do about this. When a call like this comes in, I have an obligation to check it out.”

“Can you wait a second, please?”

“Sure.”

I go to Mom on the couch. “What do you think?”

She shakes her head, her eyes wide, tears beginning to fill them. “I don’t smell gas.”

“I know,” I mutter. “But I don’t think he will just leave us alone.”

“What can we do? Can’t we stay in the apartment?”

I nod, returning to the door.

“Can’t we stay in the apartment while you carry out the check?”

“Look, technically, you can,” he replies, his voice beginning to get tense. “But if there *is* a problem and you’re inside while something goes wrong... I’m not doing this for my health, you know. I want to keep my tenants safe.”

“Who reported this leak?” I ask.

“Another resident,” Lionel says, voice snappish. “Please.”

I return to Mom. “We can stay, but it could be dangerous.”

Her reaction provokes ugly responses in me, like making me want to snap at her for being melodramatic. This is a crazy thing to think, coming from me, the queen of melodrama, the woman whose entire life is constructed around it.

But I drive. And I’m reaching out to Killian, to the man of my dreams.

Does that count for anything?

“Mom, we can just wait outside for a while,” I say.

“Outside?” she repeats.

“We can do it,” I say, voice firm. “Together. I know we can.”

I’m thinking of the moment I embraced Killian, how the fear melted away.

Mom stares wide-eyed, then nods. It’s a short, frantic movement.

I return to the door. “Okay, that’s fine.”

“Would you mind opening up to sign this form real quick? It’ll save time when the inspectors get here.”

“Okay, sure.”

I open the door, ignoring Mom’s stifled whimper. But, unfortunately, a similar whimper inside of me makes it difficult to overcome the inner roadblocks.

The second I pull the door open an inch, the man rushes in and shoves it the rest of the way.

I yell and leap back.

I’ve only seen our landlord twice, and I’ve never spoken to him.

But I know *this* isn’t him.

This man is tall, wearing a leather jacket, a gold tooth glinting at me as he grins and swaggers into the room. He’s broad, and his thick black hair is brushed back slickly.

“That was a stupid thing to do,” he says, chuckling. “Gas inspector? If there was a gas leak, the building would be *evacuated*, hot stuff.”

I turn and run for the bedroom.

For my phone.



## CHAPTER 15



*K*illian

“Where is it, boy?” I say, looking around the motel room.

Speeder’s normally the most well-behaved dog a man could ask for, but while I was in the bathroom, a car alarm went off in the parking lot, and it sent him into an anxious frenzy, his lean body leaping around the room, knocking the TV over, messing up the blankets, scattering the cushions....

And, in the fray, somehow I lost my phone.

Maybe he picked it up and dropped it, or accidentally knocked it somewhere.

It was the worst time for me to use the bathroom, just as I was texting my woman.

I’ve been looking for the phone for what feels like an eternity now.

Checking the digital clock on its side from Speeder knocking it off the bedside table, I see it’s been more like twenty minutes.

No matter how much I search, I can’t find it. I’m beginning to think he swallowed it.

I make another circuit of the room, Speeder following with his eyes the entire time, an innocent look on his face as if he’s wondering why his human is causing such a fuss.

Kneeling, I look under the bed again. It looks dusty, but I can't see anything.

And anyway, I've checked under here twice already.

Even so, I reach under, covering every inch of the floor, patting it down as though searching a person.

It's dark down here, the bed casting a shadow. Maybe that's making it difficult to see the phone?

I'm not holding out much hope, but then my hand snags on something.

A piece of the carpet is overturned, coming loose from the floorboards.

"How the...."

My phone's under the folded piece of carpet.

I take it out, looking at Speeder.

"And you don't even have the decency to look guilty."

His mouth hangs open, tongue lolling out. I'll need to run back to the apartment soon, and get him some food, his bed, and a bunch of supplies.

But first, my woman.

I scratch Speeder on the head when he pads over, then give him a tickle under the chin to wordlessly let him know I'm not really mad at him.

It was terrible timing, though.

The first new message is her telling me she's a virgin.

My blood feels like it gets hotter, as if I'm burning up from the inside.

I savor the message, staring at it for a long time, taking in the declaration as it pounds through me and fills me up.

It's true, then what I guessed.

Nobody else is ever going to touch her, ever going to get *close* to touching her. It'll only be me, her man, her *owner*.

That's not some prehistoric thing.

She owns me too.

We belong to each other.

I read through the following messages, taking my time to absorb everything she told me.

As I read, I wondered if my cute-as-hell woman was nervous when she sent these messages, firing them off in a flurry of anxiety.

There's something confessional about them, like she thinks she owes me an explanation.

The only thing she owes me is the exact thing I owe her.

Our lives.

Her Dad had a mental illness, resulting in him shielding my woman from the world. He made her afraid, and I find myself hating him for that, even if it's a nasty instinct.

He had problems, probably far worse than my Dad's love for the bottle.

***So that's why I'm a virgin.***

***I only know how to be me.***

I fixate on these two lines, especially the last one. She only knows how to be herself.

That's all I want, all I'll ever want from her.

"How can I explain this all to her, boy?" I murmur, sitting on the tangled mess of the sheets.

Speeder was probably acting like I feel a lot of the time, bouncing off the walls of my mind, flooded with a conviction to hurt something, to *do* something without knowing why or what.

It's the boxing instinct in me, the never-dying fighter, the urge to find peace somehow.

And now I have. I can.

With my woman.

I scroll down.

There's another text after she tells me she only knows how to be herself.

Suddenly, I'm on my feet, my phone grasped tightly in both hands, staring down at the words, pissed at myself for taking so long to read her messages.

Please, say she's called the cops too.

The message reads, ***He's here. Come quick. Please.***

I run for the door, Speeder beside me, then force myself to stop and attach his leash. After the car alarm, plus the unusual environment, I can easily imagine him bolting.

We jog across the parking lot together, rushing into the car.

How the hell did he figure out which apartment she was in?

I drive out of the lot, down the two streets, then look at Speeder for a moment. I can't leave him here, in this neighborhood.

Anybody could walk by and decide they like the look of him, or maybe some drunk asshats will torment him just for the so-called fun.

He's already on edge.

Knowing it could be a mistake – Emil might target him – I walk around the car and quickly take his leash.

Every instinct is primed, full-on aggression twisting through me as I think about all the deadly things I'll do to Emil if he hurts her.

The main door is open, letting me lead Speeder to the bottom of the staircase.

*Fuck.*

I pause, realizing my mistake.

I don't know what specific apartment she's in. She came down to the car before and had no reason to tell me.

If I had any doubts about how I felt about her, they melted the second I experienced the crushing sensation in my body, like a trash compactor going at all my hope.

Speeder whines, pulling toward the stairs.

I look at him closely. His ears are pricked, his tail alert.

“Can you hear something, boy? Smell it?”

He whines again, tugging on his leash.

I follow him, taking the steps two at a time, my hand clenched into a fist around the dog leash. My knuckles are aching like they used to before a fight, in anticipation of the violence, but my body is pumping with far more ferocity.

I’m ready to kill to protect my woman. To do whatever it takes to protect her.

Always.

Speeder pauses on the second floor, looking at me with uncertainty.

I kneel and scratch him behind the ear. “You’re a good boy. You’re the most loyal, smartest boy. Which way, huh? Come on....”

This could be a complete waste of time, but I’ve got nothing else to go on.

I follow him down the hallway, past an apartment with softly pumping music and then a voice.

My blood goes from hot to icy. My fist clenches even tighter.

It’s Emil, words slurred, collapsing into each other.

“Your landlord was one stupid motherfucker. A casual wave of this thing, and he sang like a birdie. He gave me your apartment number and everything. Can you imagine being that stupid?”

“He was scared.”

My woman’s voice is raised with dignity, though I can hear the terror beneath it. Unfortunately, I couldn’t hear any sirens in the air, meaning my woman didn’t get a chance to call the cops.

“It’s not a question of intelligence.”

“Are you going to tell me the truth now, or am I going to cut your mom open?”

“I *told* you. I only met him today. We’ve been texting, but that’s it.”

“Bullshit,” Emil snaps as I get ready.

I push my shoulder against the door and prepare myself. The flames rage through me, making it difficult to summon the fighter’s calm. Then Speeder whines, pawing at the floor.

I can’t take him in there with me.

*Am I going to cut your mom open...?*

That means he has a knife.

Looking around, I find some pipes, laying my hand against them. Warm but not hot enough to burn.

I tie Speeder’s leash to it, then return to the door.

“I’ve spent a lot of time studying that steroid junkie who pretends to be a tough guy.”

I suppress a savage laugh at that.

I’ve never touched steroids in my life.

“Killian has never touched steroids in his life,” my woman says, fierce defense in her voice.

I smile. Widely. It’s like she cares as much as I do.

Squeezing my fist just a little harder, I get ready to do what must be done.

Whatever the situation is on the other side of this door, I will make sure my woman’s safe.

I’m going to save her.

It’s my job.

## CHAPTER 16



M<sup>ia</sup>

Emil paces up and down the room, his gait weaving as he leans heavily on one leg and then the other, like he's struggling to stay upright. He seems proud of tricking us, waving his knife around.

It's a small blade, but it glints sharply, and Mom cringes every time Emil moves near her.

He hasn't tied us down, but the knife keeps me pinned as though ropes are wrapping around me.

It makes me think of the invisible chains I imagined wrapping around Killian in the car when he was holding himself back from kissing me.

I should've called the cops, not texted him.

But there's been this voice inside of me ever since I laid eyes on him, telling me I can rely on him, telling me he'll always be there.

"You mean something to him," Emil says. "So you better st...."

The door crashes open behind him, exploding off the hinges as Killian rushes in.

I gasp at the force of him, his silver hair catching the light with a far sharper glint than Emil's blade, his movements flowing

with practiced violence. It's like he was in the boxing ring, the years doing nothing to temper his ability.

Emil leaps for Mom.

I yell, jumping to my feet and sprinting across the room.

Emil turns at my sound, a hand lashing out.

He's about to hit me, but Killian changes course at the last second.

I've already darted back. Unfortunately, the momentum of the dodge causes my foot to hit the edge of the rug, and I fall backward, unable to keep track of what's going on.

It's mayhem.

Mom screaming, Killian leaning over me, eyes narrowed as though he's examining me for damage.

My vision wavers and the stark electric light above him turns out to be the sun's warm glow.

He's shirtless, and there's seawater glistening in his hair, a child on his shoulders, a child with Dad's kind, excited eyes, the way they got sometimes, and the smile Mom offered after we completed a puzzle together.

I hold that image as the world continues to spin, the impact of the fall making everything woozy.

"E-Emil," I say as I struggle to sit up, all the wind sucked from my chest.

"He ran like a...."

*Coward*, I fill in, but then Killian suddenly stops, his eyes snapping open wide.

"Speeder!" he yells, rushing for the door.

I struggle to my feet, finding Mom on the other side of the room, her arms wrapped around herself as she looks around with a frantic look on her face. She's convinced that phantoms will leap from the couch cushions, tearing their way out of the wall.



Gently, I wrap my arms around her, holding her as she trembles.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpers.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I’m your mother.”

“Hush.”

Minutes pass, leaving me to study the door. Nobody has come to check what’s going on, but that’s nothing new for this building.

There are routine fights and drug deals gone wrong down the hallways.

It’s the sort of place where people generally ignore each other.

Soon, Killian is back, staring around the room as if he’s ready to hammer every inch of it with his fists.

He rushes to me, then pauses. Every inch of him emanates power and heat, his chest heaving, his arms bulging.

“He took Speeder,” Killian snarls.

