



The
WOMAN
with the
FLOWERS

a mafia romance

JESSICA GADZIALA

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The Woman with the Flowers

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Jessica Gadziala

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CHAPTER ONE

Cesare

It didn't matter how long I'd been back in the city, I still couldn't seem to get used to the casual informality of walking into the *capo-dei-capi's* brownstone without knocking.

"Hey Ant," I greeted, nodding my head to one of my younger cousins who was standing on the front stoop, a white bandage wrapped around his hand. "The fuck happened now?" I asked, nodding toward it.

I'd never met someone as prone to getting injured as Anthony Costa. It was almost a running fucking joke in the Family at this point.

Except it wasn't funny when the man had nearly been disemboweled, shot, and in a serious car accident.

To that, Ant raised his hand, snorting at his palm and shaking his head. "Nothing exciting this time. Burned my hand on my coffee."

“Gotta be more careful or Lorenzo is gonna have you rolled up in fucking bubble wrap,” I told him. “He in?” I asked, nodding toward the door.

“Yep. He’s waiting for you.”

I suspected as much since my old man told me he was looking for me. Then gave me a lecture about not having my phone charged at all times.

He’d chosen retirement a while back, before, even, the shift when Lorenzo took his father’s place as boss of all bosses. That didn’t mean, however, that he wasn’t full of advice. Both asked for and otherwise.

“You coming in?” I asked, reaching for the door.

“Nah. I’m waiting for Brio. He’s the bagman this week. But...” he said, waving a hand out.

“Lorenzo wants him to have a babysitter so he doesn’t end up doing snow angels in someone’s blood,” I finished for him.

Every Family had to have their resident psychopath.

Brio was ours.

“Yep,” Ant agreed, giving a nod goodbye as I moved inside.

I wouldn’t mind a brownstone eventually. Someplace with some room to spread out, maybe a little yard out back for some kids to play in, a nice kitchen to have home-cooked meals in.

I felt like I was playing catch-up trying to get back into the Family business since coming back from Maine where I’d been handling shit for years. So, yeah, I was a ways off from having the kind of money I’d need to drop on something that could easily cost anywhere from two to twenty million.

“There you are. Your old man called to say you were on your way,” Emilio said as I walked into the dining room, finding him shuffling through some paperwork for, I imagined, one of the legitimate businesses.

Emilio wasn't the same man he'd been back before I needed to hide my ass out in Maine after fucking the wife of a Lombardi Family capo.

Stupid?

Yeah.

Reckless?

Absolutely.

But, hey, it was a story to tell to the young bloods in twenty or thirty years when I was one of the old-timers.

Back before I'd left, Emilio had been a kind of light, carefree guy. Content to be the second-in-command to Lorenzo because he simply didn't want that kind of serious responsibility in his life.

Now, though, there was some kind of darkness in him, some void that he didn't seem to even try to fill anymore.

The only real thing that reminded me of the old Emilio was the bold belt buckle he had on—a silver cassette tape with *Sinatra's Greatest Hits* written on it.

“Yeah, I got myself a lecture about having my phone charged,” I said, waving it with its power bank attached and plugged in.

“They wouldn't be old-timers if they didn't give us shit and tell us what they think we should be doing, right?” he asked, shuffling his papers into a stack.

“Right,” I agreed. “Hey,ENZ,” I said as Lorenzo Costa himself came walking in.

It was a strange thing to go away and come back to the kid you used to sneak liquor and cigars suddenly running New York City's biggest crime organization.

“Cesare,” he said, clamping me on the shoulder as he passed. “Your old man lecture you?” he asked, shooting me a knowing smile.

“He would never miss the chance to do something like that,” I said, but my tone was light. My old man might be a

pain in the ass sometimes, but he was a good man who only had my best interest at heart. Even if the fucker clearly needed to pick up a hobby so he could mind his own business for a change. Sculpture. Coin collecting. Fucking bird watching. Something. “Is everything alright?” I asked, not accustomed to being tracked down and called in.

To that, Lorenzo sighed a bit as he sat down, rolling his neck.

“Maybe? Maybe not. Hard to say.”

“Okay. What’s up?”

“Maine,” he said, giving me a nod and a look I immediately understood.

It was a look that said he was shipping my ass back north.

“What’s wrong with Maine?” I asked, realizing it had been months since I’d really even given the place a second thought. I’d been too focused on my future to reminisce about my past. Besides, the Maine operation was small-time. It didn’t really even require much oversight.

“The books,” Lorenzo said, holding up the stack of papers he’d been looking over. “They’re not... lining up with what we expect from the area.”

“Something wrong with the kick-up?” I asked, stiffening, pissed that the man I’d worked with when I’d been there was not giving the boss his cut.

“From what we can tell, no,” Emilio said. “Something is wrong with the actual intake numbers. At least, that’s what it seems like. We can’t be sure. We don’t have anyone we trust completely up there to see for sure.”

“So, you’re sending me back,” I said, careful to keep any disappointment out of my tone.

I mean, Maine was nice enough.

In the on-season.

When the weather was nice and the little town we operated in was alive again.

But in the shittiest part of winter?

Internally, I let out a little sigh, reminding myself it wasn't for forever. It likely wouldn't even be for long. I just had to suss out what the fuck was going on with the money. That was all. A week. Two, tops.

"I know you're probably not happy about it," Lorenzo said, shrugging a shoulder. "But you know the area and that operation best. I'd rather it be you than anyone else who would take twice as long to figure out half as much."

"I get it. I won't say I'm looking forward to all that fucking snow again, but I don't mind."

"If you wanna be a dick, drag one of those brothers of yours up there with you," Emilio said, shooting me a smirk, knowing that my brothers and I had always had that sibling love-hate shit going on.

"Oh, you know me. I always want to be a dick to them," I said, smirking. "But I'm gonna drag Gavino's grumpy ass up there with me," I decided.

He'd cock-blocked me the week before.

I felt he'd earned a trip up to a dead, snow-drenched town for a few weeks to think about his actions.

"Oh, that's gonna be a fucking nightmare," Lorenzo said, smiling.

"For him," I agreed. "I'm gonna enjoy the fuck out of his misery," I decided, suddenly not resenting the job much. Or at all, really. "You want me to leave soon?" I asked.

"Well, judging by the forecast," Emilio said, wincing, "you're probably going to want to get on the road tonight."

Even better. Gav wouldn't get a chance to weasel out of the job.

"What's the forecast?" I asked, though, thinking of my car and its small, sports car tires. The kind that would fishtail me all over the road in just a dusting. And would have me wrapped around a tree in anything deeper.

“Twelve to eighteen,” Emilio told me. “Tomorrow night.”

“Alright,” I said, thinking of the SUV I kept parked at the house in Maine, knowing it would need a jump and an oil change, but would get me where I needed to go even on bad roads. “I’ll let you know when I get there,” I told them, saying my goodbyes, then making my way toward Gav’s apartment.

He was still trying to find his place in the Family since he’d gotten made. Which meant he didn’t live in the best of areas, or have the nicest of places to hang up his hat.

“Why are you here?” Gav asked as he pulled open the door to his eight-hundred square foot apartment, all white walls and the kind of furniture he had to have picked out at some big box store. Black, too streamlined. Completely devoid of any character or sense of style.

As for Gav himself, the family resemblance was strong with all of us. Tall, fit, strong jaw, stern brow, dark hair. The only real differences between us was the fact that I was inked up where he wasn’t and he had dark blue eyes, courtesy of our dead mom, where I had dark brown, almost black ones.

“We got a job,” I told him as I moved inside, already making my way to his coffee pot. It wasn’t the longest drive in the world—just under ten hours if traffic congestion was low—but it was already late, and we’d be driving all night. I was going to need some caffeine.

“What kind of job?” he asked, eyeing me as I moved around his kitchen like I owned the joint.

“The kind that means you need to pack a bag. Got any long underwear?” I asked, shooting him a smirk over my shoulder as I waited for realization to dawn on him.

“The fuck? Maine?” he asked, shoulders slumping a bit. “Why? Why me, more specifically,” he asked.

“Emilio suggested I bring one of you,” I said, shrugging.

“This is about that fucking redhead, isn’t it?” he asked, shaking his head at me.

“Pretty much.”

“She was the fucking niece of the boss of the Irish fucking mob, Cesare.”

What can I say?

I had a type.

Off-limits.

Off-limits was my type.

“And maybe I would have made the right decision, but telling her I had a micro-dick was out of fucking line, you asshole.”

“Yeah, well, that part was just for fun,” he admitted, letting out a chuckle. “How long do we have to be gone?”

“I’m hoping a week, two tops,” I told him. “But when I say to pack warm, I mean it. It will be a solid ten to fifteen degrees colder. And we are trying to beat out a bad snowstorm, so we have to leave tonight,” I told him, pouring my coffee, tossing some sugar in it, stirring, then making my way to the door. “So be at my place in an hour, packed and ready to go.”

With that, I headed back out, dragging out my luggage, and stuffing all my winter outerwear into it, along with my usual suits since there was an image to protect when it came to the Family.

Sure, there was that awful period where it was all oversized bowling shirts that looked good on nobody, but this new generation, we brought back the suits.

Five minutes shy of an hour later, there was a buzz from Gav, making me double-check my apartment before heading down.

“That’s your winter jacket?” I asked, noting his plain black peacoat. Appropriate for wearing over a suit? Sure. To defend you against twenty-something-degree weather? Not so much.

I had a similar outer style, a double-breasted black coat with three rows of two decorative buttons, but it was lined. And it had a hood.

I was almost feeling bad about dragging his clueless ass with me.

Almost.

But not enough to tell him never mind, that he could head home, that I didn't need any help.

Technically, I didn't.

But I wasn't letting him off the hook anyway.

"What?" I asked when Gav let out a grumble for the second time in the past hour after glancing over at the dashboard.

"The temperature has dropped twelve degrees in an hour."

"Yeah, welcome to Maine, man."

I didn't think it was the time to inform him that when I'd double-checked the forecast to make sure we would arrive ahead of the storm, I'd found that two days after the storm, they were predicting unseasonable cold. Shit like minus twenty kind of cold.

And there he would be.

In his fucking peacoat.

"We're only twenty minutes away now," I told him, seeing the sky starting to split with the beginnings of morning.

Then, three degrees lower again, we were pulling up the driveway.

I'd spent a long-ass time in that house, hiding out to keep from the Families getting into a war over my reckless actions. Still, I had no real feelings toward it as it came into view.

It was a simple, traditional white cape with a deep green front door that, in the warmer months, made it seem like it blended in with the overgrown snowball bushes that grew along the front, and the massive tree that hung over the home, providing shade.

There was a white picket fence, cobblestone path, and a balcony off the primary bedroom that let you look out over the

sea.

In the winter, with some snow already on the ground, brown from the plows I'd called ahead to make sure the driveway was cleared, it looked a little bleak and sad, sitting alone without a single light on.

When I'd left, I'd made sure that there was a timer on for two lights, but the lightbulbs must have blown out, and the lady I had in twice a month to clean and check things out must not have noticed.

"Nicer than your apartment," Gav concluded as he looked at the building.

I would bristle at him if he wasn't right.

My apartment was nicer than his, but it was no penthouse.

And, objectively, I'd only put a small amount of effort into making it homey since my plan wasn't to be there longer than another year or two.

"Don't get too excited. You're sleeping on a twin-sized bed," I told him with a smirk before climbing out of the car, avoiding most of his ranting as I went to fetch the bags from the trunk.

By the time we made it to the front door, the snow was starting to fall, fat and lazy, around us.

It wasn't long, though, before it was practically a white-out.

And, for some reason I didn't exactly understand, it almost seemed, I don't know... eerie. Like something was coming. I just didn't know what.

CHAPTER TWO

Mere

“Go make me a sandwich, bitch,” I heard a male voice say as I pushed the door open to my apartment, finding my roommate—and cousin—sitting in front of the massive TV in the living room, her controller in her hand.

“Why don’t you eat my dick, you walking shitstain?” she shot back to a chorus of *Ooohs* from the men she was playing some shooting game with.

“Jesus, Vega,” I hissed, pushing the door closed and shaking my head at her.

“Sorry,” she said, grimacing. “My headset is charging in my room, and my legs are numb and, even if they weren’t, I’m too lazy to go get them,” she told me before her game character blasted the hell out of several enemies. “Alright. I’m off,” she said, then ended the game to turn to look at me.

There was absolutely no family resemblance between us.

And why would there be, when we were just cousins?

Vega was tall and thin with shoulder-length coppery-red hair around an angular, but gorgeous face, all big green eyes and full lips. When she was dressed for work, she went a little heavier on the eye makeup and sported a red lip. At home, though, unwinding with her video games, she was fresh-faced and softer-looking, even if her tone was anything but.

When she was made up for work, she was always fully covered, too, keeping her tattoos concealed. At home, despite the frigid weather outside, she was sitting around in a pair of men's red and white boxers and a black bralette, putting her chest, arm, and underbust tattoos on display.

"How was work?" she asked, unfolding her long legs and trying to shake some blood back into them. "I'll help you with all that in one second," she said, waving toward the canvas bags I was carrying.

She knew better than to offer to help with the flowers.

That was my specialty, after all.

I'd noticed the ones on the kitchen island were looking a little sad, so I'd spent the day collecting flowers that ended up on the floor, or ones that were less than perfect, and saving them to make my own bouquet for home.

Vega, well, she had four dead houseplants in her room.

She wasn't touching my flowers.

"It was good. Kind of busy. Ahead of the storm, I guess," I told her as I went into the kitchen, popping the bags up on the counter.

I liked our apartment.

I'd worked really, really hard on it over the years since Vega invited me to move in, shocking me when I'd arrived to find she had nothing in it but a gaming chair, a TV, and a bed in her room. Despite having lived there for almost two years at that point.

I wasn't exactly raking in money as a florist, so I'd been good at finding roadside rubbish that could be restored, or

finding some truly lovely and timeless pieces at antique shops.

I'd even painted the kitchen cabinets (horrible, faux wood ones that had a fake yellowish wood grain in it to a simple, crisp white) and replaced the countertops (the pink-toned fake Corian for genuine white Corian that had a slight golden-brown pattern in it). But I'd only been able to do it after Vega threatened the ever-loving hell out of the landlord, saying she worked for a lawyer who would sue him for all the safety violations around the building if I wasn't allowed to do some updates around the apartment.

I was not a confrontational person, so having someone like Vega around was a godsend to me. Someone to stand up for me when I couldn't or wouldn't stand up for myself.

I mean, she told strangers on the internet to "eat her dick," so, yeah, she was willing to make all sorts of veiled—or outright—threats in person as well.

"Did it start yet?" she asked, glancing over to the window, but the sheers made it hard to see outside.

"No. Is your office closing tomorrow?"

"Well, you know Hank. Always willing to close the place for any reason whatsoever."

Hank was one of two lawyers in Balm Port. Why she chose to work for the old, lazy one who hardly ever actually took any cases to court was beyond me. But she was fond of the man and claimed she'd somehow learned a lot from him.

"I'm guessing you're not as lucky," Vega said, reaching into the bags to start putting away the food.

I'd gotten a little extra groceries than usual, knowing that if the roads were bad, I wouldn't want to risk another trip to the store to get more.

In general, I didn't like having a ton of food around, preferring to go to the shops every couple of days. But sometimes you had to make concessions when Mother Nature was putting on a show.

"No. You know Dennis," I said, shrugging.

I didn't mind going to work.

I knew I was probably a weirdo for it, but I actually felt like the world fell off of my shoulders when I walked in that door in the morning. It was like all my troubles fell away when I walked in to see all the happy, bright flowers all around.

Then, for the next eight to ten hours, I got to be a part of making everyone's days... better.

Even if the occasion itself was something sad—a mistake needing mending, the passing of a loved one, or flowers for the ailing—my place was to try to make things better. In any small way.

I liked that.

It gave me a sense of purpose.

It wasn't until I locked up for the day that old stressors started to nag at me.

“I could have a talk with him,” Vega offered. “A little reminder about how he would be responsible if you were seriously injured leaving or coming to work when the state has declared an emergency...”

“No, really,” I said, shaking my head. “I don't mind work, you know that.”

“I know,” she agreed, and I wasn't imagining the way her tone went down just an octave, going a bit sad. I just pretended to ignore it. “I'm just worried about you on the roads, is all.”

“That's why I spent weeks researching which SUV to buy when I moved here,” I reminded her. “To make sure I was safe on the snowy roads. And I did put the winter tires on in November,” I added.

I was nothing if not fastidious about the small details of things.

I wasn't sure Vega's car had ever seen an oil change or tune-up until I took it and got it done for a small birthday surprise the year before.

“But you’re going to call me when you get there and when you are leaving for home regardless,” she said, standing there holding a half gallon of each, oat milk—for her—and almond milk—for me.

“Always,” I agreed, nodding.

We were good at that.

Checking in with each other.

It didn’t matter that we lived in a really safe area. So safe, in fact, that I hadn’t even locked the door when I’d come in, something that made me immediately stop putting berries in a bowl to clean with some baking soda and water and go to the door to slide the locks. We were two women on our own, after all, so we always called, texted, checked in. Vega, when I was going to or leaving work or even running errands. Me, when Vega was on a date with some random guy she found on an app.

“What are you planning to do all day tomorrow if you’re off?” I asked.

She waved toward the TV before folding the canvas bags back up. “Game. Eat. Sleep. Be lazy. You know me,” she said with a wink.

Vega liked to think of herself as a rampant underachiever. And she was, in some ways. But she was also the most fiercely capable woman I’d ever met. You know... when she wanted to be. Which wasn’t very often, but when the mood struck, it was something to behold.

“Go on,” she said, swatting my hands away when I tried to take over the berry soaking again. “Go get changed. Take your bath. I will finish this.”

I wanted to object.

It wasn’t something I really had control over, that compulsive need to do it myself, to make sure it was done right.

So I had to remind myself that Vega could handle it.

“Thanks,” I said, giving her a smile and trying not to think about how she had to let the fruit soak for the right amount of time for the pesticides, herbicides, dirt, and possible bugs to be truly cleaned off, and how if she didn’t, we’d be consuming all of that, and what that might mean for our health in the future, and...

In for five, hold for four, out for six.

My little breathing reminder, the thing that helped keep my anxieties at bay.

In for five, hold for four, out for six.

After I did it five times, I could feel the anxiety slipping away, could hear some quiet in my mind once again.

The fruit would be fine.

And I really did want my bath.

It was just one of many little routines I had. Ones that Vega knew about. And hardly ever mentioned, even if I knew she thought they were over the top.

Vega was someone who could brush her teeth, dry shampoo her hair, get dressed, and head out the door five minutes before she was due at work, figuring she could always shower when she got home.

I couldn’t imagine being that carefree.

And, in turn, she couldn’t imagine being as anal as I was.

But she was kind enough never to mention it.

The rest of the night was full of my little routines.

Bathe, wash my hair, clean the tub, have a light dinner, wash dishes, wipe down the counters. Then read a little while before my bedtime routines. Wash my face, put on serums, brush teeth, wipe down the sink and counters. Set out my clothes for the next day. Double-check my alarm, the coffee pot, the locks on the doors, the robot vacuum that would start doing his job the second Vega and I both went to our rooms for the night. Then, finally, climb into bed.

Where my thoughts would start to spiral.

Mostly with things I needed to do the next day.

Like strip the bed. It was on day three on those sheets, blankets, and duvet cover. I'd have to toss them in before breakfast, then put them in the dryer before I left for work.

The idea of sleeping on four-day-old bedding made my skin feel itchy.

But, I reminded myself, it was much better than needing to strip, wash, dry, and make the bed every single day, like I used to have to do when I first moved in.

Baby steps.

When I got up in the morning, Vega was passed out on the living room couch with her arm thrown over her eyes, a show still playing on the TV, and a big half-eaten bowl of popcorn on the coffee table.

As much as I wanted to, I knew better than to clean up the popcorn. She would wake up and eat handfuls of it for breakfast. No matter how stale it was.

I did cover her in a blanket before going through my morning routine—eating, cleaning, then dressing in the simple green linen skirt with the buttons all the way up and the chunky winter white sweater. I added some leggings for some extra warmth, then pulled my hair up into a ponytail, leaving a few tendrils around my face.

I did minimum makeup, as I always did, spritzed on my favorite, light perfume, a mix of vanilla and rose that smelled feminine and soft, then started to bundle myself up to brave the cold.

As much as I did like work, I had to admit to myself that when I walked out of the front door of the apartment building and saw the mounds so high that they dwarfed me, I was having second thoughts about going to the store.

But, having no choice, I warmed up my car while giving myself a pep talk about how this was Maine, and the road crews were used to snow, that they knew how to handle it.

Still, my knuckles were white and my heart was slamming in my chest as I drove as slowly as possible but still moving forward.

Main Street in Balm Harbor was possibly the most idyllic town I had ever seen. The home and shop owners were all in agreement that they wanted to keep the town quaint and historic, while having that coastal charm that drew in droves of tourists in the spring and summer seasons.

I'd been charmed from the first moment I'd driven into town, seeing the bright, primary-colored storefronts with their nostalgic awnings, hand-painted signs, and carefully arranged displays in their front windows.

The streets were lined with actual gas lanterns and the sidewalks were classic red penny bricks.

In the summer, flowers would be spilling out of pots in front of businesses, from window boxes, and even in hangers from the black gas lamps.

It was still charming under over a foot of snow.

Though not many businesses were choosing to be open during such a bad storm, deciding instead to take it as a sign from the universe to stay in their cozy beds or in front of the fire with their significant others.

Rain, shine, or crazy snowstorm, though, La Flora never closed its doors. Dennis claimed that humans needed basic necessities. Food, water, medicine, and access to flowers.

Which was interesting because since I'd started working at La Flora about a year before, I had only seen Dennis twice. And once was when he was hiring me.

For someone so devoted to the flower business, he was oddly hands-off about it.

I wasn't complaining, though, because with him being hands-off, I got to be hands-on.

Which was the only thing that had me parking my car at the top of the hill, not wanting to risk it on the slope that led

down to the shop, and trudging in knee-deep snow down the unshoveled sidewalks of all the closed businesses.

By the time I made it to La Flora, everything below my waist and my entire face was completely numb.

The front windows were bare of arrangements, since a little trick of the florist trade was that flowers lasted longer when they sit in the fridge at night, so everything was in the back in the coolers.

I fumbled with frigid fingers for my key to the door, glancing up at my reflection in the glass.

Pink cheeks with pale skin, my medium-brown hair neatly pulled back, which made my light green eyes pop even more. Nothing spectacular, but pretty enough. And very put-together. Which was important to me.

The door chimes let out a soft little melody as I swung it open, quick to close it so the wind gusts didn't blow any messy snow inside the pristine shop.

La Flora wasn't a huge store, but it was roomy enough with white walls that allowed the flowers to be the stars of the show.

Metal and off-white porcelain buckets sat empty all around, ready for fresh water and flowers. Assorted houseplants sat in their planters along shelves on the walls. We sold a big display of houseplants as well, something that made up a nice chunk of the daily business. To the far wall was a set up of gifts as well. Small plushies to go with the flowers. Some jewelry. Locally made candles and body scrubs and lotions.

Taking a slow, deep breath, I felt my shoulders relax as I moved through the shop to hang up my coat, scarf, and damp gloves before cranking up the heat for a moment, at least until I got a pot of tea going to warm me up from the inside out.

There was nothing that could be done about my wet skirt. All I could do was pray that it dried without too many wrinkles.

So I set to work for the next forty minutes before I could finally flip the sign to open.

Then I went behind the antique wood counter, sitting down, and sipping my tea as I chose one of my carefully curated playlists, sighing a bit as the sounds started to fill the store.

Bliss.

Pure bliss.

I was still settling into that sensation when I heard the delicate jingle of the door opening, making my gaze move in that direction.

I was already getting off the stool before my gaze landed on the customer.

And I damn near fell flat on my face.

Because... wow.

I mean, it wasn't like attractive men were hard to come by in Balm Harbour. Especially in the on season when hundreds and thousands of tourists came from all over the world.

But there was just... something about this particular man.

First of all, he was in a full suit. All black. Which matched the tattoos I could see snaking across his neck, his hands, and chest. He even had a couple of tiny ones near his ear on his cheek.

But other than that, he was just insanely handsome. Dark hair, dark eyes, a sharp jaw, and a stern brow. Great bone structure.

It was more than all of that, though.

The man just had a certain... aura about him.

I couldn't exactly explain it.

There was so much confidence, but not in that in-your-face, cocky, intolerable way. It was a quiet sort of confidence. The kind that came from somewhere deep and unshakable.

The kind I hadn't ever experienced.

He seemed completely out of place in Balm Harbour, yet I found myself suddenly hoping he was thinking about moving in.

“Good morning!” I greeted, inwardly wincing at how overly enthusiastic my tone sounded. “Are you just browsing, or would you like some help?” I asked.

His head turned in my direction, almost seeming surprised to find me there, if the way his brows pinched was anything to go by.

That seemed weird. Of course there would be someone manning the shop if it was open.

His dark gaze moved over me, and I wasn't sure I had ever been quite so self-conscious as I was right then.

“You'd think if your boss was going to make you work, he'd at least have had the sidewalks cleared for you,” he said, making me realize he was talking about my still-wet skirt.

“Oh, Dennis is, uhm, not here ,” I said.

“That's unfortunate,” the man said, sighing a bit. “Since I am here to see him.”

“Oh, no. Was he expecting you?” I asked, glancing toward the back, wondering if he had possibly slipped in without me noticing. His office was back there, right alongside the unusually massive back room.

I remember being shocked when I first started working there to find that the back room was larger than the entire storefront itself. Especially considering that most of the arrangements were done in the front of the building. Sure, there were a lot of refrigerators back there, but there were a bunch of tables for seemingly no reason.

“Probably not,” the man admitted, looking around.

“Did you need something?” I asked, knowing my tone sounded just a little bit too hopeful, but I found I didn't want him to just turn around and walk away.

“The store looks nice,” he said instead of answering. “Different from the last time I was here.”

It would be.

I'd slowly but surely made changes since I'd started. Not to trash my boss, but the place had been unorganized and stifling when I'd first been hired. There had been none of the charm of the rest of the stores on Main Street.