“What?” I gasp.

“I tied him to a pipe out there. The bastard used him as a goddamn pawn to get away, threatening an innocent dog. He’s out there somewhere with my dog. I’ve got to go right now and start looking for him. I need to hire people to help me. I can’t waste any time. But I have to know you’re safe, Mia.”

“What should I do?” I whisper.

“I’m going to text you my address. I’ll call ahead and let my manager know you’re coming – and to let you in.”

“Your address?” Mom says, looking at me even as she speaks to him. “Mia, who is this man?”

“A tattoo artist. He’s going to design a piece for me in honor of Dad.”

Mom shudders as a sob escapes her, but she’s smiling at the same time. “You still want to honor him after everything?”

“We had some good times, Mom. I’ll explain more after.”

“You *have* to go there right now,” Killian snarls, gripping my shoulders hard and staring at me firmly. “I can’t abandon Speeder, but I won’t leave until you’ve promised me, Mia. You and your mom will drive *directly* to my apartment.”

Killian looks at Mom, surprising gentleness in his eyes. “I wish I could introduce myself properly, ma’am, but you really have to go. You’ll be safe there.”

When I see the look on Mom’s face, I tug Killian’s hand and lean up. He offers me his ear, knowing what I want, knowing there’s something I have to say that doesn’t involve Mom.

A different mother would demand to know what I’m whispering about – a woman whose pride hadn’t been beaten down by years of life.

“You don’t know what you’re asking.”

Killian touches my wrist softly. “I do. And I’m sorry. But you have to make this happen. You’re strong, Mia. I heard you before talking with Emil. You’re tough. You can do this. Please. Promise me.”

He grips my wrist harder, staring into my eyes with something like desperation. It’s as though there’s far more between us than a few kisses and one in-person conversation, as though this tatted, savage man wants me the same way I want him.

Can I dare to dream that’s true?

I take a breath, nodding. “I promise.”

Killian leans close as if to kiss me but then glances at Mom. I take a step back, silently telling him we shouldn’t do that here, in front of her.

I can sense those chains again, the hunger he’s just barely holding back.

“Once you get to my apartment, don’t leave. If you have any problems along the way, call me. I have to go now.”

“How are you going to find him?” I ask, thinking of Speeder, the cute greyhound with rusty-orange fur.

“I got a partial on Emil’s license plate. And I’ve got a few cop buddies from my fighting days, and I’ve tatted some too. I’ll ask them first. Maybe hire a PI. I don’t know. Jesus. But I have to get him back.”

I rush forward and place my hand against my man’s chest.

He raises his hand and lays it atop mine, pushing down so I can feel the thundering of his heart.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll cover my end. And thank you.”

“For bringing Emil into your life?” he says sarcastically.

“No... for caring.”

He stares at me for a long moment, making me even more certain there are unspoken feelings here. But I still don’t know how he feels about me being a virgin.

It doesn’t matter now.

Just this look, this knowledge is enough....

He came for me, risked everything, and risked his *dog*.

“Go,” I whisper. “I’ll be okay.”

“Promise you’ll go to my apartment.”

“I promise.”

The second I tell him, he spins, running for the door. He moves with the same urgency I imagine him using if somebody ever threatened one of our future children.

I go to Mom, taking her hands in mine.

“Mom, we have to go.”

She glances at the door and shudders, then looks at me. “We can get the door fixed and....”

“*No*,” I yell.

She cuts short, gaping at me. The yell comes from a place deep, deep inside, a place I thought was buried a long time ago.

But that was before I left this apartment building and fell into Killian’s arms, feeling that warm embrace, the balm that

soothed all anxiety.

It was before I stood up to Emil.

It was before the promise I made to my man.

“There’s no delaying this, okay? We just have to walk to the car. I can help you. But we *are* going.”

“But....”

“Mom,” I snap. “All my life, I’ve been afraid. All my life, I’ve been scared of finding something worth fighting for because then it means... it means I *have* to fight. But I promised Killian I’d get us to his apartment safely, and I will honor that.”

She tightens her hands around mine. “Who *is* he? He’s not just your tattoo artist.”

“No,” I say. “He’s... my boyfriend, sort of.”

“Your *boyfriend*? Since when?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I say. “Just please, know that he wants to keep us safe.”

There’s no doubt about that now. And especially no doubt that Emil is real.

“I’m not sure I can,” Mom whispers. “I don’t know how.”

“Just hold onto me,” I tell her. “Hang on and... and know, Mom, I’m here for you. Always. Please, just try this. For me. Please?”

She nods, even as her eyes shimmer, even though I can tell she wants to sprint into her room and never come out. “Okay.”

## CHAPTER 17



M<sup>ia</sup>

*She passed out on the couch the second we got to your apartment,* I texted, looking down at Mom briefly.

Killian's apartment is huge, far bigger, and far more modern than any I've ever been inside. The ceiling is tall with exposed rafters, and one wall is dominated by floor-to-ceiling windows that show a view of the city, with a garden on the balcony, the railing gleaming, *everything* gleaming.

*I'm proud of her. But more importantly, is Speeder okay?*

The drive to Killian's apartment filled me with as much pulse-pounding uncertainty as it did Mom, but I kept reminding myself of what would happen if I let any of it show.

If I let Mom see how much it was freaking me out, too, she'd buckle, crumble.

So I did a thought exercise.

I imagined I was in Killian's arms again, imagined he was holding me that first time, the feeling that smoothed over me.

Killian texts back.

*He's getting checked over by the vet now, but he seems okay. Emil would be a dead man if he hurt my dog. There was some leather in Speeder's teeth. I guess he finally had enough and tried to bite Emil, and that's when Emil dumped him. I'm just glad I was able to find him.*

I sit on the armchair, the plushness of it threatening to swallow me, struggling to believe I'm here, in the apartment of the man whose website I stalked when meeting him seemed like a dream.

Leaning back, I stare up at the exposed rafters, feeling like they represent a whole lot about where I am.

Exposed, my deepest vulnerabilities showing... and Killian's, considering all he shared about his family.

My phone buzzes.

***I never told you how I felt about you being a virgin.***

I swallow, nerves threatening to choke me. I was too concerned with getting here... and about Speeder, the poor dog, and all the things Emil could've done to him.

Speeder's a smart dog. He started sprinting right back to my apartment the second he was free, meaning Killian spotted him on the sidewalk as he was driving in the general direction Emil had fled.

But it could've been much worse.

***So how do you feel?*** I text, my hands shaking.

***It makes me want you more,*** he replies, almost instantly.

I stifle a gasp, not wanting to wake Mom. She took a pill when we got here, ignoring the look I gave her.

She lies on her side, her chest rising and falling rapidly, as though her dreams are tormenting her.

***How?*** I text.

There's a long pause. I wonder if he's typing messages and then deleting them, wondering about the best thing to say.

***I won't lie. I was turned on like crazy when you told me you'd never had an orgasm before... and then when you told me you'd never kissed anybody. Knowing no other man will ever get to touch you makes me even crazier.***

I read his message several times, over and over, trying to convince myself I'm not hallucinating. The letters aren't

leaping around on the phone screen.

They're settled, *real*.

*Will I ever get to touch you....*

That's what the message says, implying he wants me for more than a few minutes or hours of pleasure.

I mean, surely I should've known that already, considering that I'm here and that he bothered to come after me to save me....

*I'm sorry I left you before*, he texts, as though anxious at my lack of a reply.

It's weird to think of Killian as anxious, but an instinct tells me I'm right. I'm starting to realize that's what I need to do most of all, trust my instincts, especially when reality is screaming at me with clear signals.

*You had to go after Speeder. Don't apologize. I was safe because of you.*

*But you'd just had a fall*, he replies. *I keep replaying the moment in my mind. What if you had a concussion? What if you weren't fit to drive, or something happened to you?*

*Killian, relax. I'm here, and I'm safe. Nothing happened to me.*

*And nothing will*, he replies. *I'll protect you. So what do you think about what I said?*

*About no other man ever getting to touch me?*

*Yeah.*

I pace over to the window, seriously considering his question. There's so much Dad would say about this, injecting fear into the revelation, explaining that I can't trust Killian, that I'd be crazy to allow myself to sink so willingly into fantasies of my desires being true.

But I have to be honest.

*I've been scared of the world for a long time. I've been terrified of what might happen, people hurting me, and the world itself hurting me. But it wasn't until I met you that I*

*felt at peace. When you held me, I felt it more than at any point in my life. It was like a drug, not that I've ever done any... but it was like what I imagine a drug brings.*

I pause, reading over the message, wondering if I'm going too far and if there's too much blunt honesty in the words.

But if I can't be honest with the man I want to spend the rest of my life with, who *can* I be honest with?

*The truth is, Killian, I want your words to mean what I hope they do. I want them to mean that, even if we're technically strangers, you're looking for something long-term with me.*

The phrase *long-term* feels weak, considering the magnitude of what I want.

*Long-term* and *forever* are two different things.

But I can't bring myself to say *forever*. There's still a small voice in my head saying I could be pushing too far.

*I want that more than anything*, he replies.

I let out a trembling breath as I open the door to the balcony, walking past the potted plants and the greenery, my body trembling as the future clashes with the present.

As the imagined becomes real.

*I wanted it the second I saw you. I should tell you this in person – and I will, when I see you... but I wanted you the second I saw that photo on the freelancing website. It was physical, sure, but it wasn't just physical. There was this feeling, something I find difficult to explain. It was calling to me... It makes me think of the green light in *The Great Gatsby*. I know you've probably got a beautiful look of shock on your face right now that a brute like me reads classic novels.*

No, I reply quickly. *I can tell you've read a lot of books. You don't talk like a brute at all. Hell, even the word 'brute' isn't something an average boxer would use.*

*I used to have to hide my reading from my Dad. And my art. He just wanted me to be a fighter, so I did that. And part of me kind of liked it. But not all of me. But that's not the point.*



***The point is... you were calling to me. I felt it so deep I couldn't question it or pretend to understand it.***

I read the words quickly, then again, then again.

A nasty thought emerges in my mind.

What if Emil has somehow gotten his hands on Killian's phone?

But no, the phone's password protected. That would be Dad in my mind again, twisting everything up, the man I love and, in my quietest, most shameful moments, hate a little too.

***I felt the same thing, I reply. I wanted you. And it wasn't just physical. Obviously, I don't have much of a frame of reference. But I've seen men before, and I've never felt like this or anything even close to it. I've never even dreamed I could.***

***I want to say something crazy, he texts. But I think I should wait until we're together in person.***

***You can say it now if you want.***

The old anxieties return, fluttering through me as I wonder what he could be hinting at.

***No, this has to be in person. The vet's almost done with Speeder. So it shouldn't be too much longer.***

***Give him a kiss from me, I reply.***

***I will. I want to ask you something about your Dad, Mia, but I don't want to upset you.***

***You don't have to worry. I'm not as fragile as I seem.***

***I know that. I'm the one who told you you're tougher than you think you are, remember?***

I smile at his words.

***So ask away.***

He takes a while to respond, giving me time to read through the previous messages, making sure I haven't dreamt it all up.

But it's real.

He wants something long-term.

He wants me *more* because I'm a virgin.

His text arrives, wiping away my smile and introducing darkness into this bright moment.

## CHAPTER 18



*K*illian

I sit outside the room, listening to the vet with Speeder. It's the same vet we've been to countless times.

Her voice soothes Speeder, but he can get slightly confused and skittish if I'm in there too, almost as if he feels guilty for showing so much love to somebody else.

Waiting outside comes with its benefits.

It means I get to text my woman.

She hasn't responded to my last message.