And I'd just made some small adjustments at first, a part of me terrified that Dennis would drop in, get angry, and fire me. But I almost never saw the man, so I got more and more comfortable rearranging things. I even repainted without permission, but with my own money.

When Dennis finally did show up one day, he had looked around with pinched brows, almost like he sensed that something was different, but he couldn't place what. Meanwhile, it was *all* different. He'd never mentioned anything, though, so I was still working on little improvements to the shop.

"Thank you," I said, feeling a genuine smile tug at my lips. I was proud of the place. It never ceased to make a warm feeling spread through me when someone noticed all my hard work.

"Are you the new store manager?" he asked.

"I, ah, I work here. We really don't have managers, per se. I work here most days, and then Rayna works here the other two days."

Damn.

I wasn't supposed to offer up the information about us working alone, was I? Vega would sigh at me for being that careless.

I guess I'd just never felt unsafe in Balm Harbour. There was little to no crime. And the businesses were so close together that were I to do so, someone would hear me scream.

But not, I reminded myself, on days when every other shop was closed due to the weather.

That information had his head turning away, and I'd like to say I didn't study his handsome profile, but I totally did.

“Do you know when Dennis is typically in?” he asked, his arm lifting to touch the petal of a white rose that had just begun to open, making the sleeve of his suit slip up, revealing a watch that I just knew cost more than I made in half a year. Maybe more. I mean, I knew nothing about watches. But everything about this man spoke of wealth and material comfort.

“Oh, uhm,” I said, trying to find a way to break the news that didn’t sound bad. I didn’t want it getting back to Dennis that I was implying he didn’t really care about his business.

To that, the man’s lips curved up into a wicked little smirk as his chin dipped a bit.

“He’s not here much, is he?” he guessed.

“Well, we take good care of the shop,” I told him, sidestepping giving him the full confirmation he was seeking.

“I can see that,” he said, looking around once again. “Have you heard from him recently?” he asked.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t heard from him in quite a while. It wasn’t that he contacted me often to begin with, but there was sometimes a note in the back room or an email or something.

As a whole, though, I was mostly in charge of everything around the shop. I didn’t feel the need to reach out to him. And because things ran well, he didn’t have a need to contact me.

“How long?” the man asked, face going a little dark as he looked at me, clearly seeing right through me.

I felt an odd little tingle at the base of my spine, something that had me stepping to the side, going back behind the counter. Closer to the phone. Putting some sort of protection between us.

Because while the man was godlike in gorgeousness, something told me there was something dark and dangerous beneath all those good looks.

“I’m sorry, what’s your name?” I asked, reaching for a pad and pen as if I was going to make a note. In a ‘I will tell my

boss you were looking for him' kind of way, not the actual 'In case I go missing and my body turns up in a ditch' way that I was actually doing it.

His gaze moved down over me, and if he knew what I was thinking, he didn't let on.

"Cesare," he said, making my head pop up, surprised. You didn't meet a lot of men named Cesare. Or, at least, I hadn't. "Costa," he added. "If you hear from him, let him know I was trying to reach him," he said, once again reaching out toward that white rose, then turning and making his way out of the store.

I waited a solid five minutes, my heart slowing down from a hammering to a slower, but no less erratic beat, before I moved out from behind the counter, walking up the center of the store, and glancing outside to find him sliding into a black SUV, then driving off.

Don't ask me why, but I plucked that white rose out of the bucket as I passed, putting it aside to go home with me later as I wondered about the handsome, darkly dangerous stranger, and what he wanted with my middle-aged, slacker boss.

Something told me, though, that a man like Cesare Costa wasn't in Balm Harbour to discuss the flower business...

CHAPTER THREE

Cesare

I woke up to just shy of the predicted eighteen inches of snow on the ground.

Even though I wasn't exactly keen on the shit, I had to admit that it was nice to look at as I stood at the kitchen window, looking out at the sea of perfect white, almost blinding in its brightness, twinkling a bit under the bright sunshine.

I'd already called ahead before I'd gone to bed to make sure someone would be by to clear the driveway and street, so I didn't have to drag my ass out there to do much, save for making a quick trail down to the garage.

I was half tempted to make Gav do it, but judging by the way he'd been tossing and turning and cussing my ass out all morning as he tried to get comfortable on the tiny bed in the guest room, I figured it wasn't wise to push him too much.

“Morning,” I said to Gav as he walked in, hair mussed, eyes puffy and heavy-lidded, wearing black pajama pants and a white tee.

“I’m going to make you pay for this, you know that, right?” he asked, shooting me a death stare as he made a beeline for the coffee machine.

In his defense, he was over six feet and sleeping on a bed just barely six feet long. And with a metal frame that made it impossible for his feet to hang over the end.

“I’m sure you will,” I agreed, checking my phone, wondering why the hell Dennis hadn’t gotten back to me. I mean, it was early. And he wasn’t exactly the most reliable guy. But still. I rarely ever reached out. So when I did, I expected a timely response.

I was hoping to avoid having to head into town until the township really got a chance to clear shit up. But after getting a look at the numbers Emilio was talking about, I was starting to get impatient for figuring out what the fuck was going on.

I’d left a well-oiled machine when I’d gone back to New York.

What the fuck could have gone so wrong?

The only person who could have answers was Dennis.

And if he wasn’t answering, I was going to need to track his ass down.

“So what the fuck am I supposed to do now that we’re here?” Gav asked, taking his coffee to the table, cradling it in his hands, but not taking a sip.

“Really, I didn’t think much past... make you suffer,” I admitted with a smirk. “So... whatever you want, really. Unless we run into some issue with the business that needs to be dealt with, there’s not much to do.”

“How the fuck did you not go stir crazy up here?” he asked, looking around. “It’s so quiet.”

I’d honestly vacillated between finding the quiet peaceful and completely intolerable depending on the day and my

mood. We'd been born and raised in the city. Our lullabies were car horns and cop and ambulance sirens.

"It's worse in winter," I admitted. "The spring and summer is busy. Lots of shit to do or see around here. Out of town women to spend some time with."

Looking back, I really wasn't sure how I'd gotten through so much time without my family and friends, without a sense of community like I had in the city.

I'd thrown myself into the import business, wanting at least to make myself useful while I was avoiding getting my ass killed for fucking the wrong woman. And, in doing so, I'd nearly tripled the revenue the port was bringing in and getting sent back to New York.

It was pissing me off that the numbers were down slightly below what they'd been before I'd even arrived.

Who was fucking up that much?

Or, worse yet, who was taking from us?

If the latter, I was glad I'd dragged my brother along, just fucking with him aside. I might need an extra set of hands. It was always good to have backup. Especially this far away from the rest of the organization.

"Think maybe fucking with women should be lower on your to-do list."

"Not all of us can be monks like you, Gav," I said, ignoring his grumbling as I walked through to the front of the house.

It was no secret that, when it came to manwhoring, Gav had just never been interested. Though, he was also not a relationship guy. So we all figured he just spent a lot of time with his own hand.

Taking the last sip of my coffee, I set it on the coffee table, then climbed into my boots and jacket, deciding to get a jumpstart on the path before I took a shower and hit the road.

An hour later, and still no word from Dennis, I drove the SUV down the abandoned, but thankfully plowed, Main

Street, parking a bit down from the florist that, surprisingly, was actually fucking open. Even in this weather.

Maybe that had been why Dennis hadn't answered. He'd been busy opening up the shop.

But as I trudged through the eighteen inches of snow out front of the shop, I became a little doubtful.

Still, I moved into the store, finding it nothing like I had left it the last time I was in Balm Harbour. Gone was the old, mediocre dark beige paint that cracked in the corners and was peeling by the baseboards. In its place was a pristine white that really allowed the abundant buckets full of flowers to pop. There was a gift station that had never been there before, and a section for houseplants that probably helped to bridge the gap in times when flower arrangements weren't very popular.

It looked like a different store.

And the person who greeted me was damn sure not Dennis, either.

Oh, no.

As eager as I was to get in touch with Dennis, I had to admit that the woman standing in his place was a fuck of an improvement.

Nothing against Dennis. I was sure there were people out there who were into middle-aged dudes with patchy attempts at a beard and a man bun that only seemed to accentuate the fact that his hairline was receding.

But, yeah, this woman was a fucking knockout.

Average height with soft curves under her flowing green skirt and white sweater. Her long brown hair was pulled up in a ponytail and secured with a dainty green ribbon that perfectly matched her skirt. When she moved her head and her hair caught the light, you could make out little flashes of red mixed in with all the brown and golden highlights. Her light green eyes were a dominant feature on her pretty face—round, doeish, lined with thick lashes.

There were tiny diamond studs in her ears and some sort of golden chain of a necklace hidden mostly by her shirt.

She seemed very put together.

Which was maybe an odd thing to notice. Especially since many women in the city looked like they'd just strutted off a runway or out of a fashion magazine. But, I don't know, it was just something different, I guess. From the perfectly rounded nails that were all the same length and all neatly painted with a pale pink, to her shoes that didn't have a single scuff on them, and the way even the wisps of hair around her face seemed intentionally left there.

She seemed to really fit in the flower shop. Way more than Dennis ever had. And I wouldn't doubt that it was the same attention to detail that she'd put into her appearance that had transformed the store in the first place.

Though she wasn't a manager.

She just... worked there.

She just worked there, but hadn't seen her boss in what seemed like weeks. Maybe even more.

What the hell was going on around this place?

Maybe it had been reckless giving her my name. A quick internet search might give her more information than I wanted anyone in the town to know about me. Especially if some shit was going down that I would need to handle.

I tried to tell myself that I just wanted to make it clear to Dennis that, if he was avoiding me, it wasn't going to work. I would come for him at every angle I could.

But I thought it might be more than that. That I just, for some reason I didn't begin to understand, wanted her to have my name.

As I silently cursed myself for not catching hers.

Making my way back to my car, I shot off a text to Gav, asking him to get dressed so he could drag his ass down to Main Street and clear the sidewalk for the woman who really shouldn't have been working when no one was in town

shopping. The main roads were clear enough that my car would handle them just fine.

The same, though, could not be said for the neighborhoods. Like the one where Dennis called home.

The plows seemed to have entirely left them stranded, only piling up the snow even higher at the openings of the road in the name of clearing the busier streets.

Maybe I should have attempted it.

But I just didn't feel like dealing with getting my car stuck, then needing to get it towed out.

So I turned my car back toward town, figuring I could check on Dennis the following day if he still hadn't gotten in touch with me yet.

I drove down Main Street, noting that Gav, in his stupid-ass little peacoat, was red-faced and muttering to himself as he shoveled the sidewalk without gloves, as I made my way toward the town's only real grocery store. Sure, there were a couple of mom-and-pop markets, but they weren't the kind of places that carried everything, and the house was all but bare save for a few questionably old cans in the pantry and the coffee that had been just this side of stale.

We were clearly going to be in the area for a bit, so we needed some shit to be able to cook.

We were both passably good at the task, having been raised by a widowed father who, after the sympathy meals from the women of the family stopped coming quite so frequently, had needed to teach himself how to cook, and, in turn, taught us.

"Figure it's a life skill," he'd said, shrugging when we'd been little shits who complained about learning it when we thought maybe he should have only taught our sister. "Everyone needs to eat, not just girls."

It was there, in that grocery store I used to frequent weekly back when I'd been stuck in Balm Harbor for my sins, that I nearly plowed my cart into another one.

One being pushed by a tatted redhead wearing a midriff-bearing vintage style video game t-shirt with a pair of men's boxers and a set of knee high polka-dotted socks, exposing about two inches of skin between the boxers and socks.

She completed the ensemble with a pair of slippers and an absurdly over-the-top faux fur men's jacket that hung down almost to her knees and swallowed up her tall, thin frame.

"Got the day off?" I asked, smirking as she glanced over at me, shamelessly letting herself do a thorough once-over of me as she lifted a Twizzler to her lips and took a bite.

"Nice ink. The suit can go," she told me, shrugging.

"What's wrong with my suit?" I asked, more offended than I should have been. But the suit was expensive. And I prided myself on my appearance.

"Nothing. I'm just not a suit typa woman," she told me, shrugging. "Now here is where I might typically say something like... but maybe the suit wouldn't bother me if it was on my bedroom floor," she said.

"But?" I prompted, sensing the word hanging in the air.

"But I promised my cousin I am going to stop fucking guys with *Bad News* scrawled across their foreheads," she told me. "She has lost the battle with my eating habits," she said, gesturing toward her cart that was full of nothing but chips, candy, ice cream, and frozen shit like fries, onion rings, and mozzarella sticks. "So I have to let her have a win with this one. Besides," she added, giving me a devilish little smirk as she pushed her cart past me, "history tells me that the bad boy types who look like they know how to fuck end up making me play with my own Polly Pocket to get off."

And with that ridiculous statement, she was off with a sway of her faux lynx coat.

"Take heart, my dear," an older lady's voice said, making me turn to find a lady in the grocery store uniform pushing a cart full of go-backs toward me. "Something tells me she's not actually your type anyway."

She wasn't.

That was nothing against her. Clearly, she was gorgeous. And confident. And interesting.

But I tended to go for softer women.

Like the woman at the flower store.

Where the fuck did that come from?

I mean, yeah, sure, she was my type. Hell, she was practically the exact manifestation of my type of woman. But still. I probably passed half a dozen women already that day that were 'my type.' And hadn't given them a second thought.

Shaking my head, I pushed those thoughts away, trying to convince myself that the interest was purely because the woman was standing in the place of the man I was trying to locate.

I managed to mostly keep my mind on the task at hand as I filled up the cart, paid, packed the car, and headed back out of town.

My sports car was gone and the sidewalks were cleared, so I wasn't surprised to find him sitting on the couch in the living room when I made my way in, cradling a steaming cup of coffee in his hands as he sat there under no less than three blankets.

The look of murder he shot me right then let me know that it really wasn't the time to poke at him any more.

Sure, sometimes I didn't heed that warning. And it would sometimes mean we came to blows. Brotherly love and all that shit.

But I was going to show him some mercy.

"No luck?" he asked after I'd finished putting the groceries away. "Finding Dennis," he clarified.

"No," I said, not bothering to ask how he knew. Sometimes, when you were close enough with your family, they could just tell shit without having to ask.

"I didn't see him at the florist," Gav said, and I had this absurd rush of possessiveness at the idea of him looking at the

pretty woman inside that flower shop.

“No. He wasn’t there. Just a woman.”

“You never mentioned there being other employees there,” Gav said, pulling the container of pre-sliced fruit out of the fridge.

“Because there never used to be anyone working there. Dennis was the florist. I mean, he was a shitty fucking florist, but still. That was the situation when I left here. I expected that to continue. You know, since sensitive shit comes through that flower shop.”

“Did it seem like she was in the loop on that?”

I thought back to her sweet smile and her perfectly put together outfit and the way she’d moved behind the desk when I felt my own face darken.

“No. I think she was completely in the dark.”

“Hmm,” Gav said, cracking open the plastic container, and stabbing a piece of cantaloupe with his fork.

“Yeah. I couldn’t get down Dennis’s street. They’d plowed it in. I’m sure they’ll get to it sometime today, so I will try again tomorrow.”

Gav nodded, focusing on the fruit for a second, spearing a slice of watermelon, then looking up at me.

“Why do I get the feeling that this isn’t going to be as cut-and-dry as you thought when we were on our way up here?” he asked.

“Because I’m pretty sure it’s not,” I said, sighing at hearing it out loud.

But as the hours dragged on with no word from Dennis, even after a few missed calls, a voicemail, and another text or two, it was only becoming clearer and clearer that shit was more complicated than just someone dropping the ball or underachieving.

And what did my fucked up ass think about as I was falling to sleep?

That maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing if shit was going down if it meant that I got to see the pretty florist again.

I mean... what the fuck?

CHAPTER FOUR

Mere

“Did I tell you about the hot guy I ran into at the grocery store?” Vega asked after stumbling out of her bedroom covered in Cheeto dust with her hair pressed down across the crown of her head from her headphones.

“You didn’t,” I said, arranging a salad. Romaine, kale, spinach, Bibb lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber, onions, and carrots. There would be baked chicken to layer across it in exactly three minutes.

I was good at timing things like that. I knew exactly how long it took me to prepare each part of a meal, so everything would be done in unison. I knew it was anal. Vega was kind enough to call it quirky.

“So I was making my way down the aisle in a full-on don’t-give-a-fuck outfit. And I nearly plowed the guy over. As much as they’re not my thing, it would have been a shame to get that suit of his all dirty,” she said, reaching across the island to snag a cherry tomato, completely oblivious to the

way I'd stiffened. "Ugh. Tomatoes are garbage this time of year. I can't wait for the farmer's market to open up again. You okay?" Vega asked, looking up at me, brows drawing together. "You're paler than usual."

"Yeah, fine," I said, spinning around to grab the oven mitts and pull out the chicken. "So, did you, ah, set up a date?" I asked, not sure why my heart and throat felt a bit constricted when I asked.

I mean, I'd just spoken to the man.

And he'd even scared me a little.

I couldn't possibly be jealous that Vega had worked her usual charms on the handsome stranger.

Vega had always had a sort of carefree ease with the opposite sex that both scared and fascinated me. Scared, because I worried that she was sometimes reckless about it. But also fascinated me because I had no such comfort around men.

I mean, sure, I could be customer service charming to men who came in looking for a bouquet for their wives without knowing their favorite flower or even color.

And I could speak to men in the supermarket or around town.

But those interactions were always underlined with a bit of uncertainty and discomfort.

Hell, dating was such a nightmare for me that I typically just avoided it.

"Oh, you know me. I don't like the guys in suits. They take themselves too seriously. I like a more rough-around-the-edges sort of guy."

We had to be talking about the same guy, right?

How many handsome strangers in suits could be in Balm Harbour at one time?

But the guy I'd met could certainly be called rough around the edges, couldn't he? What with his tattoos and the dark look

in his eyes. And, well, I was pretty sure after replaying the interaction in my head all day since there hadn't been a single customer, that I'd caught sight of a ring in his tongue.

Straight-up-and-down men didn't have tongue piercings.

"His ink was so yummy, though," she said, making me turn, more certain than a moment before that it was the same guy, just seen through unique lenses worn by two wholly different women.

I don't know why I didn't mention meeting him as well.

My gaze slid toward the bouquet of flowers I'd brought home. Ones I was going to be putting on my nightstand, since the ones in the kitchen were still fresh.

That single white rose was the only flower devoid of vivid color, making it stand out amongst its peers.

Why I'd done that was a complete mystery.

It was just a weird day, that was all. Everything would go back to normal the next day.

At least, that was what I told myself.

"I even told him that I was trying to stop fucking bad guys. You'd be proud of me," Vega said as I started to slice the chicken to layer on top of the salads.

"I am," I said, nodding. But not because she wasn't chasing another bad news guy. Because I didn't want her chasing *that particular* bad news guy.

Did that make sense?

Not at all.

But it was how I felt.

I was going to go ahead and blame the fact that it had been more months than I cared to think about since I'd even had a date with a man, let alone anything else. And the way I was responding to a handsome stranger who seemed to ooze sexual confidence was completely understandable.

“So what’s your plan for tomorrow?” Vega asked as we moved to eat at the dining table—a small, round table meant only for two. Which was fine. It was only ever the two of us anyway. On the rare occasion that Vega brought a man home instead of going to his place, he never stayed to share a meal with us. Something I was grateful for. “You’ll be home alone,” she added, pouring on a creamy salad dressing over her bowl. “I have to go in. We got a bigger than usual case.”

I felt guilty feeling glad that I would have my day off in an empty apartment. I loved Vega. But I really wanted to do a deep clean of the whole apartment. Which was hard to do when Vega was around.

She wasn’t a slob, per se.

She just wasn’t as concerned with cleanliness and organization as I was.

“A big case will be good. It’s been a while,” I said. “And I think I am just going to do my weekly reset of the apartment,” I told her. Adding silently *Plus some extra deep cleaning*. “What?” I asked when I caught Vega giving me a look.

“You just work so hard, Mere,” she said, shrugging her shoulder, making the stretched out collar of her shirt slip off of her shoulder. “It would be nice to hear that you planned to go out and have some fun on your day off.”

I didn’t remind her that I got two days off a week. It would be pointless. Since I always spent the other day off running errands. Not exactly stuff that Vega would consider fun.

“I like cleaning,” I reminded her.

“I know you do,” she agreed, nodding at her salad. “You know what? We should go on a vacation when the weather breaks.”

“A vacation? Where?”

“I would say Vegas. You know... Sin City and all of that jazz. But that might be a tad too crazy for your taste. Maybe the city?”

“New York City?” I clarified.

“Yes. It’s the perfect mix for both of us. We can do all that culture shit you would like. Museums and Broadway shows. And then we can hit some bars, hit on some out of town strange. I’ll even spring for fancy hotel rooms. Come on. You know you want to.”

She actually did know I wanted to.

I didn’t have a big list of things I wanted to do with my life. But I did want to see a Broadway show and the museums. And I also wanted to see the tree at Christmas.

“And if we go in the late winter/ early spring, we don’t miss out on any of the fun spring shit we have going on around here that you love.”

She loved them too, whether she would admit it or not.

I’d never taken a vacation before. Unless a long weekend when I had been practically bed bound with the flu counted. And, well, it didn’t.

Somehow, as much as it made my skin feel a little itchy to think of disruptions in my routines, I found myself agreeing to the trip.

And, what’s more, being excited about it.

I knew Vega, too. She wasn’t going to let me back out of it once the thrill of the new idea faded away. She would be planning and plotting and reminding me that I’d agreed to it over the next few months.

So I went to bed trying to focus on thoughts of that trip.

Somehow, though, my gaze just kept going toward that damn white rose. And the tattooed hand that had reached out to stroke the petals.

I was about two-thirds done with the baseboards the next morning when my phone started to scream from its perch on the kitchen counter where I was charging it up.

No one called me.

My bills were automated.

I didn't have any friends.

I didn't have any family.

Save for Vega.

Who should have been at work.

A thousand catastrophes spun around in my head in the time it took me to get off the floor, pull off my gloves, and run across the apartment toward the phone.

Vega, with her car in a ditch.

Vega, falling off of her heels and breaking her ankle.

And those were some of the tamer ones.

But it wasn't Vega's number on my phone when I finally got to it. It was an unknown one.

Weird.

"Hello?" I answered, heart still hammering in my chest, worried it might be a first responder or someone at the police department, ready to deliver terrible news.

"Mere, this is Sandra," the voice on the other end of the phone said, sounding breathless and hurried. My mind flipped through my mental Rolodex of names, trying to place hers. "Rayna's sister," she clarified, and an image of a tall woman with short-cropped blonde hair and a flannel shirt flashed into my mind.

Right.

Sandra.

"Hey, Sandra. Is everything alright?" I asked, now that my own anxiety had ceased, I was acutely aware of hers.

“No. Really no,” she said, and my heart ached at the higher pitch her tone took on. Close to tears. I knew that sound. “Rayna is... I don’t know. She’s unconscious. Being rushed to the hospital. I have no idea what is going on. But she... she passed out at home this morning. She... she never made it to the shop. I tried to call Dennis, but he wasn’t answering.”

He never did these days, it seemed.

“God, Sandra, don’t worry about the shop!” I said, but I was already rushing across the apartment, going into my room, and finding an outfit.

Because while she needed to worry about her sister, I absolutely *did* need to worry about the shop.

Maybe one could argue that it was Dennis’s place. And, sure, that was probably true.

But the fact of the matter is, I knew I had two anniversary bouquets I had made yesterday, just waiting to be picked up by husbands whose wives may not believe that the florist was suddenly, suspiciously closed on their anniversary.

Then there was the bouquet for the lady who had just beat what she and her family had previously believed to be a terminal illness.

The “new baby” bouquets.

And one “I’m sorry I messed up” one from a sad, red-eyed young man who clearly wanted to try to make things right with his girl.

Those people needed their arrangements.

So I needed to hurry up and get to the shop.

“I’ve got this,” I assured Sandra. “Please, go be with Rayna. Keep me updated if or when you can.”

With that, I rushed through the fastest shower of my life, knowing there was no way I could go to the shop after spending the morning cleaning.

I tossed on a simple light blue dress, pulled my wet hair back into a bun, did the fastest application of makeup known

to mankind, then rushed through my apartment.

I eyed the cleaning products all strewn about and the bucket full of hot, soapy water that I'd been cleaning the baseboards with.

There was a familiar tension growing in me at having to leave them, but they would need to wait.

Maybe, if things were slow, I could rush home on a short lunch break to clean up.

I shot off a text to Vega explaining where I was so she didn't worry, and then made my way into town.

There was already a small crowd waiting at the door when I got there, rushing out full of apologies and explaining that there'd been an emergency.

I was so frazzled that I didn't even notice any sounds from the back as I unlocked the shop and moved inside, feeling none of that familiar stress relief sensation as I did so.

There was too much to do.

And not nearly enough time to do it.

I was still pulling off my coat as I went through to the back room where I stopped dead in my tracks, every hair on my body standing on end as I was not met with an empty room.

Quite the opposite.

It was full.

Of at least half a dozen men.

Unfamiliar men.

A strange, strangled sound escaped me, something that maybe would have been a scream if I hadn't been so shocked.

But whatever the sound was, it alerted the men to my presence, making several faces turn to me at once.

I wasn't a brave woman.

I knew I wasn't supposed to admit things like that. We all wanted to be strong and brave and capable.

But I'd always known how I handled scary or uncertain situations.

Freezing.

Or, sometimes, fleeing.

I wasn't a fighter.

I wouldn't pretend to be.

My body felt conflicted between the urge to flee, and to freeze, so all I did was go back half a step, my foot not even fully touching down as I did so.

"Who're you?" one of the men asked, his dark eyes focused on me.

"I... I work here," I choked out, trying to remind myself that I had a store full of people. People who would hear me scream. People who would probably at least try to come to my aid.

"Not on Tuesdays you don't," he countered.

And, well, he was right about that, wasn't he?

"I, ah, no. Not usually. But there was an... emergency," I said, barely recognizing my own tight voice.

To that, he gave me a nod, then just... ignored me as he went back to work.

Work.

The word seemed to finally penetrate through my surprise and fear, letting me finally see the whole picture.

The men weren't just standing around, waiting to attack me. Or actively trying to rob the place or anything like that.

They were working.

Because Tuesday was a shipment day. It's when we got flowers. Tuesday and Thursday. My days off. Which was why this had been such a shock to me. Because I'd never seen it before.

But, clearly, these men were unpacking boxes of flowers that were brought in from... well, I wasn't sure where.

I didn't handle that sort of thing. I did place the orders, but just in the system, adding or taking out things that were selling a lot or not at all. Changing it seasonally to suit changing tastes and needs. But I just put in the numbers. What happened from there was beyond me.

"Oh, right," I said, nodding even though no one was looking at me.

Even knowing they were there for a job didn't seem to quell that spinning sensation in my stomach, nor the tightness in my chest.

But I had a job to do as well, so I powered past my fear, going into the refrigerator to grab the arrangements I knew people were already there to pick up, then bringing them out front to distribute.

"I'm so sorry about the delay," I told the other two customers who were there to look around. "The shop would usually be all set up before the doors open."

"Oh, honey, no rush. We have nowhere else to be," one of the older ladies assured me as I rushed around, trying to get fresh flowers in buckets and refill water and make everything at least halfway presentable.

I was working on autopilot then, not even having a chance for my own personal thoughts when there was so much work to be done.

I finished setting up, then spent over half an hour with the ladies, trying to figure out what would be the best flowers to have on their table when they finally came out to their respective families after having been "gal pals" for several decades.

It wasn't until they were gone, and two more orders picked up, and one more long conversation with someone who was looking for a houseplant that she couldn't kill that I finally got a moment of peace.

To calm my frazzled nerves.

To get everything in the shop in the proper order, the way I liked things.

And it was only then that some disconcerting thoughts started to creep in.

About the men in the back.

About how strange their presence had felt.

About how strangely silently they had worked.

Almost as if they didn't want anyone else to know they were there.

But no.

That didn't make any sense.

I was just being paranoid.

It wasn't an unusual thing for me.

I was just feeling off because the day was supposed to go one way, but ended up going a complete other.

And, well, a stupid, irrational part of me was still a little upset about the cleaning supplies I'd left out at home.

"Don't get up. It's just me," Vega's voice filled the quiet shop, making me realize I hadn't even put on one of my playlists. Really, where was my head today?

Before I could even turn to look at Vega, see why she was there, I had to put on a playlist, exhaling a bit when the soft sounds started to fill the quiet space.

"I figured you didn't get a chance to pack any food," Vega said, waving my usual insulated lunch bag at me.

"You stopped home to get me lunch?" I asked, so touched by that gesture that I actually felt a little emotional.

Vega was an interesting woman.

Someone who could forget to wash her clothes until she was out of underwear, whose car insurance was constantly sending her threatening letters because it had simply escaped her mind to pay it.

But she was really good at her job.

And she could remember small things for me.

Like bringing me my lunch.

“Oh, don’t get all sappy on me. It was really no big deal. You already had it prepped. I just tossed it in a bag,” she told me as she set it on the counter. “I also cleaned up the supplies you’d left out. I know that was probably bugging you.”

Of course she did.

Because Vega knew me better than anyone else in the world.

“You’re the best,” I said, giving her a warm smile. “Did you eat anything?” I asked, eyeing the cup of coffee in her hand. Probably her fourth—at least—of the day.

Knowing her, she’d paired that coffee with one of the following: a handful of pistachios that she kept in a container on her desk, some gummy snacks that she kept in her purse, or the sugar-free candies that were in the waiting room of the law offices where she worked.

“Hank’s order came with sweet potato fries instead of regular. You know how he is allergic to anything that even remotely resembles a healthier version of a food, even if said food is deep-fried and covered in salt. So I got to have them. How’s the day going?” she asked.

“Busy. I was so frazzled until just a few minutes ago,” I admitted.

“Have you heard anything about Rayna?”

“No. And I don’t want to pry.”

“What’s up with Dennis not answering his phone?”

“He never really answers anymore. I think he has kind of checked out of the place since he doesn’t actually work here anymore,” I said, shrugging as I opened my lunch bag.

I’d made an extra piece of chicken the night before to have for my lunch. Always planning ahead. I’d prepared it over a bed of spinach with dressing on the side. Then I had an apple and a few cubes of cheese.

Balanced.

Healthy.

I knew Vega would prefer if I occasionally loosened up and ate some junk food, but she knew I had my reasons, and she hardly ever pressed.

“Yeah, like I get that. But this is his business. And if something is going on with Rayna that is serious, you can’t be the one working here seven days a week.”

“I don’t mind,” I insisted. It wasn’t like I had some big, exciting life outside of work.

“I know you don’t. But that’s not the point. Do you want me to call him?”

“No.” The word rushed out of me. A little too fast, to be honest. But the thing was, while Vega generally worked as little as possible, she was actually really good at putting on a scary lawyer voice and making people pee their pants a little.

I didn’t want to risk my job.

“If Rayna is out, I give it two weeks before I reserve the right to speak to the man,” Vega said, and there was a firmness in her voice that said I had very little say in the matter.

“Let’s just hope that Rayna is okay,” I said instead of responding to that.

“Of course,” Vega agreed. “Okay. I have to head back. I’ll see you back at the apartment,” she said, making her way to the door. “What’s for dinner?” she asked, giving me a warm smile.

“Mushroom risotto,” I told her. “And I’m going to make strawberry shortcake for dessert,” I added.

“Ugh and now I have to wait hours and hours before I get that? Bummer,” she said, frowning, then shooting me a smile before heading out.

Once again leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Which went right back to the men in the back room and the uneasy feeling I’d experienced with them.

Taking a deep breath, I gathered some mail that had been piling up in the front and took it into the back, figuring I might just do a tiny bit of snooping around in Dennis's office.

I wasn't someone who snooped. As someone who valued their own privacy, I believed in respecting that of others as well.

But it was weird that no one had heard from Dennis. And I wanted to see if there was other contact information for him in the office.

And, possibly, the name of the company that delivered the flowers. Somehow, I was pretty sure I'd feel better about the whole thing if I could find a business card or simply an invoice, something that would lead me to a legitimate company that I could look up online.

I could probably let go of the tension coiled at the base of my spine if I could just... see that information for myself.

Really, it wasn't even that unrealistic of a desire. I mean, I was a woman working alone in the shop with these strange men, after all. Of course I would want to know that they were all on the up and up.

Confidence bolstered, my steps were a lot more sure as I made my way through the back.

I don't know why, but my gaze immediately went to the back door, finding the lock open when I was almost certain I had closed it after the men left.

But things were busy.

Perhaps I had just thought about it, but then didn't carry the task out.

Even if that wasn't like me.

There was no reason to think otherwise, though.

That is, of course, until I made my way to Dennis's office door, reached for the knob, pushed it open, and realized I wasn't alone.

And I wasn't crazy.

I *had* locked that door.

It was just that someone had *unlocked* it since then.

You know... the man rifling through Dennis's desk.

I knew that he hadn't just come in through the front, then slipped past me.

Maybe that would have been possible with someone else. Literally *anyone* else.

But not the hot, tattooed, suited man named Cesare Costa whose gaze slipped to mine.

"Shit," he hissed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cesare

“Heading out?” Gav asked as I came down the stairs, still slipping my cufflink in.

“Yeah,” I said. “I need to find this fucker and see what is going on here once and for all.”

“You want backup?”

“For one middle-aged guy whose soft hands have never thrown a punch in their life? Nah, I think I’m good. But hang by your phone just in case.”

“Any other menial fucking task you want to assign to me while you’re gone?” he asked, glowering at me, still with his panties in a bunch about the shoveling the day before.

“Well, since you offered...” I said, smirking as his face fell. “The SUV could use an oil change,” I said, shrugging. “Take it into town. See the sights a little. Maybe it will help that pissy-ass mood you’re in.”

“This pissy-ass mood is just my personality,” Gav shot back, but I was already walking out the door.

When I got to Dennis’s road, I found that the plows had come through, removing the giant mound that had blocked the road, and doing exactly one half-assed small line down the center of the side street, leaving everything else high and the center icy.

I should have taken the SUV.

Especially because no one had bothered to snow blow or shovel out Dennis’s driveway.

His car wasn’t buried under a sea of snow in the drive. But that wasn’t that unusual. A lot of people parked in their garage. Especially before a big storm, leaving one easy path to clear for your snow blower or the neighborhood kid or some landscaping company you paid to come in with a plow.

I’d come up with some inventive fucking names to call Dennis by the time I made it up to the front door, laying on the bell, and listening to it let out its loud, melodic jingle.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

“The fuck?” I hissed, taking a step back to look at the house.

If anyone thought that his place was a little nice for a florist, they didn’t say anything.

It was a somewhat simple, but large, white colonial with black shutters and a bright red door with a black knocker. Which I went ahead and pounded the door with for a while before moving away.

While it looked like some of the houses had plowed themselves out to get back to their lives, there were still several snowy driveways. Which meant some people were still home. Still possibly looking out their windows. Where they didn’t need to witness my breaking into Dennis’s place.

So I followed my steps back, saving my pants from getting any wetter, and went around to the side of the garage, finding a door there, and making short work of getting the lock undone.

I couldn't say I needed to pick locks all that often anymore. But it was a skill I'd taken pretty fucking seriously when I'd been a teenager, and it was one that was hard to forget.

I moved inside quickly, wanting to get out of view of any nosy neighbors, so I didn't notice the car until it was right in front of me.

Black.

Sleek.

Again, too expensive for your average florist, but people either didn't notice, or figured Dennis had a solid investment portfolio.

"Shit," I hissed as I looked at it. Parked. Not snowy. Not salty. Clean. Like it hadn't been driven in a while.

Was Dennis dead somewhere in the house? Heart attack? Stroke? Slipped in the shower and whacked his head too hard?

I hadn't considered that possibility before. I guess I figured that someone would have noticed if the man was MIA for a while.

But Dennis was a reclusive guy. No wife. No girlfriend. No kids. From what I could tell, no family in the area.

The shop seemed to be functioning on autopilot, and the girl there said that Dennis was never around much anyway, so they wouldn't have noticed anything being off either.

As for the neighbors, well, I guess that depended on what kind of relationship he had with them.

Dennis wasn't the friendliest guy. He was reclusive by nature, and had this ugly habit of glazing over and not paying attention when other people were talking.

I could see how the neighbors wouldn't give a shit enough to pay attention to his comings and goings.

Taking a deep breath, I moved to the door that would lead into the house, bracing myself for the pungent smell of decaying flesh.

I got the lock open, then pushed the door open, but... nothing.

I'd been around quite a few dead bodies in my day. There was no way a corpse was in the house for more than a day and the whole place didn't make you want to vomit.

Oddly enough, though, that didn't seem to shake any of the tension that was growing in me, making my shoulders ache and my jaw crack when I opened my mouth to call out his name.

"Dennis! Where the fuck you at?" I called, moving in through the mud/laundry room off of the garage and into the kitchen.

It was then that I did catch an odor.

Not a dead body.

But the distinct scent of rotting garbage, ripe and tangy.

The kitchen wasn't much to write home about. Dennis wasn't an interior decorating sort of guy. He didn't seem to have an eye for what made something look nice. Which was why his flower shop had been such a train wreck when he'd been in charge of handling the day-to-day operations.

Clearly, it was not a calling for him.

The fact of the matter was, Dennis had inherited the shop from his uncle who had run it successfully for many decades before his death. With no kids of his own and a late spouse, he had left the business to his slacker of a nephew who had never been able to hold down a steady job, in the hopes that the responsibility would help make him grow up.

In a way, that had worked.

Dennis clearly thrived on not having a boss to answer to. Even if his arrangements were mediocre at best, just replicas of the same old bouquets you saw everywhere.

The store I'd walked into the day before was a major improvement. Hell, I'd say it rivaled all the florist shops in the flower district. Which was saying something.

The pretty woman who was running things now clearly had an eye for the pretty shit that Dennis did not.

He had old oak cabinets with most of the sheen worn off and speckled black countertops strewn with a mix of food wrappers and old mail.

The sink was full of dishes that seemed to be vying for a science fair win for how many different kinds of mold could grow in one space.

Part of the smell, I was sure.

The rest of it, though, was coming from the kitchen table.

Where Dennis had left what seemed to be a partially eaten dinner of steak, corn, and what was probably a baked potato under a moldy pile of sour cream.

There were two glasses with his plate. An old black coffee. And a glass of amber liquid.

"Fuck," I sighed, glancing around from the kitchen into the living room.

This wasn't looking good, was it?

Who got up and left in the middle of dinner?

Steak dinner?

And didn't return at least to toss it in the trash?

I knew it was pointless, but I made a round through the rest of the first floor, up to the second, checking in every bedroom, bathroom, and fucking closet, before making my way down to the eerie unfinished basement.

It seemed like the spider and mouse population was booming, evidenced by the thick webs and abundance of droppings, but Dennis was nowhere to be found.

Where the fuck was he?

“Yo,” Emilio answered as I got back out of the house and climbed into my car. “Gav sick of the snow yet?”

“With his personality, who’s to know?” I shot back, turning on the heat, making me realize that Dennis’s heat had been on. And his electric had been working too.

So he either hadn’t been gone long enough for the full cycle to turn around, or, well, he had his shit on autopay. Which wasn’t helpful.

“Fair enough. What’s going on? Figure out the problem yet?”

“To do that, I’d need to find Dennis,” I said, sighing.

“Dennis. The owner of the flower shop, right?”

“Right,” I agreed. “He didn’t answer calls or texts. I went to the shop, but the girl there said he is never around, so that was a dead end. But I just got out of his house. Car is there. Food is rotting on the kitchen table. Things are... not looking great.”

“Fuck. Alright. Do you want Lorenzo to send anyone else up there to help out?”

“Not until I figure out if that’s necessary,” I said. “I mean if it’s as simple as the guy’s car went off of a bridge somewhere, there’s no reason to interrupt everyone else’s life.”

“True. Okay. Keep us posted,” Emilio said.

“Will do,” I agreed, ending the call and driving out of the street before someone got suspicious and called the cops on me.

I wasn’t exactly sure what my next move should be.

If we were in New York, I’d have a lot of contacts I could talk to, try to get information out of.

But this was fucking Balm Harbour.

There wasn’t another crime syndicate for several counties.

I found my car heading toward Main Street, and I figured that the one thing I hadn’t done so far was snoop around in

Dennis's office. See if he was hiding some shit.

That would at least give me something to go on.

I picked the lock in the back, pausing inside the door, listening to soft, feminine voices in the front. Figuring the florist was busy with a customer, I rushed into Dennis's office, closing the door behind myself in case someone walked into the back.

Dennis's office was a mess. It always had been. New paperwork was mixed in with shit that was so old that the paper was yellowing. Old to-go coffee cups were sitting on some of the stacks and almost overflowing from the garbage.

Curious, I reached for one, trying to pry off the top, but it was stuck on. So it had been around for a while. Like the food on his table and the dishes in his sink at home.

The computer was powered down, but when I turned it on, it was password protected.

Which left me with... nothing.

A desk drawer full of chocolate bars and peanuts, some pens and sticky notes, and a yellow notebook.

I was considering grabbing a fresh piece of paper and rubbing a pencil over it to try to figure out what was last written on that page when I heard the door opening.

Then there she was.

The girl from the shop.

Just as pretty as before.

Prettier, even.

Her hair was pulled back into a somewhat severe bun, and closer inspection showed me that it was wet. Had she been in a rush that morning?

Why the fuck did I care?

She had on a simple light blue dress, but it managed to reveal a bit more than that sweater she'd had on the last time,

so I got to see the curves of her hips and the swells of her breasts.

The outfit also put that necklace she'd had on display as well, letting me make out a dainty little gold rose charm.

Her hand shot right to that charm, her fingers toying with it as her body stiffened as she looked at me.

“Shit,” I hissed, slowly straightening, not wanting to freak her out any more than she clearly was with her pretty, wide green eyes.

“What are you doing back here?” she hissed, frozen on the spot where most women would probably turn and run. Especially because it seemed like she was working alone.

She looked like someone who wanted to run, but she seemed planted in the spot.

Not out of bravery.

Out of fear.

Fight, flight, freeze.

Clearly, this woman was the latter of the three.

Which, somehow, made me feel worse than I would have if she'd run and screamed.

I held up my arms, hands out, making slow movements, not wanting to make the situation worse.

“It's alright. I'm just still looking for Dennis,” I told her.

To that, one of her brows quirked up slightly. Dubious? Sarcastic? I didn't know her well enough to decipher.

“He's not here,” she said.

“I noticed. He also wasn't at his house, but his car was there. I was looking to see if there was anything here to help point me in a direction to locate him.”

“Who are you?” she asked, folding her arms across herself, hugging her chest.

“Cesare,” I reminded her. “Costa,” I added.

“So you said. But who are you? Why do you want to find Dennis?”

How the fuck could I explain myself without it being clear I’m involved in sketchy shit?

“I’m an... investor. In the business,” I told her. And that was true enough. So true, in fact, that she couldn’t find a false note in my words, and it seemed as though she was looking for one.

“An investor?” she asked, her brows drawing together. “Dennis never mentioned an investor.”

“No, but he’s not exactly a hands-on sort of boss, is he?” I asked, working off the information she’d already given me.

“No,” she admitted.

“What’s your name, sweetheart?” I asked, relaxing my posture, hoping she would mirror it.

Her body jolted a bit at the pet name, and her tongue darted out slightly to wet her lips before she spoke.

And I absolutely did not think about that tongue tracing over the head of my cock. Because that would have been insane.

“Mere,” she said, giving me a little nod after she said it.

“Mere,” I repeated. “Short for...”

“Meredith. But no one calls me that,” she insisted, tone a bit firm. Almost like she was telling *me* not to call her that either.

“Mere, when’s the last time you saw Dennis?”

“To be perfectly honest, I think I’ve only seen Dennis two or three times... ever,” she said. “I don’t know if he is here more often on my days off. Like today.”

“Today is your day off?” I asked.

If the schedule was still the same, today would have been a shipment day, too. Had Dennis set that up on purpose? So this

girl, who clearly had no idea what was going on around here, didn't get suspicious and start asking questions?

"Yes."

"Then..." I said, waving a hand out.

"Right. Well, Rayna, the lady who usually works today, was in some sort of... emergency situation."

"Emergency situation," I repeated, mind starting to work.

Had Rayna been in on what was going on at the flower shop? Had she stuck her nose in the business? Did she know what had happened to Dennis? Had she been covering for his absence, so no one got suspicious?

But if all that was true, what had happened to her.

"Her sister didn't give me any more detail than that. She just wanted to make sure someone was at the store. So, here I am."

"That's unfortunate," I said, feigning concern for the woman. "I hope she is alright."

"Me too. Especially since Dennis has been unreachable."

"Is it only the two of you working here?"

"Yes. Wait... no," she said, something dark crossing her eyes.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Well, it is just Rayna and I who work as florists here. But there are men here who... bring in shipments. I never knew about them until today," she admitted.

Completely in the dark then.

Though, if the dark look that crossed her face was anything to go by, it seemed like she did find the presence of those men suspicious.

Or maybe I was reading too much into things. Perhaps she just had been startled by their presence. And, being a pretty, young, kind of delicate woman all alone in the shop, had been uncomfortable with their presence.

But she did confirm another thing.

This Rayna woman was who I clearly needed to speak to next. Assuming she lived through whatever medical emergency she had going on.

“I’ll follow you out,” I said when the telltale chime of the door made her jolt.

Better to just follow her lead and seem concerned and unthreatening. The last thing I needed was for her to get the cops or something involved in this business.

They wouldn’t have to snoop too long to find some sketchy shit.

And, sure, the Balm Harbour police were more adept at handling a random drunk and disorderly or out of control house party in the on-season, I couldn’t count on them being completely inept.

“Okay,” Mere said, clearly still a little uncertain, but she turned and rushed back through the back room and into the shop.

I followed a little less quickly, stopping to make myself a coffee since, despite it being just after noon, it had been a long-ass day already.

When I made my way into the store, I found a small group of women perusing the flowers. All of whom looked up when they saw me standing there, their curious gazes taking me in.

All except for one woman.

Maudine Mellers, a familiar face to any Balm Harbour resident, whether you were there year-round or not. Whether you had stepped foot in the town in years... or not.

“Well, well well,” she said, a smile tugging at her lips that were painted in an almost purple shade of pink, something that made her light skin look even paler.

Maudine had what I could only refer to as a “timeless older lady” look to her. She could be sixty or eighty. There was no way to tell. But she loved her hairspray, making her blonde

hair stand up at unreasonable heights, depending on the style she was going for that day, and her bright colors.

Like right then she was wearing a pink and purple swirled silk blouse and a pair of pants that were somehow the exact same shade of purple. Giant whale earrings dangled from her ears.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” she finished, her gaze moving over me. “If you aren’t a sight for sore eyes,” she added, grin going a little mischievous. “I tell you, if I was thirty years younger...”

“Then, ma’am, you would be, what? Ten?”

“Oh, this one,” she said, waving a hand toward me. “Always with the charm. I married three men with that same charm,” she declared to her friends. Who were probably not her friends at all, but tourists who she’d latched onto and immediately started to smother with her enthusiasm.

“Divorced them too,” she added with a knowing smirk. Like she could tell just how many women I’d taken to dinner—and bed—over the time I’d been away from the town. “Lazy and stupid, Mere,” Maudine said, looking over at Mere who was looking between the two of us with confusion. “Lazy and stupid is who you want to marry. Extra points if they’re bald, like your cooking, and would rather spend time by themselves fishing than hitting the bars. Those are the ones who will stay loyal.”

“I feel like I should argue,” I said. “You know... for my kind.”

“But you know I’m right,” Maudine said, snorting a little. “Are you visiting for long? It’s been sad to see that lovely house of yours sitting empty.”

“I will probably be here a few weeks. Brought my brother with me this time,” I said, waving out the window toward where Gav was scowling at a candy store across the street. “Don’t worry. I got all the charm. He got all the grumpiness,” I said, watching as Maudine looked him over in the same way she’d looked at me. “But I should go catch up with him,” I

added, walking over toward the desk where Mere was still looking at me with her brows pinched in confusion. “If you hear from Dennis, shoot me a text,” I said, jotting down my number, then leaving my cup of coffee there, and making my way out of the front.

Don’t ask me why, but I’d turned back, looking through the doors, watching Mere for a moment as she picked up my glass with both hands, just cradling it in her palms, as she nodded at something Maudine was saying.

“Who are you looking at?” Gav asked, coming in at my side.

“No one,” I said. Then, rushed to add, “Maudine.”

“Right,” Gav said, following my gaze into the store, landing right on Mere.

And if there was anyone who would know exactly what your tastes were in women, it was your cock-blocking brother.

“Maudine,” he said, giving me an eye roll. “The last thing you need is to fuck the sweet-looking florist,” he reminded me, turning and walking away.

Oh, I might not have *needed* to.

But that familiar ache I was feeling was telling me that I damn sure *wanted* to.

Still, yeah, I wasn’t a complete fucking idiot. I knew that I couldn’t.

Why then did fate have to keep fucking putting her in my path?

CHAPTER SIX

Mere

“Okay. What’s his name?” Vega asked two mornings later, snapping me out of my swirling thoughts. Admittedly, about a particular *him*.

You know, the *him* that I caught in Dennis’s office. The *him* that I, apparently, sort of worked for. The *him* that Maudine was clearly very fond of and knew at least somewhat well from when he lived in Balm Harbour for a few years.

Broke every heart in town when he decided to leave, I tell you. Mine included.

She’d said that last past wistfully, making me think she actually meant it. Not that I thought she was trying to get with him, per se. But because she enjoyed the fantasy of it.

I couldn’t blame her.

Clearly, I was having all sorts of fantasies about the man as well.

Really, it was a little out of hand, to be honest. That cup that he'd drank out of and left on the desk? I'd left it there all day. I never did that. I took my own cup to the back to wash it out, dry, and put it away as soon as I was done.

But I'd left his cup there.

Like some kind of weird shrine.

It wasn't until I was cleaning up for the day that I finally washed it out. Thinking thoughts I had no business thinking about a man who was, in a way, a boss to me.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, Mere. This is me you're talking to here," she said, shooting me a wicked little smirk as she pulled on a blouse over her bra. A pearl-pink silk shirt that I knew she resented having to put on. She had it paired with black slacks that flared a bit toward her heeled boots. And there was a black suit jacket hung over the chair where her purse was set.

"See, I distinctly remember this look on your face when you were, what? Seventeen? I was home from college, so that about tracks. And you had this *thing* for the guy who worked at the coffee shop with you."

Ugh.

That was the one flaw about living with someone who knew you so well. They knew all your little tells.

"Then, sure enough, a few weeks later, you were banging him after closing up one night."

Oh, yes.

Bryan.

With a y.

He'd been... sweet enough. I mean, I'd practically thrown myself at him. And he'd been easy with me, making my first time a not altogether horrible experience.

We'd even hooked up another time or two before he was let go, and I never heard from him again.

Not that I expected to. Since, according to our boss, I was the reason he was fired. Not because I'd told on him for something or anything like that, but because I was such an overachiever that I unintentionally made him look like he wasn't doing enough.

"So, who is he?"

"I'm not seeing anyone," I insisted. That part was true at least.

"You should know better than trying to get past me with little technicalities. You're not dating anyone. Duh. But you're clearly thinking about someone."

"There was an attractive guy in the shop the other day. That's all," I told her.

And it was the truth. For the most part.

"Tourist?" she asked. "It had to have been a tourist. I mean, there are hot locals, but you'd have seen them all by now."

That was true.

It wasn't exactly a large town.

It had been teetering under nine-thousand residents for as long as I had been around.

A lot of people, sure, but after a while, everyone was familiar enough.

"It sucks when the hot guys are only in town for a weekend, right? I mean, it works for me, but I know you're not the random hook-up type."

I wasn't any type at the moment.

It wasn't that I wasn't interested.

I liked men.

Working at La Flora really did show me some of the best sides of men. The ones coming in for birthdays, anniversaries, or just a random Monday to put a smile on their lady's face.

The ones who knew their woman's favorite flower and color and which ones she was allergic to.

Love was in the details.

And some men really paid attention to them.

I couldn't help but wonder if Cesare Costa was one of those men.

Or if he was the type to forget birthdays and anniversaries. If he even got serious enough about a woman to reach those little relationship milestones.