***If your Dad caused you and your Mom so much heartache, why do you want a tattoo to honor him?***

I think about adding a note about how I'm not trying to be mean. Maybe the stuff with Emil and Speeder has put an edge on me.

I'll never forget driving away from Mia's apartment, my phone on speaker as I called one of my cop buddies, and then seeing Speeder sprinting down the street, black pieces of leather in his mouth that I mistook for an injury at first.

I'm about to type something else when her message appears.

***Dad wasn't all bad. I hope I haven't made it seem that way. He was ill, paranoid, but sometimes his mood changed and he was the most wonderful person. It was like that when he***

*was giving me driving lessons. Or when we were inventing stories together. Then, he was the most magnetic, loving person ever. I think that's what I want the tattoo to be about, representing both sides of him.*

*I get it, I reply. I felt the same about my old man, just as conflicted. I remember him as a madman with a bottle in one hand and his other clenched into a fist. And I also remember how proud he looked when I won my first fight and how he hugged me.*

*Exactly, it's just like that, she responds. So, since you won't tell me this crazy thing... Do you have any ideas for the tattoo?*

I sit back, wondering if I should just say it now, the crazy thing.

But it has to be in person.

At least then, it gives her a chance to see how completely serious I'm being.

My creative mind sparks alight, and ideas begin to form.

*We could have him in silhouette standing at a large door. On one side – in the foreground – there's darkness and insecurity. Through the door, there's light, hope, and possibility... maybe he could even have his hand extended like he's gesturing you to join him and walk through the door.*

*Wow, she replies. Did you just think of that? That's really good!*

I grin, and the compliment infusing me lights me up far more than any other client's compliment ever has.

*Yeah, but it's just a base concept. We can tinker with it.*

*No, I love it. I think we should go with that.*

*We'll put it at the top of the list. But who knows, my tough angel, maybe you're just saying this to make me feel good.*

*I can think of other ways to make you feel good!*

My mouth drops open, then forms into a smirk.

*Somebody's not so shy anymore*, I reply.

*This has been a magical day*, she texts. *Ever since our kiss, it's like something happened. I know it sounds like fairytale stuff, but that's how this feels. It's like living in a dark fairytale.*

*Maybe I should call you princess, then, not angel... So what are these things to make me feel good?*

I imagine her sitting on my couch, or maybe on the balcony or even on my bed, her thick thighs pressed together, her body pumping with the same desire that pulses through me. It howls louder and with more urgency each moment.

*Aren't you at the vet? It might get awkward.*

I look around the fluorescent-lit room at the receptionist typing away behind the desk. The door to Speeder's room is just off to my side.

My manhood aches, the helm engorging, as if telling me it doesn't matter if I lose control.

Instead, I should abandon Speeder and speed across the city, kick open the door to my apartment, and claim my woman fiercely.

*I'll be home soon. You can tell me then.*

*After you tell me this crazy thing*, she replies.

I swallow, wondering if I'm going to be able to do that.

*What's going to happen to Emil?* Mia asks.

*I've explained to my police contacts what's happened, who he is, everything.*

I almost don't want to tell her the next bit, to ruin the magic of these texts.

*You and your mom are going to need to talk to the police at some point. I explained your situation as vaguely as I could, about how it could make you nervous and everything. They agreed to come by my apartment. Would that be okay?*

The last thing I want is to put my woman on edge.

***You don't have to treat me like this. Like I might break. I know that could seem ridiculous, considering all the stuff I've said. But I want to try to be better, to be stronger. With your help, I think maybe I can be.***

***I know you can,*** I reply. ***You're tougher than you think, princess.***

***Princess? So we are going with the fairy tale angle, hmm?***

***Yeah, but it's going to be R-rated.***

My manhood stirs again, but then the door to the vet's room opens, and Speeder comes bounding out.

"Everything checks out," the vet says as my energetic boy leaps up, his forepaws on my legs, his tongue hanging out.

I grin down at him, scratching him behind the ear. "I can see that. Thank God."

Outside, I walk Speeder across the parking lot. The sun is beginning to set, and the air is getting cooler.

"Hell of a day, eh, boy?"

He hops into the backseat with a whine that sounds like *yes*, and then I drop into the driver's seat, checking my phone before I start the engine.

***I want you to tell the police I'm ready to talk to them as soon as possible. I want to help. I don't want to live in fear.***

It's so easy to see the fierce mother in her when she speaks like this, the woman just waiting to break free from her circumstances and become who she was meant to be.

And I'll be there every step of the way, supporting her as only her man can.

***I'll let them know. I'm proud of you.***

***But I want to make a deal. After I talk to them, you tell me the crazy thing, okay?***

***Deal.***

Sending the text makes my breath shudder because the agreement could shatter everything.

We're moving fast, which is fine by me, but what if I push for us to move *too* fast?

Reaching into the backseat, I clip Speeder to the car harness, then give him another scratch on the head.

"I'm sorry I let this happen to you."

He licks my cheek.

"You're too forgiving, boy." I smile, scratching him again. "I promise you won't have to see that asshole ever again. And well done for biting him."

*Mom's just woken up*, Mia texts just as I'm about to start the engine. *I thought she was going to freak out when I told her we had to talk to the police, but do you know what she said? "If you can be strong, so can I." I didn't even know I seemed strong to her.*

*I think you were always strong, Mia*, I text passionately.

That's something I didn't know was possible before I met her, texting *passionately*.

*You just needed a chance to show yourself. This is just the first step. Soon, I'll take you on a date... there will be noise and chaos everywhere. And you'll face it. The more you face stuff like that, the more you'll realize how strong you are. Not that you'll become stronger, but you'll be able to see it. The truth of just how fierce you are.*

*You have no idea how much that means to me*, she replies.

*It's the truth. You'll see. I'll be home soon. I'm going to call my cop buddy on the way, so you can give your statements.*

*And then it will be time to tell me the crazy thing, right?*

I bite down, wondering how I'm going to do this.

We've progressed so much in such a short *time*.

*She* has.

*Yes. And I've just thought of the best thing to call you.*

*Oh yeah?* she replies.

*You're a princess and an angel, both of them to me, and so much more. But most of all, Mia, you're a butterfly. I think you're finally done with the cocoon.*

*Is it bad that it brought tears to my eyes?*

*No, it's cute as hell, my perfect butterfly.*

Starting the engine, I pull out of the parking lot, exchanging a glance with Speeder in the rearview mirror.

I can tell he approves.



## CHAPTER 19



M<sup>ia</sup>

I have to take a moment after talking to the cops, sitting at Killian's desk chair, a few feet from his bed, the room filled with warm lamplight. The two officers were the first people I've spoken to vocally, except for Killian and Mom.

In years.

But even as my heart thudded and my body poured sweat, I did it.

Mom's already set up in the guest room. After she spoke to the cops she wanted to lie down again.

She's taking small steps, but not that long ago, being in this new environment would've shattered her.

Pride whelms in me. For the first time in a long time, I think about the possibility of us being *normal*, whatever that means.

Being just like the regular people who go about their lives and don't worry about shattering every few seconds.

There's a heavy knock at the door.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

I smile at the sound of his husky voice, though nerves still try to tangle me up. After dropping Speeder off, Killian drove to our apartment to pick up our things.

I need my laptop for work.

Whatever else is true, I can't just assume Killian's going to help me financially.

I'm probably already in trouble for not logging on for my evening shift.

"You don't have to knock. It's your room."

He pushes the door open with a smirk on his face. He's wearing a light gray hoodie, matching the silver in his hair, his body pressing through the material. He's holding a large duffle bag casually in one hand.

"I spoke to your landlord," he says.

I'm achingly aware of the door closing behind him.

"I agreed to pay for a new door, and he's going to get you a fresh set of keys soon. But honestly, butterfly...."

He glances at me as he places the bag down, his eyes glimmering.

I'm not sure what to do. I want to be in his arms again, to taste his lips, but it's all so much easier over text, when I can hide behind words.

I find myself looking down as if to avoid his steady, powerful gaze.

"I love that nickname," I murmur. "And thank you so much."

"You're staying here." He walks across the room, takes my hands, and firmly pulls me to my feet. "There's no other place for you. I can't think about you in that old apartment by yourself. Even thinking about you driving that beat-up old piece of junk here makes me feel like crap."

He wraps his arms around me, his touch firm, palms pressing firmly against my back and then guiding us closer together. The heat of his muscular body burns through his clothes into me, a gasp escaping me.

"You deserve the best," he snarls, leaning down so his lips are close to mine. I can feel his breath. "You deserve a new car, a

decent apartment, the freedom to pursue your career so you don't have to work as a customer-support anything."

I moan as he kisses me.

That feeling is as if his words are wrapping a security blanket around me, but it's much more intense than last time.

Then *earlier today*.

It seems impossible such a short amount of time has passed, but my soul and my core don't care about that, only the contact with my man, the closeness.

Our mouths open, and our tongues find each other by instinct. No urge to run grips me as he squeezes onto my hips with powerful hands, his manhood pushing against my belly like he's trying to get the quickest access to our future.

To pregnancy.

He growls through the kiss as his hands slide from my hips to my ass, massaging. Nerves tingle over my skin, so much hotter than they were when we were texting, the realness of them making my panties rub raw against my sex, pleasure burning.

"What about the crazy thing?" I whisper when the kiss naturally breaks off.

But our bodies remain close. My arms are wrapped around Killian's shoulders, feeling the power of his body, the security of it.

The word *long-term* clashes in my mind, the declaration he made of wanting this to be for real, wanting *us* to be for real.

He frowns, loosening his grip on me.

Darkness enters the lust-filled glimmering of his intense eyes.

Letting me go, he walks to the other side of the room, idly reaching up to handle one of his boxing belts, mounted to the wall. There are several of them, some golden like the hope in my heart and some the same silver as his hair.

"I thought you'd run like hell if I told you that you make me feel like I'm in *The Great Gatsby*... like you're a shining

beacon, calling to me. It sounds insane when I say it out loud. We met today, Mia. *Today.*”

His body tenses, and, with his back to me, it looks like he’s going to erupt from his hoodie.

“But you didn’t. So maybe you won’t run if I tell you this too.”

“Look at me, Killian.”

He turns, a smirk attempting to lift his lips, but there’s still that darkness in him. “I like it when you get sassy, butterfly.”

My cheeks burn as if old instincts are telling me to turn away, telling me not to face whatever this is... what it could become.

“What is it?” I ask. “We had a deal.”

He returns to me, taking my hands. He holds them both firmly, with a sense of possession.

That can’t just be hope.

There has to be something real here.

“I told you that you called to me when I first saw you. I felt it instantly. Something magical was happening, something *vital*. Something real. But there was – is – something else.”

When he pauses, I have to say, “Yeah?”

I have to urge him to keep going.

With each word, he infuses me with more and more warmth.

He nods, serious and intense. “It wasn’t just a general desire to be with you. It was an instant feeling to....”

“To what?” I whisper.

He laughs, but there’s no humor in it. It’s more like he’s a valve releasing the pressure, like he has to laugh because it’s the only response he can think of.

“I shouldn’t say this. There’s a good chance it sends you running.”

I place my hand on his chest, feeling his powerful thundering heartbeat. “Think about the tattoo design. On one side of the

door, there's darkness and pain... and on the other, there's light. I bet there will be light after you tell me."

My voice cracks as emotions swirl inside me, and I struggle to hold back tears.

I'm not even sure where all these emotions come from, except somewhere deep inside of me, maybe a part of me that suspects what he's going to say.

But I can't dare to let myself hope.

"You're so beautiful, butterfly," he says. "Inside and out."

Brushing the hair from my face, and tickling me behind the ear, he leans down and kisses me on the cheek gently.