"Well, I'm sorry your Polly Pocket won't have anyone to play with it," Vega said, making a groaning snort escape me at her wording. "What? You looked like you were attempting to imitate a beet when I called it a *pussy* last time," she reasoned.

That was true.

I wasn't a prude. I mean, maybe by some standards, I was. I think it had been more surprising than anything when she'd said it. So calmly, so casually, like we all just referred to our bits as that.

Which, I was pretty sure, we didn't. At least, I didn't.

"We can call it the Queen Mother if you want," she said, grinning wickedly as she slid on her jacket and reached for her purse. "I really hope you find a hot guy who will get on his knees and worship your Queen Mother."

"That's worse. That's a lot worse," I said, letting out a laugh.

"I will have to keep trying," she declared, and it sounded like she meant it. I had a lot of other vaginal euphemisms in my future, I could already tell.

"You're working today again, right? Rayna's shift?"

"Yes," I said, nodding, trying to ignore the little wobble in my belly at the idea of the back room full of strange men.

If the shop had customers, I was sure I would be fine.

If it didn't, well, maybe I could busy myself with washing the outside windows. Slowly. Very, very slowly.

"Let's order in tonight," Vega suggested. "You've been working your butt off. You deserve some take-out. My treat."

I normally wouldn't take her up on the offer. I *liked* cooking. But she was right. I was kind of burning the candle at both ends. I could use a break.

"That sounds good," I said, giving her a grateful smile as I grabbed my lunch, and started to follow her to the door.

I hadn't heard much more from Sandra about Rayna. She was, as of the last update I got, in intensive care, but there were no details about her actual condition, why she was in it, or what the doctors were saying.

I got it.

I wasn't family. I wasn't even really a friend.

They didn't owe me more than that.

But it did mean that I was working all the shifts at the shop since no one had been able to get in contact with Dennis.

His absence was worrisome, sure. I mean, especially if his investors were trying to track him down.

Though, I guess, it was better that there was someone around who had a stake in the business.

I wouldn't pretend to understand how this sort of thing would go. If Cesare could make business decisions if the current owner was missing.

Would there need to be an investigation? A missing persons report?

My stomach felt wobbly at the idea.

But it wasn't something I could control, so I had to learn to accept it.

Kind of like the men who charged into the shop about half an hour after I got there.

Admittedly, I rushed around as fast as possible when I got there, trying to set up the front of the store so I didn't need to actually be in the back with them when they arrived.

So when I heard them shuffling around, I kept myself in the front with my cup of coffee and my phone in my free hand.

I felt better when I had a couple of customers, including a young guy who was really struggling to figure out what kind of arrangement to get his girlfriend for their first anniversary, so he was hemming and hawing the selections for almost a full hour.

After that, I went ahead with my plan to give the outside of the windows a thorough washing.

By the time I went back inside, the sounds from the back had died down, and I tentatively glanced in, finding everyone long gone.

I locked the back door, and was turning around to head back into the shop when something on the floor caught my eye.

Something brassy and long.

I knew what it was, even before I squatted down to get a closer look.

And there it was.

A single bullet.

A bullet.

In the back room at the flower shop.

I was the only person who'd been around. I mean, aside from Cesare. But I cleaned the shop before closing the night before. I would have swept the bullet up.

This meant that the only way it could have gotten there was from one of the guys.

I mean, objectively, I had no issue with people having personal firearms and the bullets for them. That said, this wasn't someone's home. This was a place of business.

And it was upsetting to think that one or more of the men who already made me uncomfortable were armed.

Not only armed, but careless enough about it that they were dropping bullets and not even realizing it.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed a paper towel, grabbed the bullet, and took it into Dennis's office, dropping it into the top drawer.

I had no reason to worry that they might return. No one was going to come looking for a single lost bullet. Even if they realized it was missing. But that didn't mean I wasn't paranoid the rest of the day.

So much so that I rushed through my tasks to wrap up for the day, and made my way outside, not breathing a sigh of relief until I got into my car with the doors locked.

I was excited to get home, to share some takeaway with Vega and try to forget about the day, knowing that there would be no strange men with bullets in the back room the next day.

The problem was, I only got about halfway home before my car just... suddenly stopped working.

"What the hell..." I said, brows furrowing as I hit the brake to stop the car's forward momentum.

I had my car in the shop, at minimum, twice a year. I made sure all the levels were checked, topped off, and all the belts, filters, and all the other, you know, parts were inspected. And I never let the tank go below half.

What the heck could be wrong?

"Damn it," I hissed, slamming my head back on the rest.

It would be okay.

I could get a tow.

Vega could drop me off and pick me up from work.

Still, I could feel anxiety starting to curl up my spine, unfurling across my chest, making it feel constricted.

Changes bothered me, there was no denying that. And there had been several changes going on lately. It was just a lot.

But it was going to be okay.

In for five, hold for four, out for six.

I was on my fourth repetition of that when I saw headlights pull up behind me.

Normally, I would feel relief.

This was Balm Harbour.

It was full of kind people who always wanted to lend a hand to help.

It was just the weird stuff at work that had me tensing back up, undoing any of the effects of the breathing exercises.

My hand shot out, double-checking the locks as I heard a car door slam, then footsteps approaching.

“It’s fine! Everything’s fine! My boyfriend is almost here!” I called through the crack in the window, holding my phone to my ear like I was actually on a call.

“Hey, sweetheart,” a voice said.

I swear to God shivers broke out across my skin at the sound of that word coming out of that man’s mouth.

Because I knew who it was before I even turned my head to look.

I was convinced there was maybe only one man in all of Balm Harbour who could give me shivers just with his voice.

Cesare Costa.

Of course he would be who would come to my rescue.

The universe had a... unique sense of humor, it seemed.

“Oh, hey,” I said, pretending like I didn’t notice how all the anxiety that had been creeping up on me suddenly vanished when I knew it was him.

Which was absurd since I didn't know him from Adam, and there was no way for me to know if he was actually a safe person to roll my window down to or not.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I don't know. It just... stopped working," I said. "No warning lights or anything. I have my car in the shop several times a year. It doesn't make sense," I said.

"Cars can be dicks like that," he said, shrugging. "If I remember correctly from the time I got my car stuck in the snow, the tow guy will come out after hours. But he doesn't exactly do it in a hurry."

No, he didn't.

You could be stranded half the night.

"That's true," I agreed.

"You want me to give you a lift?" he asked. "Or is that big, burly boyfriend of yours right around the corner?" he asked, and the tiny smirk pulling at his lips told me he knew it had been a lie.

I was moving before I was thinking, rolling up my window, taking out my key, then reaching for my purse before pushing open the door.

"I, ah, that was kind of a lie," I admitted.

He gave me a sly smile as he pushed the door closed for me. "I figured. But you gotta be safe, right? Girl alone on the side of the road. I would tell my sister to say the same."

"You have a sister?" I asked, wincing at the eager tone of my voice, giving him a look at the almost desperate way I was clinging to a small bit of personal information about him.

"Yep. And several brothers. Big family," he told me, reaching downward and taking my hand, and I swear there was a spark at the contact, something that had me gasping and jerking backward slightly. "Just trying to lock your car," he told me, pressing his finger into the button. "You ready?" he asked.

“Yes,” I said, the word a soft, sighing sound as I inwardly thanked him for not commenting on my reaction.

“You on your way home?” he asked me as he walked so close with me toward my side of the car that our arms nearly brushed.

Maybe it was my imagination, but I could almost swear I felt the warmth of him moving through his suit jacket and warming my arm.

“Ah, yeah,” I said, watching as he reached for my door, pulling it open.

I must have paused longer than I’d realized because he ducked his head a bit, giving me a warm smile that matched the light in his eyes.

“The way I was raised, a woman’s hand never touches her own door handle,” he told me, and I couldn’t tell you why but his words sent shivers through me again, but this time on the inside.

I knew what Vega would say in this sort of situation. She’d make a joke about how she saw that as a challenge, and was going to need to be faster than him when the car stopped, so she could open her own door. Something like that.

But I wasn’t Vega.

So I said, “That’s very old-fashioned, but, you know, in the good way.”

“And not in the misogynistic prick way?” he finished for me, smirking. “Don’t worry. I know women are perfectly capable of opening their own doors. The point is, when you’re with me, you won’t need to,” he said, gusting into his car, and I didn’t even hesitate to slip inside.

In my head, somewhere muffled in the back, someone was narrating with the voice of a deathly serious true crime show host, saying something like *Meredith Behr didn’t know that she was getting in the car with a monster.*

But it was in the way back of my head, so it was easy to ignore.

Besides, my gaze was watching Cesare move across the hood of his car, unbuttoning his suit jacket with those tattooed fingers in a gesture I'd always found oddly sexy.

Then he was sliding in beside me, giving me a whiff of the crisp, somewhat spicy cologne he wore as he closed the door with a waft of cold air.

I watched as he fiddled with the touchscreen for a moment, not paying any mind to what he was actually doing—he could have been changing the radio or pushing a button to dispense toxic fumes, for all I knew—because my mind was too busy having strange, sordid thoughts about those fingers and how they might look moving over my pale skin, teasing over the curves of my hips, my breasts, lower.

It wasn't until he suddenly reached across me, filling me with anticipation that perhaps my fantasies were coming to life for a second, that I realized what he'd been doing.

Messing with the heat.

Then reaching over to position the vents more in my direction.

And that was just so damn considerate that I couldn't help but look at his face, giving him a warm smile.

“Thank you.”

“And if your ass feels warm, it's the heater in the seat,” he told me with a little wink before turning his attention back to the dashboard, and pulling away from the side of the road.

“Hey, sweetheart?” Cesare called a moment later, snapping me out of a pretty vivid fantasy I was having about climbing onto his lap and all that might happen after.

Not that I would ever be that bold.

But a girl could dream, right?

“Yeah?”

“I'm going to need you to point me in a direction,” he told me, glancing over with that damn sexy tug of his lips again.

“Right,” I said, prattling off my address, and telling myself that I was not, under any circumstances, going to invite him inside when we got there.

But then he was parking, and rushing out of the car to come get my door.

The second I was on my feet, looking up at him, the words were falling out of my mouth.

“Do you want to come in for some coffee?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cesare

It was just my luck that being a Good Samaritan would trap me with the one woman I really needed not to put my hands on.

Really, I couldn't tell you what it was about her.

Sure, she was gorgeous.

But many women were.

There was just something, I don't know, sweet, maybe even delicate about her.

Apparently, that fucking caveman part of myself that liked to be the "big, strong man" was intrigued.

It also didn't help that the woman had absolutely no poker face to speak of, so every single thought that crossed her mind was written all over her pretty face.

Meaning there was no way I missed how heated her eyes had gotten for a moment, how her gaze had slipped to my

hand. I could practically see the visions myself. Of my hands on her skin.

You know, shit I really needed not to be thinking about when trying to be a good guy and just give a woman a ride home.

Not to mention because she was off-limits, being she was in the middle of a situation for me and work. Whether she knew anything about that or not.

Then she had to do it.

Invite me up.

And my ass had no self-control.

So the next thing I knew, I was following her into the apartment building and to her door.

The door that barely got open before another woman was calling out, “Oh, thank God. I was going to send out a search party. Since when do you not answer your... ohhhh,” the woman said as Mere moved in, leaving me in the doorway.

And there she was.

The woman from the grocery store.

With the red hair and fake fur jacket.

Except, now, she was wearing massively oversized black men’s sweatpants and a cut-off shirt that, when she raised her hand up, showed off a bit of underboob.

“My car broke down,” Mere said, making the woman stop looking at me, and turn to her roommate, her brows pinching.

“What? You *just* had it in the shop.”

“I know,” Mere agreed. “Thankfully, Cesare happened by, and offered to drop me off at home.”

“Oh, I’ll bet he did,” the woman said, her devilish smile shooting in my direction. “Cesare, was it?” she asked.

“Right. Sorry. Cesare, this is my cousin, Vega. Vega, this is Cesare. He’s kind of a partner in the flower business.”

“Is he now? Well, isn’t that just... fan-tastic?” she asked, delight clear in her green eyes. Darker than Mere’s. In fact, really, there was no family resemblance at all. “So, Cesare, have you been working closely with Mere?” she asked as I moved inside, softly closing the door.

“We’ve run into each other a few times,” I told her, glancing over at Mere who was busily making a pot of coffee that I didn’t actually want, curious why she wouldn’t have mentioned the encounters to her cousin. Especially when she’d caught me snooping around Dennis’s office. That was the kind of shit you discussed with your roommate, wasn’t it? Hell, my sister could talk about the tiniest, most nothing detail of her day in excruciatingly fine detail.

“Vega is an interesting name,” I said, trying to fill the silence in the room.

“It’s where my mom and dad fucked when they got pregnant with me,” Vega said, making a chuckle escape me as, across the room, Mere’s face went beet red. “Cesare is an interesting name.”

“Italian,” I said, shrugging.

“No shit. You kind of look like you’re in the mafia,” she said, shocking me enough that I had no immediate comeback to that.

“Vega!” Mere hiss-yelled at her cousin, giving her wide eyes and a stern brow.

“What? It’s a compliment. Mob guys are hot. Well, in the movies and shows. In real life, maybe not so much,” Vega said, shrugging. “So, if you’re a partner in the flower shop, why have I never seen you before?”

“I live in the city.”

“New York City?” she clarified, watching me with penetrative eyes.

“Yes. But I lived here for a few years a while back. While I was here, I invested.”

“In Dennis?” It was somehow an incredulous statement and a question in one. Something that said *of all people* at the end.

“Every town needs a florist. Always do a solid business. Seemed like a solid investment,” I said, shrugging.

“Why are you questioning him?” Mere asked, shaking her head, then shooting me an apologetic smile as she reached for coffee mugs. “Sorry, it’s part of her job, I guess.”

“A cop?” I asked.

“No,” Vega said with a sniff that maybe spoke of some run-ins with cops at some point in her life.

I knew the feeling.

“Lawyer?” I tried again.

“Yes,” Mere said at the exact time that Vega said, “No.”

To that, Mere let out an exasperated sigh. “But you *are*, though. You passed the bar. The fact that you don’t work as a lawyer is beside the point. She’s a paralegal,” Mere explained. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Let me guess,” Vega said. “Black.”

“Cream and sugar, actually, if you have it,” I countered.

“Man after my own heart,” Vega said, walking over toward the kitchen to take the mug that her cousin was pushing toward her.

Her attention averted, I got a chance to really look around.

And all I could say was that it somehow screamed “Mere,” even though I probably didn’t know her well enough to come to those conclusions.

Maybe it was the way she so seamlessly blended into it all, where Vega’s wild self seemed to jump out.

It wasn’t a huge space. The living room was cut off from the kitchen with the island.

Everything was very... crisp. Which might have just been a nicer way of saying white. There was a lot of white. White

walls, baseboards, ceilings, cabinets, the countertop, and even the couch.

The carpet in the living room was a mix of white and a beige that matched the linen drapes that framed the windows.

The wood around the house actually all looked real and refinished.

Across from the couch was a giant TV that seemed to clash with the rest of the decor, including the electric fireplace beneath it.

Judging by the pile of blankets, the junk food on the coffee table, and the paused video game on the screen, the TV seemed to be there for Vega. A concession, probably, that would allow Mere to decorate the rest of the place.

There was minimal, but tasteful art on the walls.

And not a goddamn thing was out of place.

Not only that, but the place was white-glove clean. There wasn't a speck of dust or dirt anywhere to be found. Not chilling on the tops of picture frames or on the baseboards.

Somehow, I knew that the cleaner was also Mere.

And not only because I could just about make out two open bedroom doors in the hall.

One with more white walls and organization.

The other with the contents damn near spilling out of the door.

Polar opposites, these women.

“Thank you,” I said, reaching for my mug when Mere passed it toward me. Did I let our fingers brush? Just to watch the way her eyes widened and her lips parted?

Yeah, I did that.

“So, are you staying for dinner?” Vega asked. “We’re ordering in for a change.”

I should have excused myself, but my gaze slid to Mere instead.

“You can stay, of course,” she said, voice a little tight.

“This is going to be fun,” Vega declared, breezing past me in a fume of spicy perfume and sweet candy, going into one of the kitchen cabinets, and drawing down one of three matching binders.

Down the spine, it was clear what was inside.

Menus.

“You keep your menus in a binder?” I asked.

“Mere is quite fastidious,” Vega said in an easy tone as she plopped the binder onto the counter between all three of us, and started to flip it open. “Let’s pick a restaurant. I’m going to guess that having an Italian guy from the city means that our local non-Italian run Italian place is probably going to be a disappointment.”

“I’m not picky,” I assured her.

“Too late. It’s been decided,” Vega said, flipping through shiny, laminated pages while, on her other side, Mere was rubbing her thumbnail up and down her coffee mug.

A nervous gesture?

Nervous about what?

The food?

My presence?

I probably should have excused myself, said something about forgetting that I was going to meet Gav somewhere.

But I didn’t do that.

Instead, I gave Vega my order for Chinese food, then watched her walk away to place it.

“I know,” Mere said when I glanced back in her direction. “We couldn’t be more different.”

“Yet, it seems to work,” I said, shrugging.

“It helps that Vega hates housework, and I love it,” she told me. “And cooking. And running errands.”

“Has she lived here long?”

“Oh, this was Vega’s apartment first,” Mere said, surprising me, since her stamp was all over the place. “I only moved in a few years back.”

“From the area...” I asked, waving out toward Balm Harbour.

“No. No, I was in Ohio,” she explained. “I was born and raised there. Vega’s parents have always been kind of nomads, so she grew up all over the place before she finally decided to settle down here after college.”

“Interesting place for someone as... colorful as her.”

“Yeah,” Mere said, shrugging. “But, I think, if you are such a colorful person, in a city surrounded by other colorful people, you don’t stand out as much. Here...” she went on, waving a hand out.

“Seeing as I saw her in the grocery store wearing a faux fur coat over a cut-off top, men’s boxers, and knee-high socks, I’d say you were right,” I said, shaking my head.

Mere’s gaze skittered away for a second, looking at her cousin who appeared to be having a good old time talking to the people from the Chinese restaurant.

“It works out. She likes to stand out. I like to blend in. We’re the perfect duo.”

“Honey, you don’t blend in,” I said, watching as her gaze cut back to me, eyes wide. Almost worried. Like the thought of being noticed was terrifying. “You’re too pretty to blend in,” I added, watching as a slight flushed made her cheeks go pink. “That’s probably why you like working at the flower shop, huh?” I asked. “All that other pretty. Easier to blend in to all of that.”

“Damn, it looks like I missed something good,” Vega said, suddenly appearing beside us, smiling knowingly at her cousin’s blush. “What have we been talking about?”

“Why the two of you live here,” I said, only half lying.

“And what about you?” Vega asked.

“I lived here for a few years. Overseeing the business. Then I moved back to the city. I missed my family,” I explained.

“Do you come from a big family?” Mere asked.

“Fucking massive,” I said, shaking my head. “Lot of first names that end in vowels. Hard to keep ‘em all straight sometimes,” I added. “What about you guys?”

“My parents retired to Mexico,” Vega explained. She cast a quick glance at Mere before adding, “And, well, we don’t really have anyone else.”

I couldn’t fathom that.

Even just my immediate family was big. Lots of brothers and my sister. Then there were the cousins. Dozens and dozens of them. The men and women in my family fucked and procreated like bunnies.

“So, holidays for you are like the holidays in the movies,” Mere concluded.

“Bigger. Louder. More dramatic,” I told them, smiling.

As crazy as it was, though, I wouldn’t trade it for anything. The time I had been forced to spend away only reinforced my understanding that the city, with all the people I loved in it, was the only place for me.

“It sounds fun,” Vega said, looking a little wistful, longing even. Sure, I didn’t know her well, but that seemed to be uncharacteristic for her. “We always watch those movies on, like, Christmas,” she went on. “And we talk about how nice it must be.”

“Yeah?” I asked, looking at Mere. “I had you pegged as more of an introvert.”

“I... sometimes,” Mere said. “I like people, I just...” she trailed off, unsure how to explain.

“I think we can all agree that people in general are meh, but the *right* people are great,” Vega said, getting her cousin’s shoulders to relax.

“Exactly,” she agreed.

“So you guys didn’t grow up together,” I said. “Since you were moving all around,” I said, nodding toward Vega.

I was trying to understand their dynamic.

They were clearly close. And Vega seemed to pick up on when her cousin needed someone to kind of step in and help her out when she was feeling uncomfortable.

I got that since I saw it a lot with my own family. But it was because we’d all grown up together, and had known one another’s quirks since the cradle.

It was intriguing that they could figure all that out in such a short period of time together.

“No. Vega had to come live with me and my grandmother when she was... fourteen, I think, it was,” Mere said, looking at Vega for confirmation.

“Yeah. Just turned fourteen. For the summer. I’d been on vacation with my parents and they got into this awful wreck and were both in the hospital, then rehab centers. So child services had me go live with Gran for a few months. We kept in touch after. You know, as much as kids can. We had a bit of an age gap,” Vega explained. “I’m older,” she added.

“Then you decided to move in together?” I asked, knowing I was prying, but finding myself more interested than I could have anticipated.

“Yeah. I was living here already. Had this revolving door of shitty roommates. So when I heard that Mere was looking to spread her wings a little bit, I figured it was the perfect arrangement. She got a place to stay while figuring out her career move. I got a nicely decorated place to make people think I have my shit together. Win/win.”

A good twenty minutes of small talk later, there was a buzz from downstairs that Vega was quick to answer, muttering something about dumplings as I reached for my wallet, and followed her to the door.

“Oh,” Vega said when she opened the door to find the delivery driver standing there with tufts of snow slowly starting to evaporate on the top of his hat and his shoulders. “It’s snowing?” she asked, reaching for the bag.

“Started fifteen back. We’re supposed to get slammed again,” the guy said as I passed him a wad of cash, since I had no idea how much it all came to. “Thanks, man.”

At Vega’s look as she closed the door, I shrugged. “I know you can pay for your own food, but I wanted to. It’s a thing.”

“He also has a thing with door handles,” Mere said, making Vega wiggle her brows.

“A gentleman. Who could have guessed they still existed?” she asked, putting the bag of food on the counter as Mere fiddled with the TV remote before settling on the weather station.

“Uh oh,” Vega said as the accumulation totals flashed on the screen. “Any chance you have four-wheel drive?” she asked, looking over at me.

“I didn’t drive my SUV tonight,” I admitted.

“Welllllll,” Vega said, shrugging. “Sleepover, I guess!” she declared as Mere placed plates and silverware down on the counter, but her cousin was taking a carton and plastic utensils, and moving toward the living room. “I’m picking the movie,” she added as Mere started pulling cartons out of the bag, then took the bag to carefully fold down and place into the recycling bin hidden in a pull-out under the sink.

“I could have my brother come out and pick me up,” I offered, voice low, leaving the decision up to the much more cautious Mere, not Vega, who seemed down for whatever.

“The roads won’t be good tonight. Even for a car that is decent in the snow. You can stay,” she said, giving me a soft smile. “Vega has an assortment of men’s clothing, so you will have something to change into.”

I knew what I was supposed to do. Insist that Gav and I would be fine, take the risk, and go home.

But, somehow, I didn't want to do that.

"If you don't mind," I said.

"Not at all," she assured me, and there was none of that tension around her eyes or in her shoulders to suggest otherwise.

It didn't escape my notice that Vega had situated herself on a chair, leaving the couch open for her cousin and I to occupy, something she watched transpire with a devilish little smirk tugging at her lips.

"Has Dennis shown up yet?" Mere asked as Vega flipped through movie selections, a task she seemed to find incredibly important.

"Wait," Vega said, looking over. "Dennis is... missing?" she asked.

"Sort of," Mere said, glancing over at me.

"He hasn't been answering his phone. Hasn't been to the shop. He's not at his house. But I don't really know Dennis well enough to know if he might have needed to skip town to see family or some shit like that."

"Shouldn't someone... let the police know?" Vega asked. "I know, I know. I'm not always on the best of terms with law enforcement myself, but they do tend to be the ones you want helping to locate people."

Sure.

But filing a missing person's report was typically done by family. I didn't even know if he had any.

It also meant that there would be people snooping around, looking for clues. Sticking their noses in my business.

"I plan to if I don't hear from him soon. It's only been a couple of days and he wasn't expecting me, so I can't be sure what his plans were," I said. "How is the woman who works at the shop?" I asked, looking back at Mere.

"Rayna. She's in the ICU, but I haven't gotten any more details than that."

I'd have to see if I could talk to an old friend I knew at the hospital. Maybe they could get me more information. Had she overdosed? Fallen in the shower? Stroke? Or was she, possibly, attacked?

That last one made my stomach clench. Not necessarily because I was worried about myself. I was armed. I had my brother for backup. I could have half the New York City mafia up in Maine in a few hours if I needed it.

But if Dennis was missing, and Rayna who worked at the store was injured, some not great shit was pointing back to one location.

Where Mere worked.

All by herself.

I suddenly had the strangest urge to drop everything else, and start "working" in Dennis's office just to keep an eye on her.

But even if I wanted to, I couldn't do that.

What I could do, though, was be there on delivery days. That was my next step. To have a chat with those guys, see what was going on, when was the last time they heard from Dennis, all that kinda shit.

Conversation died down then, cut off by the opening credits of the movie Vega had finally decided on.

Beside me, Mere picked at her food, playing with it more than eating it. And I noticed her gaze on me often. Looking at my profile, my hands, everywhere, but only because she didn't think I noticed. So I went on pretending I didn't, allowing her to get her fill.

I don't know if Vega just liked that kind of movie, or if she had ulterior motivations, but sometime after we abandoned our plates onto the coffee table, the good guy in the movie was walking down the hall only to have a massive fucking jump scare from the bad guy that had Mere yelping, jerking, and grabbing my wrist in a vice grip.

I watched the panic play out on her pretty features. Not so much for what was happening on the screen, but because she realized she'd grabbed me, was unsure how to untangle herself without feeling awkward.

And what did I do?

Make shit even more awkward by sliding my arm back so our palms touched instead. I even twined my fingers between hers.

“Don't worry,” I said, leaning close like I was sharing a secret. “I've seen this one. The good guy makes it. Just barely, but he makes it,” I told her, getting a sweet little smile from her as her gaze went back to the TV.