"When I first saw the photo of you, I instantly knew you belonged to me. That *all* of you belonged to me, Mia. And most of all... your future, your children. *Our* children."

His voice shakes like a volcano on the verge of erupting, like he can't contain the fire in him. In the end, I sense indecision, as though part of him wants to take this back, as though part of him isn't sure he ever should've said it to begin with.

My throat closes as sobs choke me.

"You want us to have children together?"

"I told you it was crazy," he says, his voice deep, gruff, and possessive. "But yeah, it's the truth. I wanted it the first moment I saw you and with every text we exchanged, I wanted it more, wanted *you* more, wanted our future more."

He grabs my shoulders, lengthening his arms so he can stare down at me.

His features are unchained, his eyes staring in ownership, his touch fierce.

"I own all of you," he growls. "No man has ever touched you, and no man ever *will*. Your lips, your perfect tits, your horny young body... your sex, and your *core*, Mia. All of you belongs to me."

He holds me tighter, leaning down, his breath beastly hot as it shimmers over my skin.

“There’s nothing I want more than to support you, move you out of that apartment, get your mom the help she needs... and start building a family together right away. See? Crazy.”

“Crazy,” I repeat, wiping tears from my eyes. “And exactly what I wanted to hear.”

He tilts his head as though in shock. “Don’t play games with me, butterfly.”

“I mean it,” I say. “When I saw your photo on the website, I wanted all of that too. I thought it was just a silly dream. I thought you’d laugh if I ever told you. But I want it, Killian. A life. Kids. A marriage. Everything.”

He leans down, kissing me again.

But this time, there’s a fresh fire in the kiss.

The future is nestled within it.

## CHAPTER 20



*K*illian

I growl through the kiss as my hands move to her ass again.

Her body feels even sweeter now. I know she feels the same, her words bouncing around my head.

She whimpers as I guide her backward, and then she giggles when the back of her knees hits the bed, and she falls. She stares at me from the bed with wide eyes, excitement glimmering in them, her gorgeous hair spilling around her.

Her lips are slightly parted, reddened from our kiss, the same redness in her cheeks.

Her body looks so tempting, her pants outlining the shape of her thick thighs, her breasts round and hungrily curvy.

I lie down atop her, careful not to let my full weight crush against her, lowering myself so she can feel the firmness of my body against her breasts.

I can smell her scent and luxuriate in the heat of her lips as I kiss her again.

She makes the cutest gasping noise with each kiss, her arms wrapping around me.

I hold myself up with one hand, using the other to grind up her leg. I savor the thickness of her thigh, her shivering as I get closer and closer to her pussy.

I'm sure I can feel the heat of her sex tempting me.

"Tell me what you are," I snarl, breaking off the kiss.

"Yours," she moans.

"You're going to give me the children I never even knew I wanted... never dreamed I *could* want before I saw you. You're going to be my wife. You. Are. Mine."

"I'm yours," she whispers. "I want all of that so badly."

"So let's do it, my perfect virgin," I say. "Let's start our family."

Her eyes widen even more, but then I kiss her again, pushing away the fear.

I can sense the eagerness of her body, the same need twisting through me, my cock so hard it aches as it pushes against my pants.

Finally, my hand reaches her sex.

She breaks the kiss off when I push down, our teeth clicking like she can't focus on both things at once.

That's fine by me.

I rear up, giving myself the most perfect view as I start palming her pussy, feeling her burning lust through her pants.

I rub quicker, captivated by the way she shifts and tremors, her mouth twisting in pleasure.

Then I grab her button, meaning to yank it away.

Her hand darts down, clutching onto me.

"You're mine," I growl, roughly pulling it loose. "You don't have to be afraid. Self-conscious. Any of that. Anyway, I need to feel your soaked pussy. I need to make you come for real, not just over text."

She releases my hand. "I don't know what to do."

I smirk, lean down and kiss her like I own her.

Because I *do* own her.

"You're doing it," I say. "Just by being you."



She breaks off the kiss when I shove my hand down her pants, groaning as I feel the naked wetness of her sex, her lips against my touch as I grind down to her entrance.

She's already soaked for me, her pussy feeling so hot that the base of my manhood pulses as if she's already wrapped around me.

"You're drenched," I growl.

"I know," she whimpers.

"I need to taste you. To get you even wetter for my cock."

Standing up, I stare down at her.

"Get naked."

"Strip?" she asks, cute shyness in her voice.

My body flares. My balls expand.

My world crashes as I hear the quiver in her voice and struggle to accept everything that's happened.

She feels the same.

She's going to give me a family.

And now my beautiful butterfly is nervously asking me if I want a strip tease.

"Yes," I say fiercely. "Strip for me. Show me everything. Every part of your curvy, perfect, and innocent young body."

"Hmm," she moans, climbing onto her knees. "Just don't laugh at me."

"Laughing is the last thing I'd do here."

"What about you?" she murmurs.

"What are you asking?"

"Aren't you going to... you know, strip too?"

I smirk. "Okay then."

In maybe ten seconds, I tear my clothes off, ripping my hoodie and my T-shirt over my head, pulling my pants and underwear down, and then kicking them off with my socks.

My cock springs free, thick and hard, with precome on the end of it.

Mia laughs and whimpers at the same time, staring.

“You’re so massive.”

“I’m going to fill up your virgin pussy. Your turn!”

Her hands slowly move as she pulls her shirt over her head, then reaches around and unclips her bra.

I snarl as her breasts spill free, large and curvy, her nipples big and needy looking, with veins moving through her creamy flesh like strikes of lightning.

When I move forward, she glances at me, shaking her head.

“Nuh-uh. You said *everything*.”

“You have no idea how wild you drive me when you get sassy and confident.”

“Confident enough to....”

“What?” I say when she trails off as if the nerves are stopping her.

“Ask you to touch yourself while I take off the rest?”

I wrap my hand around my cock, forcing myself to slowly rub myself as she gives me a look that’s full of nerves, but then she tilts her head as if to say, *Screw it*.

My hand slows down even more when she turns around, looking over her shoulder as she wriggles out of her pants.

Inch by tempting inch, she reveals her round, perfect ass, making my cock bulge even more, so much precome leaking from my end, a big dollop of it drops to the floor.

I can’t wait any longer.

With her pants trapped around her ankles, I rush forward with a growl.

“Fuck, you smell good,” I moan as I slide my hands up her legs, grabbing her ass and then shoving my face right up against her pussy.

There's nothing civilized in the way I start feasting on her pussy, dragging my tongue up between her legs as I massage her ass, my body hunched over and every muscle burning.

She moans in the sexiest way when I start tonguing her. I push my tongue inside of her, tasting as much of her as I can, my hands greedily indulging in her ass as I push the mounds together, massaging.

Her moans shiver when I move to her clit, licking it quickly, flicking my tongue up and down, driven on by the quality of her breathing, her ass shifting against me, rubbing against my face as I massage her.

Her gasps increase as she bucks against me, and I keep licking her, faster and with more focus, knowing there's nothing that can make me stop.

Every part of me is focused on her taste, the feel of her ass, and her moans.

"I can feel how close your young tight pussy is," I growl as I trail my hand to her sex and gently push my finger inside.

She grips me instantly, making the end of my cock twitch as I imagine driving inside of her, pushing deeper and deeper as my woman sits back against me, her voluptuous ass flattening against my abs.

I finger her tightness quicker and quicker as I greedily lick her clit, paying it all the attention she's worth, letting her feel all the need erupting from me.

She gasps and collapses forward.

I follow her, never separating from her pussy, as she lies on her front and starts to vibrate for me.

My face is buried in her ass, my tongue attacking her clit as her body shivers with more and more force, making me feel so damn blessed I'm the one who gets to be with her.

Her curvy body jiggles so gorgeously, her thick ass dancing against my touch.

She stops shaking. Her body going tense.

“Oh, oh,” she whimpers.

“That’s it.” I grab her ass with more possession. “Cream all over my mouth. I need to taste you. Now.”

“Don’t... stop.”

The sassiness in my butterfly’s voice is enough to drive me on, enough to make me focus on her clit with renewed force.

Her pussy flutters around my finger as I slip in and out faster, like her virgin body is talking to me as more wetness floods out of her.

I remove my finger, opening my mouth wide as I keep licking her clit, tasting her tangy juices, her gorgeous cream, as she empties all over me.

Then I stand, staring down at her round ass, my cock so hard it hurts.

“I need to be inside of you,” I growl. “I need to fuck that tight little hole until you cream all over again.”

She rolls onto her back, staring up with wide eyes.

And then her mother starts to scream from the hallway.

A moment later, Speeder is barking.

## CHAPTER 21



Mia

I get dressed quickly, rushing even as instincts tell me to stay here with Killian.

Voices scream at me to find a way to ignore Mom's yelling, to ignore Speeder's barking.

When Killian was between my legs, I felt a pleasure I never dreamed I'd experience, but it went far beyond the physical release. As my pussy fluttered and the orgasm shivered through me, it was like I was feeling the future beckoning to me.

Killian's right.

When I'm with him, I don't need my cocoon anymore.

After getting dressed, I rush for the door.

Killian's already there, pulling it open.

Looking around him, I see Mom sitting against the wall, yelling as Speeder approaches her, barking.

The more Mom yells, the more Speeder barks.

"Make him stop," Mom yells. "Make him *stop*."

"Speeder," Killian says fiercely. "Here, boy. Now."

Speeder turns, and I see the happiness on his face, the glint in his eyes. The barking wasn't angry either. There was nothing

fierce in it, more like the high-pitched yapping a dog offers when he wants to play.

And then I see the reason why.

“Mom,” I say, nodding to her hand. “He thinks that’s a toy.”

She’s holding a medicine bottle.

“*This?*” she says, waving it.

Speeder’s head follows the motion. Killian looks over his shoulder, smiling at me, pride in his eyes.

“She’s right, ma’am,” Killian says. “I’m sorry. He thinks *everything* is a toy when he’s in certain moods.”

I don’t want to say the next bit, but I can tell Mom’s still freaked from the way she’s eyeing Speeder.

“I think I’ll go with you to your room, Mom, okay?”

“Just don’t let him near me.”

I suppress a sigh. This process isn’t going to be as quick for her as it’s been for me.

She doesn’t have the soothing balm of Killian’s touch, his closeness, all the fierceness between us.

The knowledge that we’re going to be together forever.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Killian says. “I’ll take him for a walk and let him burn off some energy. It’s been a crazy day.”

Killian turns to me and steps forward...

It’s like he’s going to kiss me. I wish it was possible for him to grab me, kiss me hard, guide me into the bedroom, and pick up where we left off.

But at the same time, a cowardly part of me – the part still in the cocoon – is relieved Mom gave us this distraction.

I saw how huge he was, his massive cock throbbing, his size unbelievable.

Killian realizes kissing me now, in front of Mom, probably isn’t the best idea.

He backs off and turns, scratching Speeder on the top of the head.

“Come on, boy.”

I can hear the tension in my man’s voice, the tightness in it, like he wants nothing more than to keep doing what we were doing and keep his body close to mine.

Once they’re gone, I approach Mom.

“Are you taking another pill?” I ask.

She stands, shaking her head. “I was going to the bathroom. I guess it’s a habit to carry them with me sometimes. And then that dog just started barking and... I used to love dogs once. I wouldn’t have collapsed like that, started to cry, to *scream*. Oh, Mia...”

I pull her into my arms, finding it difficult to go from the lust-filled closeness with Killian to being the loving daughter. But the pain in my Mom’s voice is enough motivation to hug her warmly, to softly whisper that everything’s going to be okay.