I caught Vega's smirk as she looked at our hands before shifting her focus to the movie again as well.

She seemed to genuinely be interested.

But Mere seemed almost to be staring through it, and her hand was a little twitchy in mine. Unsure.

She had small fucking hands.

I don't know how I hadn't noticed that before.

But mine seemed to practically swallow hers up.

I was going to hell for it, knowing she was already feeling a little conflicted, but my thumb moved out, tracing over the skin on the side of her hand, then the sensitive spot under her wrist.

I could even feel the little tremble that moved through her at the contact.

I found myself both thankful and resentful of Vega's presence right then. Because if we were alone, I was pretty sure my hand would have kept exploring, finding and exploiting her sensitive little trigger spots, then maybe pressing her back on her pristine couch, feeling my cock press against...

Fuck.

I really needed to stop having those kinds of thoughts about the woman.

First, because everything about her said she was not a casual fun kind of girl. And I had been nothing but a casual fun kind of guy.

Second, she was smack-dab in the middle of whatever the fuck was going on with our Family business in Balm Harbour.

It was too messy.

But, well, I knew me.

I liked messy.

“Damn it,” Vega grumbled when the movie went to credits, startling Mere who pulled her hand away in response.

“What?” she asked, clasping her hands in her lap, like she had to prevent herself from reaching out again.

“He lived.”

“You didn’t want the good guy to make it?” I asked, brows pinching.

“Was he the good guy, though? I mean, his flashbacks paint him as the asshole. Just because he had the badge in the story doesn’t mean he was good. I kinda got why the so-called villain wanted to rip his guts out and wear them as a necklace. Anyway. I’m tired,” she declared, making a show of stretching and yawning. “Catch you guys in the morning,” she said, practically running out of the room, leaving the two of us alone.

“No, I’ve got it,” she insisted when I started to reach for my plate. “I like to clean,” she added.

“I like to help,” I said, shrugging, and taking the plate from her. “So, is there a particular way you like to do this?” I asked, gesturing around the kitchen with the plate.

“Oh, ah, just, you know, rinse, then in the dishwasher,” she said, putting the extra cartons away in the fridge.

“Hey, babe?” I asked, noticing her glancing over at me several times as I rinsed.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“Do you want to do this?” I asked, waving toward the sink. “I get that people have particular ways they want shit done in their houses. I just wanted to be a decent houseguest,” I explained, rinsing my hands, and moving away.

“I know it’s silly to be particular about dishes,” she said as she moved into my place, but I noticed her shoulders weren’t as tense anymore.

“No, it’s not. I got an aunt who can’t let anyone else vacuum her rugs because she’s got a certain way of doing it. Everyone has their shit,” I said, shrugging.

“What’s yours?” she asked, pretending like she didn’t glance my way, but I saw it.

“My shit?” I asked, thinking about it. “I dunno. Guess I’m particular about my clothes,” I said. “Smelling good. Looking good. That kinda shit. Fuck, that makes me sound vain as fuck, doesn’t it?” I asked, letting out a little laugh.

“No. I’m... particular about those things too,” she said, gesturing toward her outfit.

“I like how you dress. Kind of old-fashioned. Soft, feminine. Think it suits you.”

“I like how you dress too. Suits will always be in style. And men who wear suits tend to pay attention to the little things. Vega dated this guy once. A mechanic, I think? Or in construction. A hands-on kind of job like that. Under his fingernails was always black,” she said, letting out a little shudder at the thought.

I knew she was not the kind of woman you talked like this to, but I couldn’t help but want to see that pretty little blush again.

“And no woman wants dirty fingernails up inside of them,” I said, watching as her eyes widened a bit, but then flooded with heat as her gaze went automatically to my hands.

And, yeah, I kept my fucking fingernails clean.

“She, ah, she wasn’t with him for long,” Mere said, closing the dishwasher, then spraying down the counters. “She’s not a serious relationship kind of girl,” she added, scrubbing a little extra hard, considering there was nothing on the counters.

“What about you?” I asked. “Are you a—“

“Hey, almost forgot,” Vega’s voice broke in. “Here,” she said, tossing a pair of men’s sweatpants at me.

“What about a shirt?” Mere asked.

“They’re all cut-offs,” Vega insisted, but the way Mere’s brow lifted suggested otherwise.

“No, they’re not.”

“Well, the ones that aren’t are all in my ever-growing laundry pile,” Vega insisted, but that was a lie too. “He probably doesn’t sleep in a shirt anyway. Hot guys never do,” she said, tossing out the throwaway comment. “I also started to run your bath for you,” she said. “Like five minute ago,” she added. “You might want to check on it before we flood the neighbors downstairs.”

“Sorry, I…” Mere started.

“No, go on. Take your bath,” I said, trying hard as fuck not to picture her in there. Naked. “I’m fine out here. I need to call my brother.”

“Okay. I will be out in a few to prepare the couch,” she said before scurrying off, leaving me alone with Vega who was eyeing me up.

“For a lawyer, you’re a shit liar,” I told her, waving the pants.

“I’m a paralegal. And if I wanted to get one over on you, I could. But there was no reason to be convincing with that lie. I kinda just want to see you without a shirt on.”

“Vega, listen, you’re gorgeous, but I’m not interested,” I told her.

“Oh, God, no. I don’t *want* you. I just want to look at you,” she said, smirking. “I like you for Mere, actually. You could

messy things up for her. I think that's... good," she said, giving me a look that said a million things. "I figure you'll be seeing a lot of each other. Maybe one of those times, you can ask about her upbringing. It might make a lot of things make sense."

And with that, she was walking away.

"And you better not get dressed in the morning before I get to see you without your shirt on," she called as she walked into her bedroom.

I wouldn't put it past the woman to strip me if I tried.

Alone, I glanced around a bit before going to the TV, switching something on, figuring it would help with any awkwardness that might arise when Mere came out.

Where I was sitting, my cock half-hard at just the thought of her one room away, submerged in the tub. And maybe her nipples would start to get hard as the water began to cool. Taut pink peaks just begging to be touched, to be sucked into my...

"Fuck," I hissed, then reached for my phone, shooting off a text to Gav, telling him I was staying out for the night because of the storm.

I almost immediately got a text back.

Whoever she is, she better not be married. Or shacked up with someone in the life.

I decided not to tell him it was someone equally as bad news, given the situation.

I wasn't shacked up with her either.

But that was beside the point.

Because I damn sure wanted to be.

She came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, a waft of a feminine-smelling soap accompanying her as she walked out wearing nothing but a barely-there creamy pink silk robe.

She damn sure wasn't helping the situation with my cock that went from half-mast to fully upright.

“All yours, if you need it,” she said, offering me a small smile before going off into her room.

As soon as I heard the door shut, I scurried my ass into that bathroom where no one would see my raging hard-on as I got changed and did some fucking math equations in my head until the situation was more under control.

I pulled on the sweatpants, folded all my clothes up with my jewelry sitting on top, then made my way out.

Then there she was.

In a goddamn *nightgown* that was loose, but still somehow didn't leave a whole lot to the imagination.

“Let me help,” I offered, making her head shoot up.

And I wasn't imagining the way her eyes went heavy-lidded and heated, how her lips parted ever so slightly, as her gaze moved over my bare torso.

“I'm under strict orders not to wear a shirt until Vega sees me in the morning,” I told her, waving at my body, silently inviting another inspection.

Which she gave me.

Shyly.

From under those thick lashes of hers.

Scrubbed free of makeup with her damp hair pushed behind her ears, she looked somehow even softer than she had before.

Fuck, but it took every ounce of self-control I had not to reach out and touch her as I moved forward, helping her put a damn fitted sheet on the couch, because she insisted, then a sheet, a blanket, a comforter. Then pillows with fresh shams.

“I know it's a lot,” she said, looking over at me as she hugged my pillow to her chest, making me know it was going to be a night of tossing and turning with an aching cock as her scent flooded my senses.

“What is?” I asked, sitting down.

“All the... cleaning and organizing and preparing. It’s a lot.”

“Figure maybe you have your reasons,” I said, looking up at her as she let out a little huff and looked away.

“You have no idea.”

“I’d like to,” I said, patting the seat next to me, knowing it was dangerous, and just all the more intrigued by that. “If you want to tell me...”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mere

I was pretty sure, by the time I got into the bathroom and shut the door, that I had never actually been quite so turned on before in my entire life.

And all the man did was... exist. Occasionally throw out a pet name. Brush off my eccentricities like it was no big deal.

But, my God, I never could have known just how appealing that would be. A man who didn't raise his brows or roll his eyes at my strange behaviors, my rituals.

I mean, not only that, but he actually sensed when I was feeling weird about one of those rituals being interrupted, and offered to let me fix the situation.

It was all just so... unexpected.

And welcome.

Everyone I had known in my life who'd come face-to-face with all my varied "issues," had treated me like I was a freak because of it.

Some even went so far as to tell me that I "really needed to see a shrink."

Everyone wanted me to change, to be more "normal."

No one, save for Vega, just accepted me as I was.

I'd always figured, with my cousin, it was a mix of her very laid-back attitude as well as a pretty deep understanding of where I'd come from, why I was the way I was.

"If all that came out of that whole shitstorm was a need for things to be clean, babe, I think you're just fine."

I didn't tell people about that part of my life. I didn't want that mental image to clash with the version of myself that I tried so hard to present to the world.

I never even thought to tell the guys I'd tried to date over the years.

But then there was Cesare.

With his understanding nature, his kind eyes, and his half-naked body that, well, put me a little off-guard.

He was covered in tattoos.

I don't know why but I hadn't really anticipated them extending beyond his arms, hands, neck, and those few on his face. Which was weird. I mean, who would tattoo their hands if their torso wasn't covered as well?

And his was.

But it somehow didn't completely mask the defined muscle underneath, either. Little indents I found myself wanting to reach out and run my finger along.

Surely, that was the only reason I took his invitation to sit down on the freshly made couch, still hugging his pillow, and talk to him about my past.

My past that I tried like hell never to think about myself.

“I don’t know where to start,” I admitted.

“With your parents is usually how it all starts, isn’t it?”
Cesare prompted me.

“Right. Well, I didn’t have a father. I mean, biologically, sure, but I never met him.” My mom once admitted to me that she didn’t actually even know who he was. Maybe there would have been more of an identity crisis involved with that had it hadn’t been for, well, all the stuff that would follow.

“That’s rough,” Cesare said, placing his hand on my knee. “My mom passed when I was young.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, my heart breaking for him.

“It was a long time ago. So it was just you and your mom.”

“That might be... an exaggeration,” I admitted. “My mom wasn’t around very often. I was pawned off on the neighbor when I was really small. As I got older, I was just alone in the apartment.”

“What was your mom doing while you were alone?” he asked, seeming to understand that I needed the encouragement to keep going. I just wasn’t used to talking about myself much.

“From what I can tell about her record, shoplifting, running cons, anything she could do to get money without actually working a job.”

“Sometimes people do what they need to do to survive,” Cesare said, giving me a chance to defend her.

I didn’t want to do that.

“Don’t paint pictures in your head about her being a down-and-out single mom doing everything she could to take care of me,” I said, wincing at the bitterness in my own voice. “My mom was a horrible person.”

“In general, or to you?” he asked.

“Both. I mean, she could be charming when she wanted to be. That was how she ran her cons. No one lets their guard down around people unless they seem kind and innocent, right?”

“That’s true,” Cesare agreed.

“At home, though, she was... mean. And angry and bitter.”

“At you?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? Can’t imagine you were a bad kid.”

I wasn’t.

I was the best kid I could be.

I thought if I could make myself small enough and quiet enough and well-behaved enough, I might be able to avoid her outbursts.

The screaming.

The hitting.

The nights I went to bed without food.

The problem was, when you were stuck with someone as miserable as my mother, it didn’t matter how “good” you were. They would always find fault in you. They would always punish you for it.

“For existing, I guess.”

“You deserved better than that,” Cesare told me, and the little kid inside of me wanted to cry hearing it.

“Eventually, when I was nine, she finally got arrested on a charge that she couldn’t weasel her way out of. She was sent away. And I went to live with my grandmother. And things were... okay at first. Until my grandpa died.

“They had one of those relationships, y’know? Those meant to be, all-consuming, love story relationships.”

I used to sit at the kitchen counter working on my homework when my grandpa would come in. Sometimes with a handful of wildflowers he picked for my grandma. Other times, he would grab her hand and twirl her around the kitchen, dipping her all the way back, her hair almost brushing the floor, then laying a big kiss on her.

It had been both embarrassing and mesmerizing as a kid.

Love like that.

I couldn't imagine.

I'd never known any love at all.

"He went out to go get the paper one morning and... he never came home," I said.

"I'm sorry. Were you close?"

"I'd only been there a few months at that point," I admitted. "But I cared for him. My grandmother, though, she fell apart."

"I can understand that," Cesare said, nodding, and giving my leg a reassuring squeeze.

Like he knew we were getting to the meat and bones of it.

Sure, my mom was a nightmare. But I was safe from her. And, objectively, I spent a lot more time with my grandmother than my mother.

"The can't-get-out-of-bed stage kind of... never ended," I told him.

I remembered going into her room before school, seeking that maternal care she used to show me. Making me oatmeal or eggs. Helping me brush my hair. Packing my lunch. Telling me to have a good day.

But she was just curled up in the dark in a room that smelled like sweat and misery.

When I got home from school in the afternoons, she would still be there, but there was evidence that she'd been up when I was gone.

Clothes on the bathroom floor.

Dishes in the sink.

I tried to help, to be the good kid I had always needed to be. But I was little. And didn't have all the life skills I would need to run a house.

It wasn't long before the bathroom was dirty, the dishes were stinking and moldy.

“Then, eventually, she was a little more mobile. But all she did was collect junk. Bringing home stuff she found on the side of the road, cramming it into the once carefully furnished house.”

It wasn't long before the living room was so packed that there was only a narrow path to walk through.

Then, not long after, not even that. Just old boxes to trip over and piles of someone else's clothes, still smelling like mothballs or cedar chests, nothing that would ever fit either of us. But stuff she refused to get rid of.

“By the end of that year, it wasn't just cluttered. It was filthy. The flies came. Then the cockroaches. The rats. I used to lie in bed at night listening to them chewing on the outside of my door.”

I kept things shoved in the gap under the door both when I was in the room and when I left, terrified of waking up to bugs crawling all over me, or rats scurrying around my bed.

I had this one particularly gruesome nightmare about bugs climbing in my nose, ears, and mouth while I was sleeping, reproducing inside of me, and eating me from the inside out until there was nothing left.

“Soon, it wasn't just the living room. It was the dining, kitchen, bathroom, spare rooms. The house was bursting at the seams. But the stuff never stopped coming in. I couldn't even get to the washing machines eventually.”

I had to learn how to wash my clothes in a bucket in the backyard because the bathtub was growing mold and the kitchen sink was teeming with insects.

“How did Vega get placed with your grandma if the living situation was so bad?” Cesare asked, pulling me out of some of those bad memories.

Like the way some of the neighborhood kids would catch me cleaning my clothes in the backyard, or sometimes even washing my own hair in a bucket because I didn't want the mold touching me in the tub.

The names they would call me at school because of how I lived.

“They never really did an inspection. I think it was all so sudden and so temporary. They were just glad to have somewhere to stick the unruly, opinionated girl who was upset about her parents and angry about having to be pulled away from them.”

I remembered meeting them outside when my grandmother pulled into the driveway, her backseat jam-packed with more crap.

She'd been magnetic even then. Red-haired with lots of makeup, and a tall, thin body that sported barely a trace of womanhood yet.

I'd rushed out, grabbing her by the hand, and dragging her through the mess and into my room, insisting she stay in there with me so she didn't get covered in bugs and rodents.

“She was really... sure of herself for a young girl. Very comfortable speaking her mind. She gave my grandma a lot of lip about the house, about the filth, about how she was forcing me to live.

“And for a short period of time, the blissful months when Vega was staying there with us, and I had a single friend in the whole world, the filth went away. And with it, some of the bugs and rats.”

“But then Vega's parents were well again...” Cesare prompted.

“They scooped her up and took her on a cruise so they could all reconnect. She promised me she would try to talk to them about taking me in. I'm sure she did. But my aunt and uncle are...” I trailed off, trying to find a kind way of putting it. “Very concerned with their own interests.”

“Selfish,” Cesare cut to the chase.

“Pretty much, yes. I'm sure it was hard enough to cart one kid along with them on all their adventures. And Vega was older than me. And accustomed to the traveling and new

towns, new houses, new friends, new schools. I wasn't like that."

"So you stayed with your grandmother."

"Yes."

"And the filth came back," he concluded.

"It doubled. Then quadrupled. Because, eventually, it stopped being junk she brought home, and started being cats. Whole litters of kittens, pregnant mama cats. She never fixed them or tried to find them new homes, so they just kept reproducing. I swear they were on every surface, inside every piece of furniture, in the very walls."

I'd liked cats before.

I'd always wanted one.

A pretty black cat with green eyes that reminded me of one that I used to watch on cartoons when I was little.

My mother claimed she already had enough mouths to feed, so I'd never gotten one.

But as my grandmother's house filled up with them, and the stench from unemptied litter boxes filled the house, I became certain that I would never want another animal again in my whole life."

"Did no one ever call animal control or the township on the living conditions?" Cesare asked.

"My grandmother had been careful about keeping the mess inside of the house. I don't know why no one cared about the cats. Maybe they just thought she was feeding strays, since they all came and went as they pleased.

"And I didn't really even know anything about health codes or calling child services. I think I would have called if I did," I admitted, not liking how that made me sound, but I'd been so miserable.

"How'd you eat?" Cesare asked.

"What?"

“If the kitchen was filthy and not functioning, how did you eat?” he asked.

The only food that was ever around was junk. Potato chips, cold SpaghettiOs from the can, snack bars, candy bars.

The only “real” food I got was from school when my grandmother remembered to give me money for lunch tickets. Which, well, wasn’t often.

“I used to go to the library a lot back then, just to be away from the mess and the smell, and I would look at the magazines full of recipes and dream about what that food might taste like. I’d never had an asparagus spear or knew what a croissant tasted like, or even just leafy salad greens. I became obsessed with the idea of eating healthy one day.”

“And living in a clean, well-organized home,” Cesare concluded.

“Yes,” I said, nodding, looking around.

“You did good,” he told me, making my heart squeeze a bit in my chest. “So what happened as you got older?” he asked.

“I got a lot of after-school jobs,” I told him. “Babysitting, gift wrapping around the holidays, picking weeds from people’s gardens. Anything I could do to make a little money that I could use to take my clothes to the laundromat instead of washing them in a bucket. And get myself some food. It wasn’t like what I saw in the magazines, but it was better than chips and candy bars.”

“And then?” Cesare prompted.

“And then my grandmother got sick,” I told him.

I’d been in the homestretch.

Just a few weeks away from graduating high school. I had a small stash of cash that I swore to myself I was going to use to get a car, and get the hell out of that house. Even if I had to live and sleep in that car. Anything was better than being in that house another day.

“Sick with what?”

“I don’t really know. She was a very private person, so she didn’t let me come into the doctor with her or anything like that. I just know she got slowly weaker and coughed a lot. Before long, she was back in that bed all the time like she’d been when first grieving my grandfather.”

“Why did you stay?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I felt obligated, I guess. It wasn’t her fault she went so off the rails when my grandfather died. As I took care of her, it also gave me a chance to start working on the house,” I told him.

I’d been both thrilled and disgusted to set to that task.

I’d reached out to a bunch of shelters, explaining the cat overpopulation issue, getting them to take them in to rehome them.

Then, the cleaning began.

Just garbage at first.

Bag after bag. The house filled up with swollen black bags that I had to put out slowly over time in the weekly trash pick up.

Then once the trash was gone, I started selling and donating all the junk that accumulated.

The cleaning came next.

The deep cleaning.

The years worth of mold, dust, hair, and animal waste along with a lot of carcasses of rats that the cats had, luckily, kept a bit more under control when they’d shown up.

“How long did it take?” Cesare asked.

“Each step of the process took several weeks. The cleaning, though, took a lot longer. A couple of months, all in all.”

It wasn’t just the scrubbing, either.

The grout had needed to be pulled out and replaced in the bathroom. The carpets, stained with years of cat urine, had to

be pulled up. The sheetrock had to be repaired in places.

New trim. New paint. Some new appliances.

It seemed never-ending.

“And then?” Cesare asked. “Did your grandmother... pass?” he asked.

“No. She slowly, then suddenly, got better a year or so later,” I told him, watching as he shot me a happy smile. Unaware of what was coming next.

“Within three months, the house was destroyed again,” I told him.

All that work.

All those hours gagging as I cleaned up feces and rat carcasses and bugs and moldy sludge. All the times I breathed in noxious fumes from the cleaning products I’d needed to use in excess.

The sore muscles. The headaches. The times I worked my fingertips to bloody points.

All for nothing.

“That sucks,” Cesare said, giving my leg another squeeze.

“I know,” I agreed. I remembered crying my eyes out in my room as the crap just kept piling in, as the smells started up again, as all that work went not only unappreciated, but resented. “I called Vega one night, and she offered to let me come here.”

I’d felt guilty leaving, knowing there would be no one to rein my grandmother in, no one to take care of her if she fell ill again.

But, at some point, you had to learn to put yourself first.

Leaving, and moving in with Vega, had been that for me.

“I was lucky. Vega was happy to have someone decorate and clean and cook.”

The only place I didn’t touch was her bedroom, though I did, admittedly, still sometimes have that sensation like I’d had

in that nightmare, of bugs crawling under my skin when I walked past and saw a mess that I couldn't clean up.

She'd let me, I knew.

If I asked.

If I told her that I was feeling weird about it.

But that was her space. She deserved a place she could be her messy self in, without worrying about my compulsive need to clean up after her.

“You two seem to have a good system going. How did you end up working as a florist?” Cesare asked.

“That was mostly happenstance, really. I was looking for a job. Dennis had a Now Hiring sign in the window. I didn't have experience, but Dennis...”

“Is the shittiest florist anyone has ever seen?” Cesare prompted, making a choked laugh escape me.

“If you thought that, why would you invest in the business?” I asked.

“Some people have a head for business, but not one for the actual work that goes into it. Can you imagine most CEOs of restaurants serving tables, having customers yell in their faces and leave embarrassing tips? No. But they have a head for the numbers and a finger on the pulse of the industry.

“That's what Dennis has going for him. Well, that and the fact that Balm Harbour is a great tourist town. With a lot of foot traffic. And there is the booming wedding industry around here too, so it was guaranteed success for the shop if he would step back, and hire people who actually know how to arrange flowers.”

“Has that been true?” I asked, inwardly worried that I was failing.

“It's been better than expected,” he told me.

And it was right then that his fingers flexed, making me acutely—almost painfully—aware of their placement. Still on

my thigh. A firm pressure. A heat that was moving through the thin material of my nightgown, and moving upward.

Suddenly, it didn't matter anymore that he was, in a way, my boss. That this whole thing was a complete and utter mistake. That the repercussions could put my carefully constructed way of life in jeopardy.

All that seemed to matter was the way the heat from his hand was moving up my thigh, between, then up further still, weaving through my belly, up my chest, making my chest flush, and my breasts feel heavy and sensitive. Even just the brush of the material of my nightgown was sending shivers of pleasure through my system.

A hand on my thigh.

That was all it took.

And my heart was thrumming.

My skin felt like it was sparking.

And the pressure on my lower stomach, the excruciating ache between my thighs, was becoming almost intolerable to bear.

My gaze slid up from under my lashes, finding Cesare already looking at me, those dark eyes so hard to read, but his gaze dipped from my eyes, down to my lips, then back up again in a way that I knew it was more than just appraisal.

His fingers twitched on my leg again, and this time, I could have sworn it was intentional, like he was trying to gauge my reaction, see if there was a spark of interest.

A spark.

There was an entire freaking wildfire of interest wreaking havoc on my body.

The sharp inhale of my breath was instantaneous, and I could have sworn I saw heat flash across Cesare's eyes as he watched me.

Then, emboldened, his hand slipped upward slightly, sliding the material of my nightgown up my thigh, making the

hem slip up, exposing my ankles.

The shiver that moved through me was involuntary, but very, very visible.

Suddenly, that tattooed hand wasn't on my thigh anymore, but at the side of my neck, a firm pressure begging me to turn my head fully toward him.

I didn't even pretend to try to fight it.

There was no use.

As soon as I turned, Cesare's fingers were slipping upward, framing my jaw, his thumb moving out to stroke just under my lower lip, making them fall open.

A silent invitation.

One he was all too happy to respond to.

It felt like hours, like days, like a lifetime, for his face to move closer to mine, his gaze heavy-lidded and focused on mine.

The air felt sucked out of the room, out of my lungs, making my chest tighter, my brain getting lighter. Like being drunk.

That was how I felt, too, at that moment.

A little drunk.

On anticipation.

On him.

And then his lips were crashing down onto mine.

From the long gaze before, I had anticipated something soft and sweet.

But there was none of that.

His lips were hard and hungry on mine, making that wildfire burn hotter, moving through me until it overtook me completely.

His hand shifted down to my neck again as his lips slanted over mine.

So close, I could smell the traces of his cologne clinging to him, making me want to breathe it in, memorize it.

Then his hand was shifting backward, sliding into the hair at the nape of my neck. His fingers were gentle at first, coaxing, relaxing, creating little shivers that moved across my scalp and down my spine.

His tongue teased the seam of my lips, seeking permission, waiting until they fell open on a small sigh, then moving inside to claim mine.

A low, throaty sound escaped me, muffled by our joined lips as his tongue ring, cold and firm, teased over my tongue.

It made a different sort of sound move through Cesare then, something deep and primal, a growling noise that vibrated through his chest as his fingers flexed, then turned, gathering a handful of my hair and tugging.

It wasn't shivers this time that moved through me, it was sparks.

Pain and pleasure mixed together to create a heady concoction I felt high on, making my hand shoot out, grabbing at his shoulder, finding his skin hot, his muscles tensed.

His other hand moved out then, snaking around my lower back, pulling me until I was shifting up, struggling a bit with the length of my night dress, before getting up onto my knees on the couch.

His hand kept pulling, though, coaxing me until I was straddled over him, until my hair was falling like a curtain around our faces as Cesare's teeth nipped my lower lip, dragging a low moan out of me.