She wraps her arms around me, clinging on tightly.

“It’s okay,” I whisper again. “We’re going to get you the help you need.”

Her grip tightens against me.

“We can’t afford it.”

*We can. Killian has offered to help.*

I almost tell her this, but something holds me back.

I *know* Killian feels the same. I know he wasn’t lying when he said he wanted a family together, kids, everything.

But I also know Mom would think I’m going insane.

“We’re going to get you help,” I say firmly. “I promise.”

One way or another, I’ll sort it out.

---

In Mom's room, she falls asleep in my arms, leaving me one free hand with which to text.

It's late now. The sun has set, and my body settled down after the closeness with Killian.

***I'm sorry. Mom's asleep. I think I should stay here with her. It's been a big day for everybody.***

I don't have to wonder if part of me is using that as an excuse. As Killian walked Speeder, it gave me time to think about what would've happened if Mom didn't interrupt us.

Would I have been able to go all the way and give Killian what he wanted?

***It's okay,*** he replies, texting from just a few rooms over, probably with Speeder curled up next to him. ***I won't lie. I want you badly. But I respect how much you care about your family. And I can see how badly your Mom needs help. I meant what I said. I'm happy to provide that help... to provide everything for you, Mia, to provide you with the sort of life you deserve.***

***I can't just quit my job,*** I reply. ***I can't just tell you, Hey, Killian, you've got to bankroll me now.***

***It's not bankrolling you when you have a dream,*** he texts. ***And also... yes, you can do all of that. You will because your man is telling you to. Your man is ordering you, you sassy, beautiful butterfly, to quit that customer-service job and focus on your editing.***

My heart flutters quickly, dreams tempting me, singing to me.

***What made you want to become an editor?*** he texts a moment later.

I smile as I imagine him worrying about the conversation coming to an end. My body is still sore from what we did, in the best way, my sex aching as if begging for more.

He wants me, both physically and emotionally.

But I can't fixate on the physical with Mom in my arms.



*I remember reading this series of books when I was a kid. They were amazing fantasy stories. In the back of one of them, the author thanked her editor. I didn't even know what it was. So I did some research. And the idea just called to me, like you called to me, and I called you.*

*Sometimes, you just know,* he replies. *Sometimes, there's no room for doubt. I get it. Anything I can do to help you, I will. I don't want you wasting time at a job you hate when I'm willing and capable of making your life better.*

*Do you mean it, all of it?* I text.

*Every single word. You're the future mother of my children. There's no question about me providing for you.*

I smile widely. *You have no idea how much that means to me. I couldn't have imagined any of this. I'm still worried I will wake up, realizing I've fallen asleep looking at your website.*

*No, this is real. We're real. Let me take you out tomorrow.*

*Out as in... out, out?*

Through the apartment, I hear my man chuckle, and it just makes me smile even wider.

*Yes, to a restaurant. Your mom will be safe here, though I may hire somebody to dog sit for Speeder.*

"Mia?" Mom says, waking.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about earlier."

"It's okay," I whisper. "You don't have to apologize."

"Who are you talking to?"

"Killian. We're...."

I almost don't tell her, but I can't keep hiding the truth.

"We're talking about going on a date tomorrow. But Killian says he will hire a dog sitter for Speeder, so you don't have to be here alone with him."

Mom sits up, looking at me, a shaky smile on her lips. “A date as in... going out? To a restaurant?”

I sit up straighter, basking in what feels like my mom’s pride. “Yes, exactly that.”

“Do you think you can do that?”

“With Killian, yes, I do.” There’s still chaos whispering at the edges, trying to break through, but it seems more distant than before. “Honestly, Mom, I feel like I can do anything with Killian.”

Mom reaches over, touching my shoulder. “Tell Killian I’ll take care of Speeder.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I want to do this. I want to prove I *can*. I wasn’t always this person.”

I reach up, touching her hand. “I know you can do it, Mom.”

Texting Killian, I say, *Mom wants a chance to take care of Speeder when we’re on the date. She wants to prove to herself that she can.*

*There won’t be much to do except keep him company. I’ve got to work all day tomorrow, but in the evening... I’m taking you out.*

*That sounds like the best thing ever,* I reply, hoping I don’t freak out when we walk into the restaurant.

I’ve never been in one before.

## CHAPTER 22



*K*illian

“What do you think?” I ask.

It’s hard to keep my voice steady, especially now I’ve seen my woman naked. It’s not like she’s wearing an outlandish outfit or anything like that. She’s wearing a sparkly black top and jeans, but I know what’s underneath there, her voluptuous breasts, her round, gorgeous ass....

No, I have to focus on the date.

It’s difficult since working all day lets the heat build-up.

The car ride over had me almost erupting.

Mia looks around at the restaurant, a low-key place with soft lamplight, not too busy this early in the evening.

Her cheeks are gorgeously flushed, her hair wavier than usual from where she keeps running her hand through it.

“It feels like being on the other side of the door.”

I smirk, reaching across the table past the flickering candle, and taking her hand. She grasps on to me firmly, letting me know there are more nerves in her than she’s showing.

“You’re doing it,” I say, reading the anxiety in her body.  
“You’re....”

“Tougher than I think?” she finishes, with a sassy tilt of her head.

Luckily, the waiter chooses that moment to come over. Otherwise, I might lose control and leap across the table, dragging Mia into my arms and my lap.

“What would you like to drink?”

“I’ll get an orange soda,” Mia says, her voice coming out loud, her cheeks blushing an even deeper red.

I grin across at her, hoping she can read the encouragement on my face, then I say, just as loudly, “I’ll have the same.”

Once the waiter is gone, Mia buries her head in her hands. “I want to die.”

I chuckle lightly, reaching over and gently touching her wrist, moving her hands.

She meets my eyes, sees me smiling, then her lips twitch cutely.

“You spoke a little loud. So what? The world didn’t end. The ceiling didn’t crash in on us. And if anybody decides to make an issue about anything you do... they’ll have me to answer to.”

Her smile widens. “Did you want an orange soda? Of course, you can get a real drink if you want.”

“Soda’s fine,” I tell her. “I’m drunk enough on you, butterfly... please tell me if that was too cheesy.”

“No way. The cheesier, the better.”

We clasp hands for a moment, then look down at the menus.

“What are you thinking of getting?” she asks.

I listen to her voice’s tone and tightness, then look steadily at her.

“You can get anything you want, Mia.”

She flinches as if I’ve struck on something true with too much accuracy.

“What do you mean?”

I look at her steadily, the same supportive way I always will. She holds my gaze for a few moments and then nods.

She *knows* what I mean. She doesn't have to ask.

And she doesn't need me to explain but I'm going to say it anyway.

"The more you eat," I say, my voice husky, "the curvier your body gets. Do you think I'm ever going to judge you for that?"

"What if I wanted to lose weight?" she asks.

My first instinct is to savagely tell her *no*.

It comes from deep inside of me, buried in a carnal place, the piece of me that erupted when I first laid my eyes on her on the editing website, my beautifully curvy butterfly.

"Do you?" I ask.

She shakes her head, and then she laughs in the cutest way. It's a difficult thing to judge, the cuteness of her laughter, how much it intoxicates me... because *everything* about her does, each thing captivating me even more than the last.

"No," she says, still laughing. "Which is a good thing. I think you'd kill me if I *did* want to lose weight."

I chuckle. "My feelings were that obvious?"

"I thought you were going to flip the table."

She pauses as the waiter brings our drinks, then clutches her glass. "Most men wouldn't want a woman built like me, you know. I'm not trying to be all pity party about it, but that's just a fact. Most men...."

"I don't give a damn what *most men* want. I didn't care what most men did when it came to boxing, throwing fights, or placating those assholes. And I don't care now, with you. If *most men* wouldn't find you attractive, butterfly, good... it means there's no doubt about who you belong to."

She smiles, reaching across the table. We clasp hands tightly, warmth surging between us, her touch awakening the hunger in me. The need.

But that's not saying much.

Everything she does wakes up the beast in me.

---

“This *is* delicious,” Mia says after swallowing a mouthful of her steak.

I smile across at her.

She tilts her head and leans back. Her eyes are wide and ensnaring, capable of capturing me forever.

No, not *capable*.

They did that the first second I saw them on my computer screen.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I ask.

“It’s your smile. It’s different.”

My grin widens as I cut into my steak. “Different... how?”

“I don’t know. Almost like the darkness is lifting... Does that sound cheesy as hell?”

“No way. Like you said before, the cheesier, the better.”

She laughs at the callback, the same thing she said to me earlier.

“You can see all that in my smile?” I go on.

“Before you told me the truth, it was like there was all this pain in your smile, even when you were happy. But there’s something new there now. Or maybe that’s just the wannabe poet in me.”

“No, you’re right,” I tell her passionately. “You have to understand before I told you the truth about everything, I was holding back so, so much. I was holding back all the insanity of the life I wanted, still want, and *need* with you.”

Her cheeks blush in that beautiful way as if a force of pure affection is lighting her up inside. There’s no greater pleasure than making my woman beam like this.

“You look pregnant already,” I say.

She frowns, leaning back.

“Not like that,” I rush to say, almost tripping over my words. “I mean... you’re glowing. You look so happy. So... where you belong.”

“Am I making you nervous, Killian?” she says, a teasing note in her voice.

I chuckle. “I just don’t want to offend you.”

“You could never do that. And anyway, if you did....”

She looks down. My hand moves across the table instinctively, touching the bottom of her chin and guiding her gaze to mine. The warmth of her skin moves down my fingers, arm, and chest, where it causes a fierce hammering in my heart.

“If I did?” I prompt, never wanting nerves to hold her back.

“We’ve got the rest of our lives for you to make it up to me,” she says, voice choked as if she has to push the words out.

“I’ll never stop treating you right,” I tell her, “even if I haven’t offended you. So now that you don’t have to work, will you focus on your editing or poetry?”

“Both,” she says, shaking her head slowly as if she doesn’t believe it. “You don’t have to do that for me.”

“You’re my woman. There’s no reason for you to bust your ass working a job you hate.”

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Yeah. Both. I love editing, love how it’s a combination of being creative but also taking a backseat, helping somebody else to realize their dream.”

“And then you’ve got the poetry for when you *really* want to get creative.”

“Exactly,” she says, beaming. “That’s it. Um... excuse me, I’m going to use the ladies’ room.”

“So polite,” I say, with a light teasing note.

I watch my woman walk across the restaurant, trying to bury the urge to run over to her and press myself against her. I can just about resist, but it’s far more difficult when she’s standing, giving me a full view of her body.

My phone buzzes.

I check it, wondering if it's Andrea with an update about Speeder.

But it's Mia.

*I know this is silly, but I don't know how to say it in person. But I wanted you to know... I'm ready. Well, I want to be ready. I want to try. I want to be together. Being in this restaurant – being on the 'outside' has made me realize I don't want to be afraid anymore. Or, if I am afraid, I want to move toward the fear, not away from it. I want to overcome my fears. I want you, Killian. I want you to take the lead.*

My lips twitch as I stare down at my phone, more like my usual savage smirk than a smile.

*You belong to me,* I reply. *So, of course, I'll take the lead.*

*I'm ready to give myself to you. Not just my body. My heart. My soul. My future. Everything. Some women my age might think they'd be 'missing out' by finding their man so young, but I don't. What we have is too special. And now I know why I didn't say this in person... I'm crying in here.*

*Get out here,* I text quickly.

But I can't wait.

Standing, I walk toward the restrooms.

Mia emerges from the ladies' room, her eyes glistening as she walks down the hallway.

I sweep her into my arms, holding her tightly, leaning down to kiss the warm tears from her cheeks.

"Why are you crying?" I whisper, kissing them away.

"Because I never thought I'd find this." She clings to me, her hands digging into my back through the fabric of my shirt. "I never thought I'd...."

"What, Mia?" I squeeze her tighter, letting her speak into my chest through tangled sobs.



“I never thought I’d *want* to face my fears, want to go outside, want to fight instead of run. But you’ve given me that strength.”

“No, no,” I say quickly, leaning back and brushing her cheek with my thumb. “I haven’t given you anything. I’ve just helped you see what was there all along.”

## CHAPTER 23



M<sup>ia</sup>

“Sorry if that was weird, the way I ran off to the bathroom,” I say as Killian drives us back toward his apartment building.

“I get it,” he says, his voice steady and deep. “Sometimes, texting is easier.”

“Especially for us,” I reply, my tone joking even as my heart hammers.

I told him I was ready, that I was done running, and it was the truth. I don’t want to spend my entire life running *away* from things, wondering how something can hurt me, believing the worst part of Dad’s obsession.

I want to move *toward* what makes me anxious....

Even if it’s hard.

But with Killian, I can do it.

At a red light, he looks at me, his eyes intense. It’s that way he has of looking at me like nothing else matters like a meteor could crash into the city, the car could flip over, and he’d still never take his eyes off me.

It makes me feel wanted, yes, but also *real* in a way that hiding in the apartment never could.

“I prefer being with you in person,” he says. “But I’ll always have a soft spot for texting since it’s how we started.”

“Some things *are* easier to say over text, though.”

“For an adorably cute virgin like you, maybe.”

His hand comes to rest on my leg, squeezing gently, taking any possible sting out of his words. It comes from a warm, loving place.

But any warmth seeps out of the atmosphere as we arrive on Killian’s street to find several men leaning against the corner of the building, right near the entrance to the underground parking lot.

“Emil,” Killian snaps.

My blood turns icy as I stare at him, the man who barged into our apartment and made me wonder if he was going to let us go... or do something evil. He’s got a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

The men around him – four in total – are all big, with wide shoulders and a violent air around them. It’s like they could snap into action at any second, but I can’t quite figure out why.

It’s as if Dad’s protective instincts are coming in use for once.

*Run away*, sings out in my mind over and over.

Emil pushes away from the wall, gestures to us with his cigarette then flicks it.

“Who the hell does he think he is?” Killian growls. “He can’t keep showing up like this. And after what he did to you and Speeder....”

“Killian, wait,” I yell, but it’s too late.

Killian throws the car door open and steps from the vehicle, his massive body even tenser than usual, pressing through the fabric of his clothes, his silver hair shining like armor.

In a flash of poetic imagination, he becomes a knight charging to battle.

Does that make me the insane princess chasing after him?

I’m out of the car, too, running over.

Killian turns and opens his mouth. I can tell he's going to tell me to wait in the car.

But then Emil calls over from the other side of the sidewalk. "Got a trade in mind for you, Killian. I'll let you off the hook for all those fights if you let me and the boys here have a go on your...", he clears his throat. "*Lovely lady.*"

The men snigger.

Killian moves, blocking me from view, but I peer around him and glare at Emil. It's another instance of moving *toward* what makes me anxious instead of away, though in this case, I think Killian would prefer it if I stayed in the car.

"You're a loser," I snap, hating how my voice trembles but pushing on anyway. "You can act tough all you want, but what sort of man does this? You should've let this go *years* ago, but here you are, stuck in the past."

I'm aware I'm talking to myself too. Stuck in the past with Dad's paranoia, trapped in that cycle.

But not anymore.

"She's right," Killian snaps. "Why are you really here, Emil? It can't just be for the fights."

"For respect," Emil says, his voice shaky.

Whatever the other men are on, he is too. Even his leer shifts around like a snake trying to slither off his face

"You don't get respect by forcing fighters to break their code or the law. And you don't get it by insulting a man's woman."

"Insult, where?" Emil says. "I called her a lovely lady. I could've been *honest* and called her a fa...."

*Fat*, the word slaps me coldly across the face, but then Killian rushes forward, and I'm more concerned with stopping him from getting jailed by swinging on Emil.

Clinging onto his arm, I say, "It's not worth it. Let's just go inside."

Killian is raging, his arm expanding in my hands, his muscles pressing powerfully through his shirt like he's going to tear it

loose. He glares at Emil, chest heaving, as Emil smirks and the men around him laugh low and mean.

“You’re a joke,” Killian growls. “All this effort... stalking Mia, threatening her landlord to get her apartment number, all to get to *me*. And because I wouldn’t fix a few fights?”

“You humiliated me,” Emil yells.

“This is what happens when a man lives too long alone, is it?” Killian goes on, voice deep and yet cutting.

As he speaks, he reaches back and guides me behind him, blocking me from the men’s view with his bulky body.

“This is what happens when a man doesn’t find a wife and start a family. Is that it, Emil? You’ve been on your own for too long, stuck going over and over things that shouldn’t matter to you anymore. Stuck wondering what might’ve been.”

“It *does* matter.”

“You sound like a fucking child.”

“You’re disrespecting me again!”

“Yes, I am.”

The second Emil throws himself forward, the other men follow him so the five move almost like one entity.

I scream when Emil brings his hand around toward Killian’s head, but then Killian ducks and makes a *tsk* noise, controlled, and hammers Emil in the chest.

Emil gasps, wheezing, collapsing to the concrete as he clutches at his chest.

The other men rear back like animals who suddenly realize they’re far too close to a flame. They exchange looks.

Killian nods at Emil, coughing and sputtering.

“Whatever he promised you, fellas, it’s not worth what’s going to happen next. He was a big deal once. He had Cartel connections. But now, I’m sure he’s just a pathetic man who

can't let go of an old grudge. I'm more interested in the future... in my woman."

My chest flutters with warmth when he calls me that, stating it firmly as if challenging the men to make a comment about me.

"I'm calling the cops," Killian goes on. "Since they want to talk to this bastard about a home invasion, it's your choice if you stay here or not. But be aware that my woman's here, and I'll do anything to protect her. That includes beating the four of you so badly you can't walk for weeks."

The men bristle, shrugging their shoulders, stretching out their arms, in general, doing everything they can to look tough.

And then they realize Killian is serious.

I can't see his eyes, but I bet they're smoldering.

I *can* see his back, the taut muscles making his shirt seem tighter, the rising and falling of a bear ready to charge back into battle.

They look down at Emil, still gasping, still clutching his chest.

Together, they turn and leave.

"Ain't worth it," one of them says.

Killian leans down and grabs Emil by the scruff of the neck, lifting him and turning to me, forcing him to look at me.

"Apologize," Killian snaps.

I almost say, *He doesn't have to*. But then I remember how he marched around the apartment, how terrified Mom was, and the pain he caused.

"S-s-sorry," he wheezes.

"Call the police, Mia," Killian says. "It's time to end this."

I take out my cell phone and dial.

## CHAPTER 24



*K*illian

*How is he?* Mia texts.

I'm on the couch, Speeder sprawled out at my feet, sleeping soundly. The second we returned from the police station, Andrea declared she was exhausted and went to her bedroom.

But I don't blame her for that.

We were gone for longer than we said we'd be, *plus* she didn't just take care of Speeder but also cleaned much of the apartment.

*He's fast asleep. He looks happy. She did a great job.*

*I'll be out in a little while. I said I'd sit with Mom while she fell asleep.*

*That's fine,* I reply.

I look down at Speeder, warmth infusing me.

In the old days, the police wouldn't have dared touch him, but Emil's standing within the Cartel has clearly waned.

He was ranting that he was a so-called important person as they dragged him away.

Now, they'll throw everything they have at him – the home invasion, the attempted assault, plus crimes from before he left the city.

*Do you mind?* Mia texts. *I know it seems silly. She's the Mom, and I'm the daughter. I shouldn't have to sit with her... but this was a big deal for her, a huge deal, taking care of Speeder and then taking it upon herself to clean the apartment.*

*You don't have to make excuses,* I text. *I agree with you. I saw how she reacted when Speeder was barking at her. I'm proud of her, Mia. You don't have to be self-conscious or anything like that.*

*You know me too well,* she replies, making me smile, despite the aftershocks of what Emil did or tried to do, they were still ricocheting around me. *I keep forgetting I don't have to put up a false front with you. You've seen me, Mom, our whole deal... and you still want me.*

*More than anything.*

*It amazes me,* she texts. *Seriously.*

*By the way, I haven't forgotten what you said.*

I keep the text suggestive, not wanting to force anything on her, though something about defending her against that asshole Emil has caused the fire to flare to life in me, the pulsing heat of claiming her, owning every inch of her.

It's like the fire of violence has turned into the fire of love.

*Love.*

I still haven't aimed that word at my woman yet, but I can't think of how else I'd describe this feeling, this thundering in my heart.

*I still want it,* she replies after a moment. *I won't lie. I'm nervous. But I don't want to live my life based on what makes me nervous. I want to live confidently and fully. And with you, I think I can.*

*I know you can,* I reply. *You were always stronger than you thought. I'll never stop reminding you of that. You're tough, Mia, but not so tough your man will ever stop protecting you.*

Speeder wakes, stretching out his body, arching his back and elongating his limbs, and then looking at me with something



like a smile shaping his mouth.

It's like he knows.

Everything's going to work out.

Unless my woman freaks when I claim her.

---

"She's asleep," Mia says, walking into the bedroom.

I smirk over at her, her clothes hugging a body made for me and me alone, her hair curling around her shoulders.

"What?" she says, closing the door behind her.

"Just then," I say, walking slowly across the room, "when you said *she's asleep*, it was so easy to imagine you talking about one of our children. It's so easy to think of the future and all the wonderful moments to come. But, at the same time, I don't want to let go of a single moment. I wish I could tattoo every single second into my memory."

"Don't you think that would get boring after a while?" she says, voice spunky like she's trying to make light of it.

But the glistening in her eyes tells me she understands this moment's importance.

I can almost scent her nerves in the air, but her lips are hard, determined.

"Never," I say, stepping forward.

I wonder if she'll always make that noise when I kiss her, the muffled quick breathing through the closeness of our lips, the moaning need as I wrap my arms around her and pull her right up against me.

She wraps her arms around me, clawing onto my back as I pull her closer, our bodies melting together. As we open our mouths and kiss passionately, I struggle to believe this woman was ever a stranger, to believe I ever thought I was going to live the rest of my life alone, and to believe I thought I was too broken for this.

For her, my woman.

My manhood pushes against my pants. The urgency of it makes me lift Mia off her feet. She squeals in the cutest way, our lips never parting as I carry her to the bed and lay her down, staring down at my woman, my body shuddering.

“Another strip tease?” she whimpers.

“I’m done being teased,” I say passionately, collapsing atop her.

She gasps in lust, and we begin rolling over, kissing, our hands all over each other as we tear at each other’s clothes.

I can feel the pulsing within me, the aching to be as close to her as possible, skin on skin, the heat of belonging and knowing *she* belongs to *me* too.

My balls bulge, flooded, as I pull her shirt over her head and tear her bra off.

Her breasts are big, round, and beautiful, my lips magnetize to them without any need of thought, instinct driving me every step of the way.

I squeeze them together, making it so I can suck one nipple and then the other, savoring the taste of her, her needy nipples getting excited in my mouth.

At the same time, I’m tearing at her clothes.

I yank off her pants and her underwear, leaning back, my shirt already off, my belt awkwardly wedged against my hip from where she hurriedly tried to unclasp it.

Gazing at her, I know I’ll never tire of drinking in the sight of my woman, the thickness of her legs, the glistening wetness of her sex, with her full lips and her lust-filled clit.