Both of his hands were moving then, sinking into my ass, fingers flexing there for a moment, then sliding up to my hips, dragging me down until I had no choice but to lower fully onto his lap.

I could feel the hardness of him through his sweatpants, the only thing between us then, save for the barely-there material of my panties that were getting wetter by the moment.

Cesare's lips pulled from mine then, going instead to my neck, pressing kisses across the sensitive skin, making that ache between my thighs almost unbearable.

As if sensing this, his hands shifted down once again, going to my ass, sinking in, and coaxing me to move. To shift. To slide against him.

His cock rubbed against my cleft, making a shocked moan escape me, the sound loud in the quiet apartment, and I could feel his lips against my neck curve into a smile before his head lifted, his heated gaze holding mine as he pulled me against him once again.

This time, I pressed my lips together, trying to keep my sounds to myself, not wanting to alert Vega of anything going on in the living room. Not that she would care.

She'd always been the one trying to get me to loosen up a little around the opposite sex, have a little fun.

I'd just never found casual interactions with men all that enjoyable before.

But this?

This was fun.

This was... all-consuming, overwhelming.

Unstoppable.

Yes, unstoppable.

I felt like there was nothing that could stop this, that if something did, I might not survive.

That was how strong the need was, how deep the ache for more, for everything, for relief from the clawing need building inside of me.

The next time, I didn't need him to guide me.

My hips found the motion they needed most, writhing and grinding down on his hard length, consumed with the idea of him inside of me, filling me, moving in me, driving me up and through an orgasm so intense that would tear a hole through time and space.

I'd struggled with intimacy before, with being too close with someone, so vulnerable.

All the years of routines and neuroses had made me a bit rigid, uncomfortable with things that took away even a small bit of my control.

I felt entirely out of control of my reaction to Cesare right then, so lost in the sensations that my body was moving with an intrinsic rhythm, with an ancient understanding of what was needed... and how to get there.

And, amazingly, I didn't feel anxiety welling up, threatening to ruin this, to take me out of the moment, and too aware of myself and the situation.

All I felt was need and heat and him.

God, him.

With his roaming hands and his licks and sucks and nips to my skin as he explored my neck, my shoulder, the top of my chest that was exposed by my modest nightgown.

But then he was anchoring my lower back so he could bend me backward, bracing me, taking some of my weight as I was leaned back.

My knees clamped around his hips. At first, just to hold on. Then, as his head dipped, and he sucked my nipple into his mouth, nightgown and all, it was so I could writhe against him again as his tongue started to do circles around the hardened bud.

A whimper escaped me as my hands dug into his shoulders, and that growling sound moved through him again, but this time, vibrated around my nipple and into my chest.

I swear I felt it down to my bones, into my marrow.

My hips did another grind against him, making him let out an impatient grumble.

Then, suddenly, my nightgown was gathered in his hands, then up and off of me, leaving me naked save for my panties.

Right there in the living room.

The closest I'd been to nude in the main area of my house was when I'd realized after my bath that I'd left my towel on the top of the dryer, so I'd held a shirt to my front, and made a mad dash to retrieve it.

No one was home, but still.

I guess being naked in the living room had just seemed too out of control for me to be comfortable with.

Yet, somehow, with Cesare's heated gaze moving over me, creating little sparks across the skin his dark eyes devoured, I couldn't seem to muster up one hint of uncertainty, a spare thought to propriety and order and control.

In fact, I wanted anything but.

I wanted to lose all control.

I wanted, I realized, for him to take it away, to let me get lost entirely in this moment, in him.

"Fuck," Cesare groaned as his gaze explored my body. The swells of my breasts, the pointed peaks aching for more touch. The slope of my stomach and the flare of my hips. "Beautiful," he murmured as he lowered his head again, resting it between my breasts for a moment, his breath warm on my skin, sending out another rush of shivers, then moving to the side. Tongue circling, teasing, lips sucking, teeth grazing.

I felt beautiful then, too.

I wasn't insecure about my looks, per se. But I was very aware of them. Almost painfully so. The kids at school had done a number on me, I guess.

I was careful about my dress, and put out a very particular image for others to consume, to draw conclusions with.

Stripped of that, I should have felt exposed and vulnerable.

Maybe I did.

Maybe it didn't matter because, at that moment, I knew I could trust Cesare with that vulnerability.

His hands were moving over me then as well. Teasing up my sides from my hips to the outside of my breasts. They were

soft, barely-there brushes that shouldn't have ignited me as much as they did.

A needy whimper escaped me as my hips did another writhe against him, looking for something I couldn't quite reach.

Cesare's head lifted, his gaze on mine as his hand suddenly moved away, pressing at the material between my thighs.

My body jolted hard at the sensation as his fingers shifted, finding the spot where I needed him most, and teasing over it with expert precision.

"No," he growled when I tried to lean forward, to bury my face in his neck, eyes squeezed tight. "I want to look at you," he told me, making my heavy eyelids flutter open. "I want to watch what I am doing to you," he said, making my sex clench hard even as his hand was moving, sliding into my panties, removing the last barrier between us.

A tremble coursed through me as his fingers slid up my slick cleft, finding my clit, and gently moving across it as his gaze held mine.

"I want to see your eyes when I do this," he went on as suddenly his fingers were slipping inside of me, making my walls tighten around him, holding him close. "Fuck, you're so wet," he hissed, his forehead leaning against my chest for a moment, like he was trying to get control over himself.

I didn't have time to wait.

I was too far gone.

Too desperate for relief from the aching need inside.

My sex tightened and my hips started to move, creating a bit of friction, but not nearly enough.

Cesare's head moved back, his molten gaze finding mine again.

"Do you need more?" he asked, his deep, low voice moving over me like a cold rush of air on overheated skin, making another shiver course through me.

“Yes,” I told him, my tone a small, whiny sound. “Please,” I added, too far gone to care how desperate I sounded. I was desperate right then.

That sound moved through him again as suddenly his fingers were moving inside of me. Just small, careful thrusts at first, but growing faster and harder as I writhed, as I whimpered, as my fingernails dug crescents into the skin on his shoulders.

“I want to feel you come,” he said as his fingers turned inside of me, finding that spot inside that I had begun to think was possibly a myth after all, but there was no denying its existence as Cesare’s fingers found it, teased it, stroked over it again and again even as his thumb found my clit and started to work that as well. “Come for me, Mere,” he hissed as he drove me up, as he got me right to that edge.

And as I teetered there, I heard a bleep. Like an incoming text on a phone.

Not mine.

Cesare’s.

Perched on the arm of the couch, all but forgotten until that moment.

And I saw it, just a split second before the orgasm overtook me.

The one thing that could put an end to this going any further.

The name on the phone.

Dennis.

But then the orgasm was crashing through my system, forcing me to ride the waves of pleasure over and over.

The end came, though.

And reality came charging back.

Cold water on heated bodies.

“Dennis texted you.”

The words were muffled, murmured against the skin of his neck where my face was resting.

I could feel the impact of the words, though.

The way Cesare's body stiffened.

How his hands froze as they moved up and down my back.

It was over.

The moment was gone.

Pulled backward like a fog at the first teases of light.

I untangled myself from his lap, grabbed my nightgown, held it against me like a shield, and backed out of the room.

And, what was probably most important, he didn't stop me.

CHAPTER NINE

Mere

I didn't want to walk out of my room the next morning.

In the middle of the night, trapped together in a snowstorm, lost in the magic of the moment, it had been easy to brush aside pesky things like, you know, common freaking sense.

In the harsh light of the morning, however, that was not such an easy task.

I say morning as if I was waking up on the right side of it.

Or waking up at all.

But the truth of the matter was, I hadn't been able to sleep at all.

I'd tossed and turned, tangling my bedsheets in my frustration.

My body, sated once, felt ravenous for more, making even the thin material of my nightgown feel too oppressive against me as I ached for more of him, for what could have happened if only his phone hadn't dinged.

Surely, though, it was for the best that it had interrupted. If nothing else, it saved me from even more regrets the next morning.

At some point, I had pulled myself out of bed, moving around my room, walking on my tiptoes to make the least amount of sound as possible, even though I knew Vega could sleep through an earthquake or full-scale civil war.

It wasn't Vega I was worried about.

Because while a part of me wanted Cesare to realize I was awake, and that he could come to my door, push it open, stride inside, rip off our clothes, toss me onto the bed, and surge inside of me, I knew that couldn't happen.

Things were messy enough.

Complicated enough.

I would already struggle ever to look him in the eye again, knowing the last time I had done so, his fingers had been buried inside me, feeling my walls clench him as I came.

I cleaned my already cleaned room, and arranged and rearranged the few knickknacks I had lying around. I checked my inventory of backup items—never more than three of each thing in total, never wanting too much, yet also somehow afraid of running out.

There was nothing to do, but I needed to busy myself to keep my mind from focusing on the one thing I really needed it not to.

Him.

Out in the living room without his shirt, his muscles begging to be explored, his tattoos memorized, his cock ridden.

“Enough,” I hissed to myself when the sun was finally breaking through my bedroom blinds, made doubly bright by

all the fresh fallen snow outside.

Going into my closet, I found my outfit for the day, did my makeup and my hair, then steadied myself for the coming discomfort as I emerged from my room.

“Vega!” I hissed, finding her walking up to the back of the couch where a sleeping Cesare was sprawled, an arm draped over his face, his whole torso on display.

Which was why my cousin was getting close.

With her camera out.

To take a picture of the sleeping man.

She shot me a wicked smirk, and I heard the shutter of her camera before she tucked her phone away again, gesturing toward the kitchen, where I was heading after I quickly brushed my teeth.

I felt a little twitchy that I wasn't giving myself a chance to shower before starting my day. But I had a feeling that being naked again was only going to bring those memories flooding back.

I needed my clothes. The ones that doubled as a shield. That masked everything beneath.

“You're cooking right now?” Vega asked, perched on the kitchen counter in nothing but a long t-shirt and, I hoped, panties. “With a hot, mostly naked man asleep on the couch?”

“He's half-naked at most,” I objected, turning toward the cabinet, and pulling out the makings for pancakes. “And, eventually, he will wake up, and will likely be hungry,” I said, moving around all but silently, finding a bowl and utensils, then starting to measure things out.

“Fine, yeah, but you should be jumping his bones right now, not cooking.”

“Jumping his bones,” I repeated. “With you right here?” I asked, shaking my head.

“Girl, I would never be a clam jam.”

“A... what?” I asked, knowing almost immediately that I was going to regret the answer.

“The clam,” she said, gesturing toward her crotch, “jam. I would never jam your clam, girl. That’s what I’m getting at. If you wanted to go over there and get the friction on, I will see myself to my room, put on my headphones, and be in a whole different world.”

“Thanks for the offer, but no, I will not be accosting the man in his sleep.”

“Please,” Vega said, rolling her eyes over the rim of her coffee. “I saw the way that man was looking at you. It would be consensual accosting.”

“Would that stand up in court?” I asked. “And he didn’t look at me in any unique way,” I insisted.

“Mere, I love you. But you are truly blind when it comes to the opposite sex.”

“I am just reasonable about the opposite sex,” I insisted.

Sure, things had gotten carried away the night before, but in the harsh light of morning, I was starting to see things a little more clearly. Namely, that Cesare was a very attractive man who could have just about any woman he wanted. The chances of him wanting me were slim to none.

I had just been there.

That was all.

If we were in a normal crowd of people, he wouldn’t have chosen me.

I wasn’t trying to be negative about myself, just realistic.

“Listen, I get it,” Vega said, exhaling a bit. “He’s hot. And not just like regular hot. He’s super hot. And it’s hard for you to think that he might want you because you clearly don’t see yourself as clearly as everyone else does. But you’re hot shit too. And he, being a seeing man, noticed.”

I said nothing to that, just waited for the pan to heat up, not wanting to risk that dreaded first “practice pancake” all pale

and sad-looking.

“Maybe it’s a good thing that he’s not long for the area, y’know?” Vega went on. “Maybe you put too much pressure on your interactions with men. This could be a fun way to subvert that. Just a fun little fling you can easily move on from when he heads back to the city.”

It was silly, but just the mention of him going back to the city made my stomach drop a little.

“I’m not interested in a fling.”

“You’re not interested in anything with men,” Vega countered.

“So?” I asked, even though the constant, distracting pressure on my lower stomach told me that there was definitely interest. And unfulfilled desire.

“Listen, if you genuinely just want to be alone, that’s fine. I just... I don’t think that’s the case. I think you’re scared of anyone accepting you the way you are. But, uhm, newsflash, cuz, you love to cook and clean. I’m pretty sure every guy would count themselves lucky to have you in their life. And with that, I will stop nagging.”

“Good.”

“But not talking about what a yummy piece of man meat that is over there,” she said, looking over her shoulder toward the couch as a grumbling sound escaped me. “Oh, come on. You know it’s true. Those muscles? The tattoos? My God,” she said, fanning herself with her hand.

“He’s attractive, yeah,” I agreed, getting an eye roll from my cousin. “Are you off work today?” I asked.

“No.”

“Really?” I asked, looking up.

“I know, right? There’s like another foot or more out there, but somehow, I have to schlep my ass into work. We are still working on that case. Hank is a bit uncharacteristically motivated by it. What about you?”

“I’m going in. I have a big baby shower order. And I have to prepare the flowers for the inn,” I added. They had a standing weekly order that made a decent amount of money for the shop. It was a big job, and not one I could save for the following morning.

Besides, having a distraction would be good for me right about then.

“Well, that kind of works out then. I can drive you in.”

Right.

My car.

God, how had that escaped my mind?

That was normally something I would be hyper-fixating on, worrying about. But it seemed to have completely escaped my mind since getting back to my apartment with Cesare.

As soon as I could, I was sneaking away to call for a tow.

“Or I can let Mr. Dreamy over there drive you to work,” she offered, giving me a wicked smile.

“I’m sure he is ready to be back to his life,” I said, dropping two mounds of pancake batter into the heated pan, watching them spread, then start to fill with little bubble holes.

“Speak of the devil,” she called, loudly enough for the man who had just folded up from the couch to hear.

“Talking about me already?” Cesare called back, his voice a little rough and raspy from sleep. And damn if it didn’t send a little jolt of desire through my system.

“Talking about. Taking pictures of. Thinking about accosting,” Vega called, and I could feel my cheeks growing warm.

I swear I felt, rather than saw, Cesare stand from the couch, stretching out his long torso, then turning to face the kitchen before making his way in our direction.

“Morning Vega,” Cesare said, coming into the small space of the tiny kitchen, immediately seeming to suck up all the air

He still smelled like his cologne.

And I swear as he moved behind me to go to the coffee pot, I could feel the heat radiating off of him.

“Morning, Mere,” he said, voice a low sound that slithered over my skin, forcing wicked memories to flash in front of my vision for a moment before I reminded myself to focus.

In for five, hold for four, out for six.

“Morning,” I mumbled, not even sure he could hear me, since it was quiet even to my own ears.

“Mere is making us pancakes,” Vega declared, tone bright, bubbly, and I knew her well enough to know she was probably up to something.

“I see that,” Cesare said, choosing to lean in the tiniest area between the fridge and the stove where I was standing, his whole body maybe only an inch from mine, making me all too aware of my movements, not wanting to brush him.

Either completely oblivious to the charge in the room, or simply trying to show me some mercy, Vega spoke again.

“She might throw in some chocolate chips if you ask nicely,” Vega prompted. “But I want blueberries in mine,” she declared.

“Always,” I agreed, hearing the strange tightness in my voice, wondering if Vega was picking up on it.

If she was, she was ignoring it.

Because the next thing I knew, she was hopping off of the counter.

“Okay. I call dibs on the shower,” she said, rushing off in that direction, leaving the two of us alone in the kitchen without a buffer.

“Think we need to talk, sweetheart,” Cesare said, sending a rush of butterflies through my belly.

I reached for the spatula, flipping the pancakes, trying to distract myself from the fluttering.

“About Dennis?” I prompted, tone innocent. “What did he have to say?”

“No, baby, not about Dennis,” he said, voice even lower, even sexier.

“He texted you, though. Where is he?” I asked.

“I don’t want to talk about Dennis, Mere,” he said as I busied myself by taking the pancakes off the pan and putting them on the plate lined with a crisp white kitchen towel, so I could flip the material over the pancakes to seal in the heat.

I was about to reach for the bowl and spoon once again when Cesare’s hand shot out, flicking off the heat, surprising me enough to turn to face him.

Close.

Way too close.

And looking far too good.

“There’s nothing else to talk about,” I insisted, watching as he took a long sip of his coffee before setting it down.

“You’re right. I actually don’t want to talk,” he said, suddenly sinking his hands into my hips, grabbing me, turning me, and slamming me back against the counter.

“We can’t,” I insisted, voice nothing but a whisper.

“The only way we can’t is if you don’t want to,” he countered, leaning his head down, keeping eye contact that should have unnerved me, not made another rush of desire move through me. “Tell me you don’t want me,” he invited.

It was a challenge.

Because he damn well knew I couldn’t say that.

Or, at least, I couldn’t mean that.

“Tell me you don’t want me to do this,” he said, tipping his head down, running his lips across my neck. “Or this,” he went on as his hand slipped up from my hip, grazing over my breast before squeezing, making a little whimper escape me. “Or this,” he went on as his hand went down from my breast

and up under my dress, finding nothing between us again but my panties that were already wet with need. “Fuck,” he hissed, feeling it, then hearing my gasp as his fingers toyed with me through the thin material.

His control snapped then as he yanked at my panties, and I felt them slide down my legs, all but forgotten by the time they pooled on the floor.

But then he was moving, gathering up my skirt, and starting to lower down.

“Wait!”

The sound was a panicked shriek, making his head jerk up to look at me, brows furrowed.

“I want to shower first,” I insisted.

“Baby,” he said, tone patient, understanding. “I want to taste you, not soap,” he said, ducking his head again.

There was a pause, waiting for me to object again, but I couldn’t seem to find the words.

And then he was on his knees, my leg was draped over his shoulder, and his face was between my thighs.

A shudder racked my system as I felt his tongue gliding up my cleft, the cold shock of his tongue ring dragging a moan out of me.

Everything else fell away right then.

My car that needed towing.

The pancakes that needed cooking.

Vega in the other room.

Even the possible repercussions of this decision.

All there was in the world was him, and the sensations he was creating inside of me.

My legs felt shaky, my breath uneven and frantic.

My skirt had fallen, shielding most of Cesare from view even as his tongue traced over my clit, creating little sparks of pleasure as the need built in my system.

His hand slipped between us, two of his fingers moving inside of me again, creating more intense sensations as they began to thrust as his tongue continued its sweet torment.

I'd never been able to relax enough to enjoy this before.

For the partners who'd insisted, I'd been wooden and uncomfortable until they gave up.

But Cesare's words were still floating around my mind.

I want to taste you.

Like he was craving it.

Like the only way to be satiated was to consume me.

Which was what it felt like he was doing.

I'd never felt quite so in my body before, my mind free of worries, nothing to focus on but the pleasure as it rose upward, then peaked.

My cries were muffled thanks to the breathlessness I felt as the waves crashed through me over and over, making my thighs weak enough that I needed to grasp the counter as Cesare kept working me, dragging out the pleasure until I was completely sated.

It was then, right then, that I heard the bathroom door open.

Cesare seemed to hear it as well, rushing out from under my skirt, grabbing my panties as he went, stuffing them into the pocket of the sweatpants as I turned, flicking the heat back on, and dropping batter into an unheated pan.

I should have known better than to overreact.

Vega never remembered to bring her clothes into the bathroom. So she always wrapped herself in a towel and walked to her room to dress.

Still, my heartbeat was hammering, my pulse a strange fluttering sensation in my neck and wrists and, well, groin.

Seeming to sense my desire *not* to talk about it, Cesare moved away, his hand brushing my lower back as he went into

the living room, gathering his clothes, and making his way into the bathroom.

I don't think I took a proper breath until I heard that door close.

I was saved from overthinking about it as I remembered to call the tow. Then as Vega came out of the bedroom, her hair pulled back into a clip, wearing pinstripe dress pants, heels, a black shirt, and carrying her black jacket with her.

If she noticed I should have been further along with my cooking, she didn't mention it as she gathered some plates, syrup, and butter.

When the door to the bathroom opened, I felt myself jump, then glanced at Vega, wondering if she saw my guilty gaze.

But she was focused on Cesare, who stopped mid-stride as he looked at her. His dark brow rose as a smile tugged at his lips.

"Almost didn't recognize you," he admitted, shaking his head.

"Obnoxious, isn't it?" she asked, gesturing toward her outfit.

"Dunno. Think suits scream *power*. Which is never a bad thing," he told her as he slipped his watch on his wrist.

"Wait, where are you going?" Vega asked, making me look up to see that, sure enough, he was heading toward the door. "Don't you want to stay for breakfast?"

"You know what?" he asked, shooting the barest of smirks in my direction. "I'm actually full."

And with that, he was gone.

"That was weird," Vega decided, stealing a lukewarm pancake off of the plate. "It was almost like he got a mouthful of pussy," she added, then her eyes went huge as she turned to look at me fully. "Meredith!" she hissed, mouth gaping.

"What?" I asked, playing dumb as I flipped a pale pancake.

“Did you serve him breakfast? On his knees? In this very kitchen?”

I couldn't lie.

Not to her.

So I said nothing.

“Oh, my God. That's hot. Holy shit. I am so fucking proud of you!” she said, wrapping her arms around me, and squeezing me tight. “This is too good. I need all the details!”

“What? No.”

“I don't need to know how you like to get it,” she said, rolling her eyes at me. “But was he good? He looks like a man who likes to dine at the Y, if you know what I mean. Guys who like that always carry themselves differently, I swear.”

“Vega, I don't want to talk about that,” I said, shaking my head.

She tried to hide her disappointed sigh. I knew she was looking for that female closeness. She had, after all, shared all her sexual escapades with me.

“I know. I get it. Just know I'm super happy for you, okay? Now hurry up with those pancakes. We have work to get to.”

And so we did.

I just had no idea what I would be walking into is all...

CHAPTER TEN

Cesare

It had been a rough night.

And not just because my cock was throbbing, begging to surge inside of her, to hear those little whimpers and moans of pleasure as I moved inside of her.

But because the fucking pillow smelled like her, reminding me of her sweet skin and hair as she curled into me as she came.

Before the goddamn text came in that ruined it all.

Fucking Dennis.

Missing for days, showing up just in time to be the worst goddamn cockblock in history.

Because I knew that if the text hadn't come in, forcing Mere to come out of her body and her wants and desires, and

focus instead on life shit, things were going to progress with us.

I couldn't tell you why I wanted that so badly.

It wasn't like I'd been hard up for a woman.

I never really went very long without one.

But, fuck, I could barely think straight with the need to have her.

It was the first thought when my eyes opened and I heard the murmur of feminine voices coming from the kitchen.

It took a second of focusing to make my cock settle back down again before I got to my feet.

Then there she was.

Looking as sweet as ever in a cream dress, barely able to look at me, or even breathe properly when I moved close.

I was praying Vega would take off to shower.

Then when she did, I lost any control I had over myself.

I meant to talk to her. To explain that I wanted more. That I didn't care if the situation was messy.

But, well, the urge to taste her, to hear and feel her come again, was too strong to fight.

And as much as I enjoyed the fuck out of that, it was a problem. Because we never got a chance to sort shit out.

Which was why I was planning on heading into La Flora for a little chat. After I went home to shower, change, and then meet up with Dennis at his place.

Gav was in the kitchen when I got in, and I rushed up the stairs without greeting him, stripping, and climbing into the shower, so I could finally take my throbbing cock into my hand and get some relief from the clawing desire that had been with me the entire night before.

I came so hard I swear I damn near blacked out for a moment. That was what that woman did to me. With her pretty

face and her old-fashioned dress, with her eccentricities, and her shyness, and her sweetness.

I knew that I should probably be a better man, decide to ignore the desire, not let shit go down with Mere. She deserved better than that.

But I wasn't that good of a man.

And all I could think about was how to get the shit squared away with Dennis quickly, so I could surprise her at the shop. Maybe lock the door and fuck her in the back room before either of us could think better of it.

"Isn't it a good thing that Dennis reached out?" Gav asked, making me realize I was scowling as I made my coffee.

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "Just pissed he took this long to get in touch," I said. And there was some truth to that. The man had me thinking that there was some giant fucking conspiracy going on or something.

"Yeah, dick move," Gav agreed, but it was clear that all he was thinking about was the situation getting wrapped up quickly, so he could haul his ass back to the city. "You want me to come today?" he asked, looking for something to do. Anything that wasn't more shoveling or sitting around staring at the walls of the house.

"If you want," I said, shrugging. "But we'll take separate cars," I added, knowing I wasn't about to head straight home afterward.

Two hours later, I was pulling up to Dennis's house once again, finding Gav already parked in the driveway, waiting for me.

We got to the door.

Knocked.

Rang.

But no one came.

"He's probably in the shower or something," Gav said, reaching for the door handle, and it turned in his hand, making

him turn to shrug at me, silently asking if we went in.

And since I didn't want to be standing on the cold step, I nodded and we moved inside.

I braced myself for the smell of rot, but there was nothing but the slight scent of a lemon cleaner.

"Dennis!" I called as we moved down the hall toward the kitchen, where the table was cleaned off, the sink empty.

For a second, I almost thought I'd imagined the rotting food and the mold.

But, no.

I mean, if Dennis was back, of course he'd have cleaned up his mess. He wasn't going to stay in a house reeking of old food.

"Don't hear a shower," Gav said, tilting his head up to listen to the top floor.

He was right.

It was completely silent.

I felt unease prickle across my skin, making my hand reach instinctively for my gun, not sure what was going on, but not liking the vibe I was getting.

Gav noticed, and his hand went for his own weapon. The other hand made a twirling motion in the air, and I knew him well enough to know his meaning.

Let's do a sweep.

So that was what we did, and with each room we passed through with no one in it, I could feel my tension rising until my spine was ramrod straight, and my gut was twisted into a tight knot after we'd explored all three floors with no success.

Back in the kitchen, I pointed toward the door in the mudroom. The one that led out into the garage.

Where there was no longer a car.

"Could have just run out to get some food," Gav said, shrugging.

It was good logic. He'd been gone a while. His food supply was probably low. Maybe he wanted to serve us something for the meeting.