Her everything... all for me.

“And you,” she moans, her voice shy and yet brave.

It’s a combination specific to my woman, my butterfly breaking out of her cocoon. Her eyes go wider when I start to undress, quickly tearing off my pants and standing naked at the edge of the bed.

“Happy?” I say with a smirk.

“Hmm,” she whispers, nodding. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“You’re naked. You’re beautiful. You’re mine... you’re already doing everything you need. But if you want to earn extra points, moan for me, Mia.”

I lean down again, laying my bare chest against her breasts, then slide my hand up between her legs and stroke softly at her pussy.

Her sex is already gifting me with so much precious wetness.

Rubbing around, I smooth up her folds, spreading the wetness all over her perfect pussy.

She breaks off the kissing when I start to move my hand faster, like she can’t concentrate, so I turn my head and push it against her mouth. She moans directly into my ear, her hot breath shivering down my neck and all over me as I slip my finger inside her.

Her moan hitches, then she keeps going with even more urgency, like she wants to scream at me to claim her faster, to fuck her perfect virgin pussy with her finger until she’s squirting, creaming, shaking....

“Yes,” she moans. “Yes, yes, *yes*.”

Her legs begin to tremble as I move my hand even faster, slipping my finger in and out, doing everything I can to drive her closer to orgasm.

Then her breath goes hollow and even more frantic.

I feel her orgasm, the release of it, the hunger of it, and I know I’m the luckiest man alive.

## CHAPTER 25



M<sup>ia</sup>

The orgasm makes my lower half shudder, my moans coming with more force and confidence because my man wants to hear them.

He's got his face turned, ear aimed at me like he wants to take in the sound of my pleasure. His finger moves in and out of me wetly, my body burning, even as nerves try to scorch the moment.

A voice whispers viciously that *soon* it will be more than his finger.

Then vignettes flash across my mind.

Holding our first child, barbecues, parties, laughter, and happiness... and knowing, most of all, I have a place to belong. I've built a family with the man of my dreams, which will be much sweeter than my family.

With so much more love.

He pushes his finger deeper, making my pussy flutter, making me wonder if his finger feels this huge, what is his massive, bulging manhood going to feel like?

Then he rears up as the orgasm comes to an end, my body pulsing, sweat sliding over my skin. I'm gasping and trying to draw in enough breath.

Killian stares down at me firmly, his jaw tight, his eyes flaring.

Moving into position, I feel the tip of his huge manhood grinding up my inner thigh, leaving a trail of hot precome, tantalizing me the closer he gets.

Another instinct tries to make me clamp my legs shut.

The same instinct that made me want to slam the door every time it was time to leave the house, even for driving lessons. The same instinct that makes me want to run as fast as I can anytime things get real.

But I'm done running.

My core screams at me to take this pleasure, to *chase* it.

Reaching up, I squeeze onto his shoulders. My hands were at my sides as the orgasm surged through me, limp and passive, but I'm done behaving that way.

Deciding not to listen to my nerves, I stare at him firmly.

"I want it, Killian," I murmur. "I want you. I want *us*."

"You want this?" he says passionately, reaching down and guiding his manhood to my sex.

A moan escapes me when I feel his massive helm pushing against my entrance, a preview of just how huge he is. I imagine a different version of me, rolling off the bed, yelling at him to stop....

Not because I don't want it, but because something *bad* might happen.

But I love this man. That's the truth, and I don't care how crazy it sounds.

Nothing bad can happen when we're giving ourselves to each other.

"You're going to take every inch." He rubs his massive cock up and down my fold, circling them, teasing me as he moves quickly and with more carnal captivation. "You're going to take it all, Mia, and then I'm going to fill your virgin pussy with so much come your young body will have no *choice* but to get pregnant."

"Yes, yes," I whimper. "I want that so badly."

I want it....

But there's still a voice telling me I can't, telling me I'm not good enough, telling me I'm going to somehow ruin it.

Digging my fingernails harder into his muscular shoulders, I look down the length of our bodies, at his solid mass of muscles, then back into his eyes.

He's staring at me like nothing else exists again like we're the only ones who matter.

Ever.

"Oh, fuck," he growls arching his back as his huge cock parts my lips.

It's so intense all I can do is lie back and focus on his face, his mouth twisting in pleasure as he pushes deeper and deeper.

My core sings inside of me, telling me *yes, yes, yes*.

My body shakes all over as he keeps pushing, driving his massive manhood until he's buried all the way inside of me, our eyes locked as our bodies are as close as it's possible to get.

He's filling me up, my sex tight around his base.

"You're... so... big."

"You're so tight," he snarls. "You feel *perfect*."

He begins to slip out of me slowly.

I know I want him badly when I smooth my hands over his shoulders, down his arms, and pull on him, urgently moaning for him to get deeper inside of me.

He's filling me up, but it feels so good and new, unlike how I feared.

He smirks and grinds into me again, our bodies colliding as I do my best to move my hips in time with him.

He makes a snarling sound when our bodies meet again, and I know I'm doing something right.

I chase the feeling of pure pleasure between my legs, twitching my hips, sliding my hands down to his rock-hard sides, the

edges of his abs where the muscles are firm and bulging.

He groans and shifts his hips quicker, pulling his cock right out, his tip kissing my sex, then driving in with even more passion.

The bed whines beneath us as our pace gets quicker, and I struggle to believe I was ever scared of this, ever worried about my man.

His groans get even deeper when I start to moan with more urgency. The feeling is nothing like his finger, his tongue, nothing like over the phone when we were texting.

It's like he's fucking the future into me. With each thrust, I feel the life we both want getting closer, and it feels hotter.

So much more purposeful.

It's like my core is adding to the pleasure, setting fire to the lust, pouring gasoline all over the desire.

He rears back, giving me a better view of his tatted chest muscles and his stomach as he stares down at my breasts.

"The way they bounce for me," he growls. "Oh, damn... your pussy's so hot."

"Your cock is on fire," I moan.

*You sound stupid,* a voice hisses. *Nobody says that.*

"You're burning me up, baby," I go on, ignoring the voice, ignoring the self-doubt.

I *refuse* to live like that anymore.

"Yes, yes," I cry.

"So tight," he moans. "I can feel your horny virgin slit getting close."

"Not. A. Virgin. Anymore."

Each word is an effort as I struggle to push past the flaring heat in my pussy. It's like the helm of his huge cock is sending solar flares of pleasure through my body, each of them hotter than the last, spreading throughout me and making everything tingle, sparkle, and burn.

He makes the hottest growling noise as he stares at my breasts. My hands move up on instinct, wanting to please my man.

When I start massaging my breasts and pushing them together, the bed squeaks even more, my man's hips going into overdrive as he pounds his cock faster and harder and with more possession.

"Yes, yes, yes," I moan, hardly aware of anything anymore except the feeling between my legs.

The heat gets even more intense, and our movements become more frantic.

We're chasing an eruption.

Reaching up, I take his face in my hands, then drag my fingernails through the silver of his hair. He's getting closer too.

I can hear it, *feel* it in his thrusts, both of us rushing toward an explosion that will change everything.

With a possessive snarl, he arches his back, pushes all the way inside of me, pushes deep until he's buried to the hilt, and his intense eyes roar at me to finish.

"Cream all over... my dick," he grunts, pushing the words past his tangled lust.

I moan as his words trigger a release in me, the solar flares all clashing into one spot and burning like the flames will never go out, or the heat will never stop blazing inside of me.

I disappear into the orgasm, consumed by it, my whole body shaking as pleasure like I never dreamed existed riots through me.

The pleasure comes from feeling his seed spilling into me as if I can sense the life surging into me.

But it also comes from the way he snarls, telling me he's never felt anything like this. So even if *he's* not a virgin, this pleasure is new for him, this connection, and it just makes it so much more special.



I throw my arms around him as he collapses atop me, his groans tinging with release as he pushes deeper as if he wants no space between us.

“Forever,” he pants in my ear, as our bodies start to slow, the orgasmic kisses of pleasure getting further and further apart, but the tremors not stopping, still plucking at me with euphoria. “Forever, *forever*.”

“Me and you,” I whisper, running my hands up and down his solid back. “Just us, forever.”

Finally, he rolls aside, gently pulling me into his arms and cradling me.

I lay my cheek against his chest, listening to his pounding heartbeat, marking this moment, so I’ll remember it forever, the smell of his sex-scented body, the firm feel of him, the sound of his breathing, and the pleasure still pulsing between my legs.

I’ll always remember giving myself to this man.

*My man.*

I’m never looking back.

## CHAPTER 26



*K*illian

“When’s the final session?” Andrea asks, sipping on a cup of coffee as she strokes Speeder on the top of the head.

Speeder sits next to her on the armchair, his head tilts toward her touch. I don’t answer right away, instead taking a moment to appreciate how well Andrea’s doing.

It’s only been two weeks since mine and Mia’s first time, two weeks since Andrea started intensive daily therapy, and already she’s improving.

She’s started to do what Mia always says....

“I want to take steps *toward* what freaks me out, not *away* from it.”

“This afternoon,” I tell Andrea. “I just wanted to double-check.”

Andrea looks around the living room, then down at Speeder. I get the sense that she’s not taking in my apartment but rather the security I’m able to offer her and her daughter. Of course, Mia and I have talked about getting Andrea her own place, and we will, but only once she’s ready.

I could live in a house full of people as long as I had my woman to hold at night.

“You don’t have to double-check anything,” Andrea says after a pause. “You already have my blessing.”

My soul soars.

After saying goodbye to Speeder, I head to the office.

*Are we still on for later?* Mia texts me.

She's working from a café this morning. It was a big deal for her, but she did it, rushing out the door like she was scared she was going to turn back.

Pride whelmed in me as I watched her go.

*Yes*, I reply, as uncharacteristic nerves touch me. *I wouldn't miss it.*

---

I take care with the tattoo, even more so than my usual clients.

Partly because it's so distracting to tattoo my woman, struggling to keep my instincts at bay when she's lying flat on my table, on her back, her legs exposed as I tenderly apply the needle.

Most of the piece is done now, the silhouette of her father standing at the door with darkness and depression behind him... and a whole new world, brightness, color, and love through the door.

The future that my woman is bravely walking toward each and every day.

And I'll always be here to guide, support, and protect her.

"I thought it would be more painful than this," she murmurs.

"Remember what I said?" I smirk as I gently brush her skin.  
"You're tougher than you think, butterfly."

I can sense her smiling without looking up at her. If I look up into her eyes, I'll stand, then lean down, press my lips against hers and kiss her hard, possessively, until the lust takes over like it does every time.

Ever since our first time, we lose ourselves constantly, the captivation and the closeness making it impossible not to sink

into fresh lust, always driven by our desire to create a family.

But also the sheer physical release of *us*.

“It’s done,” I tell her a minute later.

She gasps, sitting up.

I stand and take a step back, hoping she can’t read the nerves attempting to throttle the moment.

“I wanted to wait,” I say. “Until the tattoo was done.”

She looks up, her eyes watering already like she knows what’s coming.

But even if that’s the case, it doesn’t stop the doubt from twisting through me. No matter what any man says, this is a huge moment, bigger than any fight, any high-profile client, or anything I’ve ever done.

“It’s in honor of your Dad. May he rest in peace,” I say, reaching down and softly cradling my woman’s face.

She raises her hand and lays it atop mine, pushing down so I can feel her shakiness. Her eyes are wide, beautiful, and full of wonder.

“But I also think it represents us,” I go on. “In both our pasts, there was darkness. There was uncertainty. I thought it was going to be that way for me forever. I never dreamed I’d find the woman I want, the woman I need... the woman I love.”

She gasps, and I lean down, kissing her as she sits up even more, meeting me in the middle. We kiss long and deep, our tongues finding each other, our lust rising as it always does.

But then I break it off... with an effort, maybe the biggest of my life.

I want nothing more than to keep kissing her.

But this is important.

“Don’t sound so surprised. Mia, I love you, and you’re the brightness through the door. You’re the brightness in the future. You and our children and our life. I love you more than anything.”

“I love you too,” she says, her voice shaking, eyes glistening as tears form and cling to her eyelashes. “So much.”

“Now that the tattoo’s done... I think it’s time we walked through the door together.”

I kneel down, reaching into my pocket at the same time.

Mia swivels, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, the tears streaming now.

“I never thought a few texts would lead to this,” I say, taking the ring box from my pocket. “I never thought they *could*, but you’ve changed me. You make me a better man. You take away the darkness. You tattoo *light* onto my soul every single day. And I don’t care if that sounds cheesy....”

“The cheesier, the better, remember?” she says through a sob.

I smile widely as my eyes sting like *I* might cry too.

“Mia Nelson,” I say, opening the ring box to display a diamond as elegant, full, and gorgeous as my woman. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she cries, her voice bubbling with joy.

I slide the ring onto her finger, then leap to my feet and pull her into my arms. She throws herself at me, and then I spin her around, both of us laughing as we try to kiss, but our excitement won’t let us.

“I love you so much,” she says when I finally put her down. “I’m so happy you said it. I’ve wanted to say it since... honestly, Killian. Since our first *text*.”

My smile somehow gets wider as I lean down, getting closer and closer to my woman’s lips. “Me too, Mia. I wanted the proposal to be extra special.”

“It was. It is,” she speaks breathlessly. “It’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Walking through that door with you.”

“And it’s just the beginning,” I whisper.

# EPILOGUE



## ONE MONTH LATER

M<sup>ia</sup>

“Good boy.”

I smile as I walk down the corridor to Mom’s apartment, past the bright and airy artwork on the walls, the colorful rugs, and everything just generally bright and hopeful, the sort of place I never could’ve imagined her living in – *alone* – before I met Killian.

I expect to find her in the living room, but instead, Speeder is in the room alone, grinning as he upturns one of the doggie puzzles and collects a treat. Mom’s voice comes from the camera in the corner, which she uses when she’s taking care of Speeder.

“Oh, hey, Mia,” she says, her voice filling the airy room. “I’m just at the store. I won’t be long.”

I grin. The idea of Mom going to the store on her own is still new to me, but this intensive therapy – so expensive we never could’ve dreamed of affording it – is working miracles.

“Okay, no worries,” I say, sitting on the couch. “I’ll wait. Hey, Speeder.”

I sit with Speeder, knowing he can probably sense the nerves in me.

***I’ve got some news for you later***, I text Killian, though teasing him at work probably isn’t fair.

But the news is bubbling up inside of me, which is why I came here.

It's like it wants to shatter me and break free.

*What sort of news?* Killian texts back right away.

I bite down, wondering how much I can reveal.

*Because if it's news that has anything to do with a certain small, crying, wonderful bundle of love... I want to know. Now.*

My whole body starts beating in time with my heart.

*I can't tell you over text.*

*Mia, I can't leave here for two hours. My next client will be here in two minutes. But I won't be able to focus if I don't know. I get what people say about not doing big things over text... breaking up, getting together, proposing, fine. I get it. But we fell in love through text, at least partially. I think if anybody can make an exception, it's us.*

*Are you sure?* I reply. *You won't be pissed I made the moment less special?*

*Texting is special to us. I don't care what anybody says or thinks.*

I smile, stand, and pace, causing Speeder to follow me with his tilted head.

*I'm so happy you said that because I'm not sure I could've held this in all day.*

*Held what in?* Killian replies.

I take the pregnancy test from my pocket, lay it on the table, then laugh and give Speeder a nudge when he tries to sniff it.

"Nuh-uh, boy, that's not for you."

After taking a photo, I send it to Killian.

*That's positive, isn't it?*

Yes, I reply. *I'm pregnant. We're going to have a baby!!!!!!!!*



***Oh my God!!!! I didn't know it was possible to feel this happy. I didn't know it was possible to be this focused and determined... to make our child's life as great as it can possibly be. I want to come to you right now, but this client booked months ago...***

I smile, admiring how much my man cares about his work and his clients.

***Come to me,*** he goes on. ***If you've got the time? I've got fifteen minutes after this client. I need to hold you tightly and tell you you've made me the happiest man alive.***

***Okay,*** I reply. ***I'll be there after you're done with this client. And for the record, I so respect how much you care about your work. I love you, Killian, so much.***

***I love you too. See you soon. PS. You're going to be the best mom,*** he texts back immediately. ***Hey! Don't I get a PS too?***

I can almost see him smiling in my head. ***Sure....***

As I type the words, my lips spread, my cheeks aching from grinning so hard. ***PS. You're going to be the best dad.***

# EXTENDED EPILOGUE



## ONE YEAR LATER

*K*illian

“Smile for Mommy,” I say, beaming at Lillian as I take another photo.

She lies in her crib, eyes wide, making the cutest baby noises as she reaches up for me. Mia’s at her new office, handling a big editing project for her new client, so I’m keeping her supplied with photos of our little bundle.

After sending the photo, I place my phone aside and let Lillian hold onto my finger.

She squeezes it with her entire hand, not knowing that my heart almost shatters every time she does that.

Her grip gets even tighter.

With my free hand, I wipe at my eyes, thinking of all the joy this past year has brought.

Emil’s lifelong conviction, the home invasion only adding to the impressive pile of his crimes.

Andrea getting a job as an assistant to an artist, living in her own apartment, venturing out into the world... through the door, into the light, instead of being trapped in the dark.

Mine and Mia’s wedding, my woman walking toward me like an angel in her white dress.

The birth of our dear Lillian.

The thoughts rush through my mind as my daughter slowly falls asleep.

Afterwards, I check my phone, finding a few replies from Mia.

***I'm so jealous right now.***

***Give her a kiss from me.***

***I love you both.***

I walk quietly from the room down the corridor of our five-bedroom house, rooms we're going to fill up one by one.

Love and laughter and happiness....

That's the destiny of this home.

***We love and miss you too,*** I reply, sitting on the couch.

***Thanks for being there with her. I won't be long. It's just easier to think at the office.***

***When I said I wanted to be involved, I meant it... and anyway, sweet wife of mine, you're going to make me say something very arrogant if you carry on.***

***Oh, do it. You don't have to pretend with me.***

I chuckle, imagining Mia tossing her head as she says this, her sassiness becoming more and more undeniable as the days and months pass.

***We don't have to worry about money. Lillian doesn't, and neither will her children. There you are, happy?***

I laugh as I shoot the text off.

***I feel so secure when you say things like that,*** she replies.

***You are secure. Safe. Protected. Forever. Never forget that.***

# EXTENDED EPILOGUE



## TEN YEARS LATER

M<sup>ia</sup>

“Lillian and Daddy to the rescue!” Lillian laughs as she clings to her father’s back.

My smile couldn’t be more filled with love as I watch my husband running shirtless across the yard, still every bit as muscular and powerful as the first time I ever saw him, his silver hair glistening in the midday sun, wet from the pool.

Killian rushes over to Tommy and Trixie, our seven-year-old twins, who have fallen and had an ‘accident,’ everybody is participating in the game since it’s what our four-year-old birthday girl, Lena, demanded.

I sit with Alyssa in my arms, rocking her gently as the others play the game. Speeder is stretched out on the stones, basking in the sun, his hair turning gray as he ages, but his spirit is still the same, with the same smile and aura of love.

Lena marches up and down in front of her siblings, gesturing at the twins with her toy stethoscope.

“*Here* is the booboo. Daddy, can you fix the booboo? No, Daddy’s the horse. Lily....”

“You’re the boss,” Lillian says when Killian puts her down.

He looks over at me as Lillian starts to work on Tommy, patting him down and then tickling him under the armpit. Then, he erupts into laughter, making Killian and I laugh too.

My husband holds my gaze as the kids play, looking at me with that nothing-else-exists face that he's aimed at me so many times, the love filling the air, engulfing us, the kids, Speeder, the whole house, the whole street....

So much love pouring from us all it's a shock it's not visible from space.

My gaze moves to the tattoo on my husband's shoulder.

The butterfly.

*"Every time you look at it," he told me after he got it almost nine years ago now, "remember the cocoon. Remember that you broke out of it. Remember what it feels like to fly."*

I told him I didn't need to remember.

I fly – with him, with our children – every single day.

## TOP READS

Looking for your next read?

Here are my top 10 reads:

[Inked by My Best Friend's Dad](#)

[Texting the CEO](#)

[The Accidental Text](#)

[Inked by the Mafia Man](#)

[My Sister's Man](#)

[Texting My Dad's Best Friend](#)

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[Inked For Life](#)

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Book 10: Pistol

Book 11: Policed

Book 12: Driven

Book 13: Lucky 13

Book 14: Lumberjacked

Book 15: Protector

Book 16: Carpenter

Book 17: Italian Stallion

Book 18: Gardener

Book 19: Budapest Billionaire's Virgin

Book 20: Billionaire's Babysitter

Book 21: Cocky CFO

Book 22: Fireman's Filthy 4th

Book 23: Mechanic

Book 24: SEAL's Secret

Book 25: Police, Pooch, and Smooch

Book 26: Fireman's Fake Fiancée

Book 27: Billionaire's Virgin Ballerina

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Book 30: Cowboy's Christmas Carol

Book 31: Police Officer's Princess

Book 32: Statham

Book 33: Bodyguard

Book 34: Greek God

Book 35: Billionaire Single Dad's Babysitter

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Book 38: Royal Romance  
Book 39: Doctor Mountain Man's Special Delivery.  
Book 40: Crocodile Dan D  
Book 41: Mountain Man's Secret Baby.  
Book 42: Doctor Bad Boy's Secret Baby.  
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Book 51: Possessive Professor  
Book 52: Firefighter's Babysitter  
Book 53: Soldier's Secret Baby.  
Book 54: Ward's Independence Day.  
Book 55: Doctor Next Door  
Book 56: Possessive Policeman  
Book 57: Coached by the MMA Fighter  
Book 58: Boss's Babysitter  
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Book 60: Rock Star's Baby.  
Book 61: Possessive Protector  
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Book 66: Possessive Prince  
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Book 73: Blue Collar Billionaire  
Book 74: Possessive K-9 Cop

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Book 315: Puppy Madness

## BRATVA BEAR SHIFTERS

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Book 2: Babysitter For Dad'd Russian Mafia Bear Friend

Book 3: Dad's Bratva Bear Friend

## LAIRDS & LADIES

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Book 2: Taken By The Highlander

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## RUSSIAN UNDERWORLD

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# IRISH WOLF SHIFTERS

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Book 3: Claimed By The Enemy

## INKED BY LOVE

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## TEXT ME YOU LOVE ME

Book 1: The Accidental Text

Book 2: Texting the CEO

Book 3: Texting My Dad's Best Friend

Book 4: Texting My Dad's Best Man

Book 5: Texting My Hot Tutor

Book 6: Texting Mr. Hollywood

Book 7: Texting the Tattooist



## COLLABORATIONS

- \*[Alpha's Arms \(Makes My Heart Race Book 7\)](#)
- \*[Winter Kisses: An Instalove Possessive Holiday Romance](#)
- \*[Her Ride \(Men of Valor MC\)](#)
- \*[Ringin' His Bells: A Filthy Dirty Christmas](#)

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