But even with that theory floating around, I couldn't seem to shake my unease, my sense that something was wrong, that I was missing something.

"Give 'em half an hour," Gav said, leaning against the counter.

But he didn't put his gun away.

If that was because he was feeling some sort of unease as well, or just picking up on mine, I didn't know.

All I did know, though, was half an hour passed.

Then an hour.

Then two.

With no sign of Dennis.

I texted.

I called.

I felt anger mingling with that feeling of tension.

"What is it?" Gav asked as we walked back down the front path.

"I don't know," I admitted. "That's what's pissing me off."

Something was going on here, but I had no idea what the fuck it was.

"Maybe he went to the flower shop?" Gav suggested.

"That's his place, after all. He's been away. Maybe he wanted to check on shit."

That was actually pretty good logic.

And I wasn't just thinking that because my cock was still aching at the thought of Mere reaching out and touching it, stroking it, sucking it into her mouth, welcoming it into her tight, wet pussy.

"True," I agreed, nodding.

“Want me to come?” he asked.

I couldn't think of anything I wanted less than that, actually.

“No, I got this. Why don't you call Emilio and tell him that Dennis was in contact, but that we haven't talked yet,” I told him instead, wanting him to have a task so he didn't get suspicious and show up at the flower shop.

“Alright. Can do. Let me know what you find out,” Gav said before dipping into his car.

I had to slow my pace to my own car, getting in, and driving slowly back into town.

Mere's car was gone from the side of the road, signs of a tow truck in the snow, making it muddy and packed down. I hadn't been aware she'd called for it. But maybe she'd done it after I'd dipped out of her apartment that morning.

I figured that Vega must have driven her into work, because I saw the open sign on the door, and the flowers in the front window as I drove down the street to park.

Anticipation was sparking through my system as I walked toward the shop, making me feel like some fucking teenager, still waiting for his first taste and feel of the opposite sex.

I didn't stop to think about it, though, as I yanked open the door to the empty shop, hearing the little chime on the door fill the space, as I couldn't seem to focus on anything other than my sheer dumb luck.

An empty shop.

And Mere.

I didn't even fucking care anymore if Dennis was still in the wind.

I just wanted to see her.

She wasn't in the front of the store, and it took a solid minute before her figure appeared in the doorway to the back.

Looking back, I would see the signs.

The tense shoulders.

The big eyes.

The way she kept shifting her feet.

At the moment, though, I was looking through a lens of desire. And everything else seemed to fall out of focus.

All that mattered was she was there.

Looking even prettier than I remembered.

“Hey, sweetheart,” I said, dipping my head to one side, shooting her a smile that should have been able to charm off her panties.

Then again, of course, I still had her panties in my car glove compartment, didn't I? From where I'd fished them off the ground and stashed them into my pocket.

I should have left them in the bathroom laundry bin.

But I didn't do that.

I couldn't say why. It wasn't like I was one of those guys who sniffed panties or some shit. I guess I just wanted to have a piece of her with me or something. Even though that didn't make any sense. I wasn't a guy who kept souvenirs of their conquests.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, voice a little breathless. And at that moment, I thought it was a mix of surprise and pleasure.

“I was supposed to meet with Dennis at his house, but he didn't show. So I figured I would drop in here to see if he's around.”

“He's not here,” she said, the words rushing out, tumbling over one another.

“Well, then maybe I will just... hang with you for a while,” I offered, taking a step closer.

“No!” The sound burst out of her, frantic and forceful, making me stop in my tracks.

“No?” I asked, brows drawing together.

“No. I have so much work to do. I can’t have any distractions. I, ah, I have to do all the flower arrangements for the inn. It takes hours. And I’m already behind because of, uhm, being busy here today.”

Busy?

It seemed dead.

Was she lying to me?

Trying to rush me out of the store?

But why?

As far as I could tell, we’d left things on good terms that morning.

Then again, maybe dipping out when I did had been a mistake.

Clearly, Mere wasn’t like the usual woman I fucked around with. In fact, she wasn’t really the type of woman who fucked around at all, was she?

Had she been hurt by my leaving? Or thought I was done with her?

Then spent the next few hours overthinking it?

It seemed possible.

Probable, even, judging by her behavior.

“Sweetheart...” I tried again, laying the charm on thick, trying to take a step forward.

“Really. You need to go,” she said, rushing forward a few steps, pressing her hand into my chest and pushing me backward.

She wasn’t strong enough to actually push me, but my surprise had me following her lead until I found myself standing beside the door.

Her other hand shot out, reaching for the door, finding it locked, then fumbling with the lock, so she could yank it over.

“Mere,” I tried again, voice soft, my hand reaching out, trying to touch her face.

“Cesare, I’m busy,” she snapped, her tone so sharp that I swear it left fucking gashes.

Then I was out on the sidewalk, and she was on the other side of the door.

I was too stunned to do anything other than walk to my car, to get inside, to take my bruised fucking ego and head back to the house.

Some time later, when shit was hitting the fan, and I was trying to figure out what went wrong and why and how, I would remember it.

The look on her face.

Pure, undiluted fear.

And the fact that as soon as I was outside, she not only shut the door once again but turned the lock back into place.

At the time, though, all I saw was a woman who had literally pushed me away, shoved me out of her business, out of her life.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mere

Everything was fine.

Until, of course, it wasn't.

My morning went predictably.

I opened up the shop, doing a quick clean, then after helping one particularly bereft young man who had “epically fucked up” with his girlfriend, I went into the back to prepare all the flowers for the inn, playing around with some different, but still long-lasting and low maintenance flowers.

I would like to say that my brain wasn't constantly flooded with thoughts of Cesare. But that would be an outright lie.

I couldn't help but obsess over it.

Why had he departed so quickly?

Was that all he wanted from me?

And, if so, why?

I mean... he'd gotten nothing out of it.

Was that the problem? Had I not been quick enough in reciprocating? But, like, Vega was just a few feet away, about to emerge at any point. I couldn't exactly have her walking out to me on my knees in front of him, could I?

Maybe he thought I could.

Maybe he didn't care who might see him doing dirty things.

"Ugh," I grumbled as I put the last of the arrangements into the walk-in, knocking my head into one of the wire racks gently, feeling the cool against my flushed skin.

Maybe I should have engaged Vega more in the conversation she'd clearly wanted to have over breakfast and then all through the drive into town.

She wasn't used to me having a guy in my life, so she'd been understandably buzzing with all the questions she wanted to ask.

I shouldn't have shut her down so quickly.

Maybe talking it out would have made the whole thing easier to deal with, to analyze, to see through a less confused lens. Especially because, if there was one woman I knew who knew a lot about men, it was Vega.

This was the woman who once spent a week on the white sand beaches on some private island with a damn prince.

An actual prince.

I mean, sure, it was of a small country, but still. It was royalty.

She also claimed the man had wanted more from her, but that she quickly became disinterested because, "He was boring." And that "Guys like him, who grow up with the whole world oohing and ahing over every little thing they do, they have no motivation to actually become interesting."

Personally, I would have chosen the prince over the partially-employed musician that she'd pined over for one whole summer.

But that was me viewing it from an outsider's perspective.

I couldn't have known what things were like between them.

And I hadn't personally ever felt that sort of obsessive interest that she had with him.

Until Cesare.

But maybe talking it out with Vega would be the smartest thing.

Let her give me some gentle advice. Or, at the very least, figure out my own feelings on the whole matter. And, possibly, tell me why he'd walked out like that.

I felt some of the anxiety uncoil as I made up my mind to talk to her on the drive home. My car, unfortunately, wasn't going to be fixed for another day or two, thanks to a backup at the garage.

It was fine.

It gave us time to talk.

Taking a deep breath, I moved out front to help another customer who left a few moments later, hand clutching a pre-made bouquet that she wanted to give to her friend who'd just found out she was going to be a grandma.

I was just going to go make myself a cup of tea, and relax at my desk for a while.

That was the plan.

Until I walked into the prep room to find a man standing there.

Like he was waiting for me.

He was tall, but not quite as tall as Cesare, but with a stockier build that he had covered in an army-green t-shirt and a pair of black jeans. His brown hair was buzzed short, something that made his somewhat out-turned ears seem to stick out more.

If I hadn't been so scared, I might have said he was attractive. Wide mouth, stern brow, dark eyes, and a cleft in his chin.

Most women would say he was attractive.

I found him... menacing.

A gasp escaped me, making his head pop up, one of his dark brows slowly lifting.

"Don't," he said, tone low yet forceful when I immediately tried to take a step backward. "You run, you make me chase you. And you won't like what I do to you then," he said, making my stomach sink.

Goosebumps rose up my arms, over my chest, and down my back.

I was suddenly frozen, actual shivers racking my body.

"What do you want?" I asked, trying to think of a way out of this.

I could scream.

But there was no guarantee anyone was in the businesses next door. What with the new snowstorm and all.

I could run.

But he looked like he worked out. I took long walks in the summer, but I was no athlete. He could easily overtake me.

What was left?

To fight?

As much as I hated to admit it, I wasn't an overly brave woman. I'd never thrown a punch. I got a little uneasy at the sight of blood.

What was I supposed to do? Grab a pair of shears and jab them into his throat? His eye?

I really didn't think I could do either of those things. Not even to save my own life.

Lord, that made me sound like a coward.

But it really just seemed like the truth to me.

“Well, I want to have a little chat,” he said, head tipping to the side slightly, watching me as I processed that information.

“A... chat?” I asked, frowning. “About what?”

“The business,” he said, waving an arm around, showing me half of a tattoo on the inside of his arm that disappeared into his t-shirt.

“I, ah, this isn’t my business,” I said, figuring that if this was a Dennis problem, this guy could just go ahead and talk to him, not me. “I could give you the owner’s number,” I invited.

“I don’t want to talk to Dennis,” he said, making my stomach twist. It was one thing, I thought, that he wanted to talk to the general owner. It seemed like a complete other that he knew who the owner was.

“Okay. Ah, what is this regarding?” I asked, saying a silent prayer that someone—anyone—would come into the store, and give me an excuse to move away from this man. Then walk my butt right out onto the street and keep going until I got to a police officer.

Or Vega.

Because, quite frankly, if I were to put my money on a cop or Vega, I might pick my cousin.

“We got a problem.”

“We?” I asked.

“Yep. We. Used to be a problem with me and Rayna, but now...” he said, waving a hand out, letting the sentence hang, letting me fill in the blanks.

But now Rayna was in intensive care.

Because of him?

Had he put her there?

It certainly seemed possible.

Everything about the man screamed danger.

“I have no idea what kind of business you were doing with Rayna. I just... I just work here.”

“Yeah. And I was hoping to just keep it that way,” he said, nodding. “But shit has changed. Now, you’ve seen my men. And now you are involved.”

His men.

The strange men that made me so uncomfortable.

The ones who left a single bullet in the prep room.

Suddenly, that felt like ages ago.

But it wasn’t.

And maybe it had just gotten back to this man that I had seen his men, that I, I don’t know, thought they were up to something.

“Your men? The ones who unpack the flowers?” I asked, letting my tone be a little softer, more innocent, almost naive.

“Oh, come on now, Meredith,” he said with a cold smirk, making a shiver move up my spine. “You’re not that dumb,” he said. “No one thinks it takes half a dozen guys to unpack some flowers. Men you didn’t even know existed.”

“I have no idea what happens on shipment days,” I insisted. “I’ve never worked them before.”

“Well, it’s too bad you started,” he said, shrugging. “Now you’re involved. Whether you like it or not.”

“Involved with what?” I asked, shaking my head. “Flower imports?”

“Don’t be dumb, Meredith,” he said, rolling his eyes at me. “You know it’s more than flowers coming in this shop.”

I didn’t.

Not until that very moment.

“What else is coming in?”

“That’s my business. And you know whose business it isn’t?”

“Mine?” I asked.

“Not who I meant, but in fact, it ain’t your fucking business either.”

“Who then?” I asked. “Dennis?”

“Fucking Costa.”

Cesare?

He knew who Cesare was?

I mean, if he was using the flower shop as some sort of import business, I guess he would have to learn about the people involved in said business. Dennis. Rayna. Me. And Cesare.

“I... okay. I won’t say anything. I don’t even have anything to say,” I added.

“Nah, see, that ain’t good enough,” he said, pushing away from the table, and making his way toward me. “I gotta give you some motivation to keep that pretty mouth shut,” he said, reaching in his pocket.

For a split second, I worried it was a gun.

Or a knife.

But it was just his phone.

He swiped a finger over the screen a few times then turned it to face me.

And there it was.

A picture of Vega.

“This your girl, right?” he asked, smirking in a way that would make the devil himself envious.

“That’s my... roommate,” I said, wanting to protect part of her identity.

“Nah. That’s your cousin,” he corrected, giving me a look that said I better stop lying to him. “She’s pretty. Kinda badass lawyer lady too. Be a real shame if someone had to snatch her off the street, drag her somewhere dark and cold, and spend hours having all sorts of fun with her. Maybe while you watch.

Before the same happens to you,” he said, making my blood turn cold in my veins.

“No...” I whispered as my mind flashed with horrific visions, ones I knew were going to plague me for days, weeks, months, years, an entire lifetime, ones that came to me in bright, vivid detail. The sounds, the sighs, the screams.

No.

I had to stop.

I had to focus.

Just then, though, there was the chime on the door, making me jolt and my potential attacker to glance past me, then pull me back so I was out of sight.

“Get rid of him,” he hissed, voice low, his head dipped so that our foreheads almost touched. “You say one word,” he said, flashing his phone at me again, where Vega’s picture was still on the screen. “You got me?”

“Yes,” I said, voice choked.

“Get rid of him.”

Him could have been anyone.

The shop was full of male customers all the time.

But, somehow, I knew.

Not just because of the strange man’s reaction, but the way my skin felt like it sizzled, like something about Cesare charged the air.

Then there he was.

Looking good.

And still, it seemed, interested.

I felt like my heart was a popped balloon in my chest as I rushed forward, as I pushed him toward the door.

Because whatever I had been hoping might transpire between myself and Cesare no longer could. It was too risky. For all I knew, the men could be watching me, reporting my moves back to the man in the back room.

Had they known that Cesare had saved me from the side of the road?

That he had stayed at my apartment?

Did that put Vega in more danger?

My mind was racing, making me feel immediately lightheaded as I all but shoved Cesare out onto the street, pretending to ignore not only the surprise and confusion on his handsome face, but something else just under the surface, something that made my heart ache at seeing.

Hurt.

He was hurt by my rejection.

And I had no way to tell him that I didn't mean it, that I was being forced to say those things, to act that way.

Not unless I wanted to put Vega at risk.

I knew my cousin.

I knew how she would tell me to handle this.

To reassure the man, then do the exact opposite of what he was telling me to do. She would tell me not only to tell Cesare, but to go directly to the police.

But I wasn't Vega.

I wasn't that strong.

And there was no way I could live with myself if she got hurt or killed because I didn't do exactly as I was told.

So, yeah, maybe I chose the coward's way out.

But I slid that door lock into place, and walked back into the prep room, ready to reassure this man that I wasn't going to say anything to anyone.

"That seemed... cozy," the unknown man said, his brow quirked up slightly.

"What did?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

I wasn't going to get Cesare in trouble because of some situation that had nothing to do with him. The poor man didn't

even live in the area. He only showed up because he was looking for Dennis.

This was Dennis's problem. And, apparently, Rayna. And now mine.

Not Cesare's.

"You and Costa," he said, and something in his curious gaze told me that he didn't know about Cesare being at my apartment the night before.

I was going to do everything in my power to keep it that way.

"I've only seen the man, like, three times," I said, shrugging. He didn't need to know what happened during those times when we'd seen each other.

"The less he's around here, the better," the man said.

"I can't really control who comes into the store," I reminded him.

"Guess not, but it would be in your best interest to make sure he doesn't hang around for long. You know why," he said, tapping his darkened phone.

"I understand," I said, nodding in a solemn way.

Because I did understand the gravity of the situation.

But more so because I wanted him to go away, to leave me alone, to give me five minutes to freak out by myself.

"Good. I'll see you on delivery days," he told me, his words a dark threat.

Then he was turning and making his way out of the back door.

I didn't bother to rush behind him to lock it.

It had *been* locked.

So he either picked it, or he had a key.

Either way, the lock was completely useless.

What I did do, though, was take myself into the bathroom, close and lock the door, then collapse back onto the wall. My entire body was racked with shivers as tears sprung to my eyes.

I'd never known true fear in my life, not really.

I'd been scared of things, sure. Speaking in front of a class. Having my car skid on black ice. Having a man follow me on a dark street when no one else was around.

Scary situations, all.

But they paled in comparison to this. An actual threat. Not only to my safety and life but that of Vega's as well.

A cold sweat had broken out across my body, making me feel clammy and freezing even as I went to the sink, staring at my reflection in the mirror.

It was going to be okay.

Because I wasn't going to say anything.

I wasn't going to do anything that would put Vega at risk.

Or Cesare.

What was going to be hard was acting like nothing was wrong. I'd never been good at hiding my emotions. It was probably why the bullies at school had teased me so mercilessly. Because they could see just how much their words affected me. It was how Vega always knew when I needed her to give me some space, or back off when she was making me uncomfortable.

It was all right there on my face.

I needed to figure out how to change that.

In about... five hours.

I stared at myself, the flushed skin, the wide eyes, the tightness in my jaw.

Taking a deep breath, I told my reflection, "Shut it down."

Then stared at myself as I relaxed the tension around my jaw and lips, as I eased the muscles around my eyes until they

looked more normal.

I went beyond that, shaking the tension out of my shoulders. Relaxing my spine.

That was the version of myself that I needed to show to Vega. To Cesare. To any and every person I came in contact with from now until, well, forever, I guess.

Taking another steadying breath, I walked out into the shop, walking up to the front, and unlocking the door.

The rest of the day was full of familiar, mundane tasks. Making arrangements, handing out orders that had been placed days before.

It wasn't until the shop was closed for the day, and I was alone to finish up my tasks, that I came to a startling realization.

Work wasn't my sanctuary anymore.

I felt none of that old, familiar relief being inside of it.

Everything around me reminded me of the men in the prep room. The boxes that were supposed to only be full of these beautiful flowers, but clearly had something else inside. Something secret that men were willing to maim and kill over.

I never could have imagined a day when I didn't want to work in the shop.

But every inch of me wanted to run, to hide, to never return.

I couldn't do that, though.

What would the man do then?

If I disappeared with all of his secrets?

Track me down?

Torture Vega to try to get information out of her? Kill her when he didn't get it?

No.

"I need a giant ice cream sundae then to murder about three-hundred people on an ultra-violent video game," Vega

declared as I met her on the sidewalk.

For one moment, I thought about grabbing her hand, pulling her to the car, spilling the details of what was going on, beg her to pack a bag, and run away with me.

I couldn't do that, though.

So I agreed to get ice cream.

Then I shut myself in the bathroom, buried deep in scalding hot water, as she yelled at and insulted and cursed out some guys on the game she was playing.

I don't know how many times I refilled the tub, but by the time my neck was aching from leaning against the edge of it, Vega was quiet.

Gone to bed, I figured.

It wasn't until I walked out that I realized I'd miscalculated.

She was silent because she was no longer in the apartment.

And in her place was Cesare.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mere

“What are you doing here?” My voice came out breathless. And I honestly couldn’t tell you if it was from surprise or pleasure.

I felt both.

Even though I’d spent a larger chunk of my bath than I’d like to admit thinking about all the reasons I needed to not be interested in Cesare anymore.

Or, let’s be real, in the first place.

Starting with the fact that he wasn’t a resident, that he wasn’t going to be staying, that there was no future in it.

And as much as I hated to admit it, I was someone who was looking for that. I would be sad, if not downright heartbroken, if things progressed and then he suddenly was on his way back to the city like nothing had happened, like I meant nothing.

It was for the best to end things now, no matter how much my body objected to it.

Even just looking at him in his well-tailored charcoal gray suit with the matte black shirt beneath had my sex clenching, making me press my thighs together to ease the ache.

“I had to go thirty minutes out of town to get ‘em, and when I really thought about it on the way back, I figured that maybe bringing flowers to a florist was a stupid fucking idea,” he said, waving a hand toward the kitchen counter where an arrangement sat in a brand new vase.

I didn’t know where he’d gone, or how much input he’d had on the arrangement, but holy hell did he do a good job.

The whole thing was in moody shades of purple with just the barest amount of eucalyptus around to give it some greenery. Lighter purple, puffy round alliums were mixed with deep and medium shades of purple scabiosa.

The vase itself was a simple, tasteful wide cylindrical shape that gave the flowers a little room to breathe, not be crammed all together.

The flowers themselves weren’t exactly expensive in and of themselves, but they were rare for your average, everyday floral arrangements. Which meant he’d probably paid a nice chunk of money for it, all together.

Easily over a hundred. Depending on the town and shop, closer to two.

I know it was silly to feel emotional over it, especially given my trade, but the thing was... no one had ever gotten me flowers before.

Not men I’d dated because, well, they just... didn’t care enough, I guess.

And not Vega because she thought, like Cesare had just said, that it would be silly to get a florist flowers as a present.

“Besides, flowers pretty much wilt and die when I look at them,” she’d once said, smirking.

“They’re beautiful,” I said, blinking rapidly to ease the sting behind my eyes. “I don’t know why you got them, but you did a good job.”

“Figured maybe I fucked up somehow without realizing it,” Cesare admitted, and there was something off in his voice that had my gaze moving from the flowers and back to him, finding him almost a bit... fidgety. Which went against the whole cool, calm, collected, and confident air he always had about him.

“What do you mean?” I asked, pretending not to notice that his gaze dipped for a split second down my body that was wrapped in nothing but my usual silk robe. My wet hair was dripping on my shoulders and chest, and I wondered if maybe the material was sticking to parts that I should have worried about being exposed.

“Well, getting physically shoved out of a woman’s workplace kind of sends a bit of a signal that you fucked up, right?” he asked, actually shuffling his feet a bit, and the move was so unexpectedly charming that I wanted to go toward him, to assure him that nothing was wrong.

But a vision flashed in front of my eyes. Of a man with dark eyes and threats against myself, Vega, and Cesare.

“Gotta admit, I’m a little out of my depths here, sweetheart,” he said, exhaling hard. “I’ve never had to work at this before,” he added.

“Work at... what?” I asked, thinking I knew what he meant, but my insecurity made me want to hear him say it.

“This,” he said, waving an arm out. “Trying to get a woman to give me the time of day,” he added, shaking his head as he looked down at his feet for a second.

Sure, it could have been an act.

Hot guy puts on an insecure front to get under a woman’s defenses.

But something about how embarrassed he seemed to admit those words had me believing he was being genuine.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why what?”

“Why... me, I guess,” I said, watching his dark gaze inspect my face for a moment.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, and my heart crushed a little in my chest. “Sure, you’re gorgeous and you’re interesting, but... I don’t know. There’s just something. Can’t get you out of my fucking head for some reason,” he admitted.

Of course.

Of course when I finally found a guy who was interested in me, I couldn’t be with him.

Not without risking us.

And Vega.

Too much was at stake.

“Did Vega let you in?” I asked, looking around, pretending to ignore the flash of hurt in his eyes.

Cesare didn’t strike me as the kind of man who showed vulnerability easily. And there he was, showing me some, only to have me completely ignore it.

“Yeah. She saw the flowers, then decided to head out to give us some time to talk.”

“Where did she go?” I asked, tone too sharp, voice just a shade too hysterical.

I didn’t want her out of my sight. Especially at night. When she had no idea of the risks all around.

“She said she was going to do some shopping, and then hit the pizza place,” he told me, brows drawing together as he watched me.

I was sure it was all playing across my face right then.

The way I was working through the details. Like Vega wouldn’t be doing any kind of shopping in Balm Harbour. Most places closed too early in the off-season. So she would be heading to the next bigger town, full of big box stores that I

knew she could browse endlessly, buying more lay-around-the-house clothes, stocking up on snacks, and perusing the books.

There would be lights and other people and security cameras.

She was safe there.

The pizza place was in Balm Harbour, but she knew everyone there too. Well enough that they let her use the employee side lot. Where there was also a camera.

So as long as she just went in and out of those places, there wasn't really a chance for anyone to grab her. Even if they knew that Cesare was at my apartment building.

"Are you... afraid to be alone with me?" Cesare asked, tone careful, but I could hear the concern underneath.

"No," I rushed to say, not wanting to hurt him any more. "No, of course not," I added, tone more firm. "Did you ever get in touch with Dennis?" I asked, hoping that my boss's reappearance might help me with these unknown men.

To that, his posture dipped a little as he let out an exhale. "No. We were supposed to meet up, but he didn't show. His place is all cleaned up now, but his car isn't there. Dunno what the fuck is going on. You haven't heard from him still?"

"No." I wish I had.

"You're sure he hasn't been by the shop?"

"I mean, not when I was there, no. Anything is possible if I wasn't. There... there aren't any cameras," I said, realizing for the first time how unusual that was. Everyone had a camera in town. At least one.

But of course the shop didn't.

When they were bringing in who-knew-what in the boxes that the flowers came in.

They couldn't exactly have all that caught on camera, could they?

But it also meant that there was no proof of the man who'd threatened me, even if I'd wanted to go to the police.

"What's wrong?" Cesare said, making me snap out of my swirling thoughts, finding that he'd moved several steps closer to me without me noticing.

"Nothing," I said. Then, realizing that wasn't going to be convincing, I added, "I'm just worried about what is going to happen if Dennis doesn't show up, I guess."

"Nothing will happen," Cesare assured me.

"How do you know that?"

"Because the business will fall fully to me if, God forbid, something happened to Dennis. You don't have to worry about your job, Mere. You're safe there."

Except I wasn't.

I just couldn't tell him that.

Maybe I would, if somehow we figured out that Dennis was gone for good, that Cesare was the one in charge of things.

He would want to know, surely, that illegal things were happening at his business. But until I was sure there was no way not to involve him, I didn't want to take that risk.

I wondered if I could somehow track down Dennis. Or get in contact with Rayna. Who, it seemed, knew about the men in the back room as well.

"Mere," Cesare called, voice soft, making that damn shiver sensation move through me.

"Yeah?"

"You want me to leave?" he asked, head ducked to the side a bit.

Need?

Yes.

I absolutely needed him to leave.

Want, though, that was a far trickier one to answer.

“If it helps to make up your mind,” Cesare said, taking another step closer, right into my personal space, making me have to tilt my head up to keep eye contact. “I didn’t leave this morning because I wanted to, but because I knew Vega would be able to read what was going on. And, I might not know your cousin as well as you do, but I had a feeling she would say something, then you’d be embarrassed, and it would turn into a whole thing.”

“She did,” I said, shrugging. “Say something,” I clarified. “Vega has never been one to let things pass her by without comment. And I would have been humiliated if she did it in front of you.”

“I figured I’d get you alone again to talk about shit. If I didn’t think you understood that, I would have taken the time to say something.”

He was being so... communicative and mature and everything guys I’d known in the past had never been.

It made it even harder to bolster up my resolve to put and keep him at a distance.

“It’s fine,” I said, shrugging.

“Clearly, it’s not,” he countered.

“Can we just let it go?” I asked, tone a bit desperate. Partly from the fear of what might happen to myself, Vega, and him if he didn’t stay away. But also, and perhaps almost as much, because him being so close was making it hard to think straight, to be logical. My mind and body were at war with each other, and I honestly didn’t know who would win unless he took a steps back.

“Hear me out for a minute, sweetheart, and if you want me gone after that, I’ll be gone. And I won’t bug you again.”

I wanted to tell him that he wasn’t bugging me. That the only thing bugging me right that moment was the unyielding pressure on my lower stomach, the aching need to be as close to him as possible.

I couldn’t do that, though.

But I could let him have his say.

I gestured over toward the couch, hoping that a little space between us would clear my head.

Cesare moved in that direction, unbuttoning his suit jacket, then dropping down.

I moved to the far side of the sofa, sitting as well, not realizing my robe had slipped open to reveal not only most of my leg, but a fair chunk of my breasts too until I saw his hungry gaze move over the exposed skin.

I grabbed at the sides of my robe, holding them together as I shifted my leg, trying to cover it mostly up.

Why hadn't I asked for him to give me a moment to change?

No.

Better not to think too much on that question. Because I was pretty sure my conclusion would be that I didn't want to be fully clothed around him.

"I'm about to say some shit about me that you're probably not gonna like," Cesare started, giving me a boyish smirk.

"Okay."

"I've made no effort to hide the fact that I've been a shameless whore most of my adult life," he told me, making my brows shoot up.

I mean, it wasn't like anyone expected a man as good-looking and charming as he was to be a virgin. But it was interesting to hear him admit to sleeping around with a bit of a sheepish look, like he knew it wasn't something most people would think he should be proud of.

"In fact, the first time I moved up here to Maine, I did it to get out of a nasty little mess I'd created by sleeping with another man's wife."

"A friend?" I asked, stomach tensing, not wanting to think he was capable of that kind of betrayal.

“More like someone I really disliked,” he told me. “Still, not my finest move,” I admitted.

“I think the fault always lies on the party that’s in a committed relationship,” I said, shrugging. “Unless the other person is someone’s best friend.” That was the kind of betrayal I couldn’t imagine. Finding out someone you trusted as much, if not more than your partner, had been the one screwing around with them all along.

“That’s fair. And she hated the bastard too, so there’s that,” he said, the smile shining through for a minute before he wiped it away. “But, yeah, I was raised better than that,” he added. “My father was more pissed than anyone about the situation. That man never looked at another woman after my Ma passed.

“Granted, he likely couldn’t, what with keeping his eyes on all of us. And we didn’t make it easy for him, but still. He was a model of fidelity and love. He hasn’t exactly been proud that I turned out to be so casual about women.”

“You were... young,” I said, assuming that most of his transgressions would have been in his twenties. What man was a full-fledged adult in their twenties? Not many.

“Yeah, but I knew better. Hell, just a couple weeks back, my brother Gav—the one I dragged up here with me—,” he clarified, “stopped me from getting involved with another married woman.”

“Why?”

“Why did he stop me?”

“Why were you interested in another married woman?”

“Honestly? I didn’t know this one was married at the time. Only Gav did. But I honestly don’t think that information would have stopped me, either,” he admitted.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked, shaking my head.

Who went out of their way to paint themselves in a bad light?

“Figured maybe a little backstory might help this make some more sense,” he said, taking a deep breath.

“Okay.”

“I’ve been casual as fuck about women, is what I’m saying,” he told me. “A fun night, maybe two if it landed on a weekend, and that’s it. Not to be a dick, but I really never gave any of them thoughts beyond those nights, either.”

“Alright.”

“That’s the thing. Can’t fucking stop thinking about you,” he said, shaking his head at himself.

Oh, my heart.

What I wouldn’t give to have a different situation, a more fair choice to make.

“Maybe just because we haven’t...” I said, waving a hand out. He knew what I meant.

“It’s not that,” he said, tone certain. “Not that I don’t want that,” he said, reaching out to gently slap his hand onto my thigh, making me realize it had gotten exposed once again as his fingers met my bare skin.

I couldn’t hold back the little gasp that escaped me.

And Cesare couldn’t pretend to ignore it.

His dark eyes flashed and his fingers tightened on my skin.

He watched me, gaze intense, waiting for an objection of some sort.

But despite knowing I needed to give him one, I couldn’t seem to force my mind and mouth to work in unison.

I just looked back at him, knowing the desire was clear in my eyes.

Seeing it, his hand shifted, sliding up.

My legs parted slightly, and Cesare wasted no time, his hand slipping between, pressing his palm against the juncture of my thighs.

A whimper escaped me as his touch met my bare skin, my clit aching as his finger shifted up to slide over it.

“Fuck,” he hissed, shifting over on the couch to give himself a better angle. “You’re already so wet for me,” he hissed, leaning closer, his breath on my neck.

I was beyond thought right then.

All that mattered was the sensations, the feel of him, the smell of him, his words murmured against my skin as his lips met my neck.

My legs spread, giving him full access. His hand shifted, his thumb taking over on my clit as his fingers slipped down, sliding inside of me to the sound of my ragged whimper.

“Fuck, baby,” he groaned, his fingers thrusting for a moment before, on an impatient growl, they moved away so he could grab me, pull me until I was straddling him, then slip his hand between us again to start working me.

His other hand shot out, working the knot of my train free, so he could slide the material wide, exposing me to his hungry gaze.

His hand moved up my side, then across my chest, grazing my breast, making me arch back to press myself into his hand, silently begging for more even as his fingers steadily drove me up.

Cesare’s head dipped, his lips closing around my nipple, sucking it into his greedy mouth, making sparks dance across my skin as my hips started to rock against his palm, creating new sensations that had me breathless even as Cesare’s tongue moved across the tightened bud of my nipple.

I felt the orgasm coming slowly, then all at once, leaving me crying out as I leaned into him.

His hand stayed there after, fingers still inside of me, but unmoving, as I shifted my head, softly sealing my lips to his, feeling them coming alive under mine. Slow and soft at first, then harder and hungrier as the moments stretched on.

It wasn't until his tongue was moving over mine, then his teeth nipping my lower lip that I felt the desire growing once again. Somehow, just as strong as before.

Pulling back, I looked down at him as both my hands rose to his chest, going to his buttons, and working each of them free, feeling his heated gaze on me as mine focused on my task. And the exposed skin beneath.

He was covered in tattoos. All across his chest and down his torso. Each piece distinct in and of itself, but somehow all of it fitting together to form one big masterpiece.

I found that I wanted to spend hours on his chest, fingers tracing the outlines of each tattoo, asking him if any of them had any meaning, and stories.

I could feel a crushing sadness press against me as I realized I couldn't have that.

But I pushed those thoughts away.

I couldn't have that.

But right here, right now, I could have this. I wasn't going to spoil it with negative thoughts. I was going to let myself enjoy every moment I had with this man.

Finished with his buttons, I let my fingers roam, watching as his muscles twitched a bit under my exploring touch, teasing the lines down the center of his chest right to the top of his waistband.

When I glanced back up, Cesare's gaze was molten and his lips were parted slightly. His breath was coming out ragged and his hand was digging into my hip.

Emboldened, I scooted back on his lap until his hands fell away, until I was slipping off of his lap and onto my knees in front of him.

I watched the flames spark in his eyes as my hands slid up his thighs, then across to unfasten his belt, then work his button and zipper free.

My palm brushed over him through his pants, making his breath hiss out of him and his hips jerk slightly.

Feeling almost drunk on the power I had over him right that moment, my hand slipped inside his boxer briefs, closing around his cock, and freeing it from the material.

My hand slid down his thick length, holding him at the base as I slowly leaned forward over him, keeping eye contact until I couldn't anymore.

I teased my tongue over the head, making a savage curse escape him as his hand slammed down on my shoulder, fingers digging in as I slowly sucked him into my mouth.

As I worked him, I was spurred on by his ragged breathing, his almost pained hisses, his muffled curses.

His hand slid from my shoulder and twisted into the hair at the nape of my neck, holding on as I started to work him a little faster.

The feel of him in my hand, the taste of him in my mouth, the sounds of his pleasure, it was all somehow making the need within me grow.

The familiar pressure, the ache, the throbbing, the hyper-awareness of the space inside of me that I wanted him to fill.

“Fuck, baby, wait,” he hissed, fingers grabbing my hair, yanking hard when a gentle tug didn't have me moving back.

But as the pain ricocheted across my scalp—something that somehow made even more pleasure flood my system—I had no choice but to move back, his cock sliding out from between my lips.

When I looked up at him, his chest was rising and falling quickly, his breathing ragged.

His free hand moved out, tracing the lower edge of my swollen lips.

“Get back up here,” he demanded softly.

Bracing my hands on his thighs, I slid back onto his lap.

His lips were on mine almost immediately. Hard. Crushing. Desperate.

“Could watch you on your knees for me for fucking hours,” he murmured as he pressed his lips to my neck. “But I need to be inside of you,” he added, his gaze meeting mine as his body shifted, so he could reach into his back pocket.

I knew this was where it should have ended. I should have wised up before it went further.

But I was helpless to do anything but bury my face in his neck, breathing in his spicy scent as I pressed soft kisses to his skin as he protected us.

Finished, his hand gripped the base, allowing him to slide the head up and down my cleft, teasing over my clit, and filling me with anticipation.

It wasn't until I sat back, and his gaze held mine, that he shifted himself back down, pressing at the entrance of my body, then teasing in.

I felt the stretch of him with a whimper as he let out a shuddering breath.

“Take me in,” he demanded, voice somehow rough and soft at the same time.

I didn't need more encouragement than that.

Hands planted on his shoulders, I started to lower down on him, feeling his thick length fill me completely, letting out a moan as he settled deep.

“Fuck, you feel good,” he hissed, fingers flexing on my hips. My walls involuntarily tightened around him at those words, making a sexy little smirk toy with his lips. “Ride me, baby,” he murmured, rocking his hips upward once, giving me a hint of what my body desperately needed.

Arms around the back of his neck, I did just that.

Slow at first, enjoying the feel of him, getting used to him inside of me, then faster as the need began to grow.

Cesare's hands explored as I moved, stroking over my hips, up my sides, across my breasts, then down my back to sink into my ass, holding onto me as I rocked against him.

His hips started to jerk up into me as I moved, driving me up faster and faster.

His hands pulled me back slightly, letting him find a different angle inside of me, making a moan escape me.

“There you go,” Cesare hissed as my whimpers got louder, as my walls tightened, as I got right to that edge, teetering, then crashing over.

Cesare rocked up into me through it as my forehead met his, as the waves kept crashing through me.

It wasn't until I was spent that his arms went around me, grabbing me, and flipping me under him.

His weight pinning me to the couch was oddly reassuring as his lips came to mine. Soft, sweet, giving my body time to recover as he stayed still inside of me.

It wasn't until my legs wrapped around his hips, and I started to writhe against him again that his lips pulled from mine, and his hips shifted, his cock moving inside of me.

Slow and soft at first, but harder and faster with each passing moment, until the sounds of our movements filled the apartment, mingled with our ragged breathing, his curses, and my moans.

My hips moved against him, finding his rhythm, then moving against it, making him touch all the right places, driving me to that peak once again, then tossing me over before I could even catch my breath to cry out.

“Fuck,” Cesare growled, fucking me through it. “More,” he declared as I came back down.

“I can't,” I objected, even as he shifted back onto his heels, reaching for me, and pulling me up against him.

“Yes, you can,” he countered, wrapping his arms around me, holding me against him as he got to his feet, walking.

His lips were on mine, and my eyes were closed, trusting him completely.

My back slammed into a wall, and his cock started to move inside me once again.

Fast.

Making the stirrings of need build within me again.

I could feel it about to crest, but then suddenly, I was moving away from the wall, and he wasn't moving inside of me anymore, making a grumble escape me.

Cesare shot me a devilish smirk as he kept walking.

A door pushed open, then got kicked closed, and then we were in my room.

Cesare lowered me onto the mattress, pressing me down into it for a moment, then shifting back, and getting to his feet off the edge of the bed.

Reaching down, he grabbed my legs, dragging them straight up, then situating one on each of his shoulders before he started to fuck me again.

A little harder, a little faster than before.

One of his hands went down, teasing over my breast that was bouncing with each of his thrusts, rolling, then twisting the nipple before his hand was slipping down my belly, his thumb going between my thighs to engage my clit as he continued to fuck me.

“Come for me,” Cesare growled. “Let me feel you squeeze my cock one more time,” he added.

His hips rocked.

His thumb swiped.

And just like that, the orgasm slammed through my system.

“Cesare,” I cried out, letting the pleasure overtake me as he continued to move inside of me, dragging it out, then slamming deep, letting out a savage curse as he came.

He came down to me afterward, his face buried in my neck, breathing me in, as we both tried to calm our racing

hearts, even out our breaths, bring some order back to the chaos in our bodies.

I felt a small pang of disappointment when his weight finally lifted off of me, rolling to the side for a moment, and I was vaguely aware of him dealing with the condom in the trash beside the bed before rolling back to me.

Slipping his arm under me, he curled me onto his chest, and any thoughts of disappointment slipped away as I felt myself drape over him, as his hand started to trace up and down my spine.

For once, my mind wasn't running with constant lists of tasks that needed to be done, or worries that I had little to no control over.

It was the most peace I had ever known.

He made the world go quiet.

I felt irrational tears stinging my eyes, knowing how fleeting this had to be.

For my safety.

For his.

I couldn't help but curse a world that would bring me a man who could give me silence and comfort and peace... only to make it abundantly clear that I couldn't have him.

"I know what you're thinking," Cesare said, voice soft, but there was something light about it. Maybe even teasing.

No you don't. You couldn't.

"What am I thinking?" I asked, hoping my voice didn't sound as thick to him as it did to me. Or, at least, if it did, that he thought it was from post-orgasm contentness, not sadness. Not grief over losing something that I really, really wanted to hang onto.

"That you want to change the bed," he said, and I was so surprised that a bubble of laughter burst out of me as I pushed up to smile down at him.

"What?" I asked, shaking my head.

“Well, you know,” he said, shrugging a bit as he reached up to tuck some of my hair behind my ear. “You like things clean. We just got a little dirty,” he said, eyes twinkling.

Right.

Of course.

And I mean, yes.

I’d never been able to sleep in a bed I’d just had sex in. The very idea made my skin feel like it was crawling.

In the past, guys had rolled their eyes over it, had grumbled about it, had said unkind things about the need to change the sheets.

And yet there was Cesare.

Anticipating it.

Smiling about it.

Bringing it up, so I didn’t need to.

God, this man.

The truth came to me with startling clarity.

This was a man I could truly love.

Except, of course, I couldn’t.

There was a crushing sensation in my chest, my heart turning to dust.

I moved away from him then, snatching the throw off the end of the bed, and wrapping myself up in it.

“Right,” I said, turning away so I could blink back the wetness in my eyes. “Okay. Off,” I said, going into my closet, and finding some fresh linens.

“I’ll be right back,” Cesare said, moving past me, brushing his lips against the back of my head, then going out into the hall.

I heard the door to the bathroom close, and closed my bedroom door, leaning against it, and taking several long, deep breaths, trying to calm myself down.

How was I supposed to get out of this? Send him out?
Without bawling all over him?

I was saved from having to answer that question, though, when I heard the front door burst open, slamming against the wall.

For a split second, my heart seized in my chest, sure it was the man from the prep room, here to kill us all, but then Vega's voice rang out through the apartment.

"I hope everyone is decent!" she yelled out. "Well, I mean, it would be no hardship to get another look at you, Cesare," she called, making a small smile tug at my lips. "But I don't want to be walking into anyone getting their cheeks clapped."

"Hey, Vega," Cesare's voice called back as the bathroom door opened.

"I gave you as long as I could. The damn pizza place was closed. Can you believe that? I had to get freezer pizzas. Don't give me those judgy Italian eyes," she said.

"Judgy Italian eyes?" Cesare shot back, sounding amused.

And, damnit, I liked him even more because he was so good with Vega.

"Look, not all of us are privileged to have access to amazing New York City pizza, okay? Some of us have to settle for waxy cheese and undercooked crusts," she said, and I could make out the sound of a pizza box slapping onto the counter in the kitchen.

I knew I shouldn't eavesdrop.

But this was the last time I was going to get to hear this man in my apartment.

I was going to let myself enjoy it.

"Where's Mere?"

"In her room," Cesare answered.

There was a short pause.

"Why?"

“What?”

“Why is she in her room, and you’re out here? I thought you were supposed to be banging the night away.”

Oh, Vega.

She didn’t know what a social filter was.

“Wait... that’s her robe,” Vega said, sounding a little giddy. “Oh, yay. This is great. I like you two together. But now I have to put on my best friend voice...” she warned.

“And threaten to castrate me if I hurt her?” Cesare asked, sounding like he was smiling.

“Pretty much. But it was going to be a lot more graphic than that.”

“Listen, Vega, I like Mere. I don’t plan on hurting her.”

“Here’s the thing, dude,” Vega said, sighing a little. “I know your type. I’ve fucked a few dudes like you. So I can smell you a mile away. You want fun, casual. And that’s fine. Like, maybe even good here. But you need to be clear with Mere that that’s all this is.”

“What if it isn’t?” he asked, and the silence after his words was heavy.

“Isn’t what?” Vega clarified.

“All it is. What if I want more than casual?”

Vega considered that.

“You know what, I will believe it when I see it. But the threat stands. Don’t hurt her, no matter what this ends up being.”

Little did she know that I was going to be the one doing the hurting.

Hurting him.

And myself in the process.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cesare

“What?” Gav barked, making my head jerk up, and making me realize I’d been staring at my phone for the better part of the morning.

Waiting for a call, a text, something.

“The fuck?” I shot back, looking up at him as he stood next to the kitchen table, a coffee mug in his hand, glaring down at me.

“What is it? You’ve been a moody-fucking-ass for a couple of days now. What is it?”

I wanted to object, to insist that I hadn’t been.

But the fact of the matter was, he was right. And you knew you were down when someone as grumpy as Gav was calling you out on it.

I hadn’t told him about Mere.

Why, I don't know.

As a whole, as a family, we shared shit. Especially the kind of life-changing shit that was getting yourself involved with someone in a more serious way.

I hadn't been blowing smoke up Vega's ass when I told her that I wanted more than casual with Mere.

I couldn't explain the impulse, the way I wanted to spend more time with her, how I wanted to take her out to eat, to walk in and out of the shops with her, to see her across the table from my old man, my brothers, and my sister.

I just knew that the feeling was there.

Even after having had sex with her.

That, in a way, had been the final test.

Normally, when the sweat was dry, all my interest dried up as well.

But I just wanted more.

More sex.

More nights standing at the island eating shitty freezer pizza and bullshitting with Mere and Vega.

I'd been so immersed in my enjoyment of the night, that I was pretty sure I must have missed something with Mere.

Because I'd given her my number. Because I'd taken hers. I'd even reached out first.

And hadn't heard shit back from her.

Maybe she was mad that I hadn't stayed the night? I mean, I wanted to. I just figured that maybe it would be better for her if I didn't push that right away.

Had that been a miscalculation?

Did she think I wasn't serious about wanting more from her because I hadn't stayed?

Fuck.

This was all too damn new to me.

I didn't know what the fuck I was doing.

"I dunno. I'm frustrated," I admitted.

It was the truth.

But I knew that Gav would think I meant I was frustrated about Dennis's disappearance yet again. Not about Mere. Who I hadn't so much as mentioned, except for the basics about her working at the shop.

"Yeah, know the feeling. You know Lore made her sauce for pasta night at Aunt Meg's last night?" he asked.

Lore, our sister, the baby of the family, was the best cook in the *entire* family—though we would never tell our aunts or cousins this—but she never cooked.

If we were lucky, we got to taste one or two meals a year from her.

It was a big deal to miss one.

And her fucking sauce needed to be bottled and sold to the masses, it was so damn good.

Still, I could only bring up a small amount of disappointment over missing out.

"Look, it's shipment day, isn't it?" Gav said, making my head pop up again.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Go to the shop," Gav suggested. "Talk to those guys. See what the fuck is going on?"

I didn't have direct contact with the guys who unpacked the shipments. That was Dennis's area. But with Dennis missing, yeah, that was the next rational step.

And my enthusiasm to do so had nothing at all to do with the woman in that shop.

Not a damn thing.

"Right," I agreed, nodding, glancing down at the time on my phone.

I had about an hour before they showed up.

I wanted to rush through my shower and getting dressed, but Mere liked me neat and put together, so I took the extra time to make sure everything was looking good, sprayed on some cologne—because it hadn't escaped me that she liked to take deep breaths of me when she was close—then made my way out.

If Gav noticed I was in a better mood already, he said nothing as I got in my car and drove into town.

I parked at the end of the street, and made my way down, feeling a strange flip-flopping sensation in my gut, and a fluttering feeling in my chest.

I glanced through the door as I got close, and could have sworn she glanced up and saw me, but I must have been mistaken because she suddenly turned and went into the back for a moment, then came back out, holding a couple of flowers that she set down on the desk.

She looked stupid pretty in her light yellow wrap dress that made you think of spring in the middle of winter.

“Hey, Mere,” I called as I opened the door, watching her head lift.

I almost went back a step.

Because her face was so damn... blank.

Blank.

Mere.

I swear the woman wore every small emotion on her face. And yet... there was nothing.

“Hey, Cesare. What are you doing here?” she asked, tone a little... distant. Like she was speaking to a customer, not someone who knew what her pussy tasted like.

Weird.

All of this, paired with the unreturned text, had me immediately on edge.

Uncertainty rose up in my system, making me feel more awkward than I was sure I ever had in my life.

“I’m actually here to check on the delivery,” I told her, nodding toward the back room. “Since Dennis still isn’t around,” I added.

“Oh, right,” she said, her tone still so bland, face so blank. “Go ahead. I am just finishing an arrangement,” she said, waving toward the couple of flowers she’d brought in from the back.

“Small arrangement,” I said, making her head shoot up. I could have sworn I saw something there then, panic, maybe? But then it was gone, making me think I was imagining things.

“Well, sometimes we have very cute, very young customers who want to get their moms or their teachers or their little crushes flowers. We like to cater to all budgets,” she said.

I could have sworn there was a false note in her words. But I had no reason to doubt her.

So I just gave her a nod, telling myself I would figure out what was going on with the two of us after I talked to the guys in the back.

“Excuse me a moment,” I said, getting a distracted nod from her as I moved past her and into the back room.

Where five guys were lining the table, long white boxes spread out before them.

They looked up, surprised, as I moved into the room with them.

“Who are you?” one of the men asked. The boss of the crew, I figured.

He was on the tall side, but shorter than me, with a stockier build, and a sharp, hawk-like look in his eyes as he looked at me.

“I’m who pays your boss,” I explained, moving forward toward the table, reaching for one of the boxes, and flipping open the lid.

I grabbed the handful of baby’s breath out, tossing it onto the table, and pulling the false back out of the box.

Then there was the compartment.

Full of guns.

Ones that came in from the south.

Conveniently, from the general area of the flowers this flower shop in the cold north needed to order from.

They looked like they were all there, too. Which meant any theory of the supply being less causing the cash shortage we were getting didn't hold any weight.

It really was looking more and more like Dennis was the reason we were getting a cut in our share of the business.

No wonder he was MIA.

The bastard.

"Looks all good here," I said, pushing the box back to the guy who took out the guns with his gloved hands, and put them into a different, bigger box.

"Run a tight ship here," the man said.

"I see that," I agreed. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Jake."

He was lying about that.

What can I say, when you were raised in the Family, surrounded by criminals, you knew when someone was feeding you a fake name.

That being said, I didn't blame him for not giving me his real one.

"Alright. *Jake*," I said, putting some emphasis on it, so he knew he wasn't going to bullshit me. "Carry on. I'm just going to dip into the office for a minute."

"Yeah, boss," Jake said, waving over toward it.

The men were already back to work as I let myself into Dennis's office.

I hadn't been back since Mere caught me in there the last time. I wondered if she had been in.

Because the place had been cleaned.

The coffee cups were gone.

The paperwork was all sorted and stacked into a neat pile.

That certainly seemed like something Mere would do. But, somehow, I don't think she would overstep that professional line.

Hm.

Who then?

Dennis?

Had he cleaned up his office like he had his house, maybe removing any incriminating evidence?

I dropped down into his seat, swiveling around for a second, before reaching to pull open his drawers, looking around.

They, too, seemed to be reorganized.

Pens, sticky pads, a calculator that looked older than me.

It wasn't until I was about to slide one of the drawers closed, that I heard something.

A little tap.

Pulling it back open, a single bullet was sitting there.

A bullet?

Just one?

That was... odd.

Maybe he'd just found it and stashed it in there so the employees didn't see it.

But I was reasonably sure it hadn't been there the last time I'd gone snooping in his desk.

Why get rid of all the other evidence of the illegal shit going down in the flower shop, but leave a bullet?

I put it back in the drawer and sat back for a moment, debating how much I wanted to reveal to the guys who were

working for Dennis.

If they got wind that their immediate boss was missing, there was the risk of the guys getting greedy, trying to steal from me.

No.

I had to keep them out of the loop.

Decision made, I got up out of the chair, making my way out of the office.

Only to find the guys had packed up and taken their leave.

Well, if that wasn't just the best fucking timing.

A smirk tugging at my lips, I moved through to the front of the store, finding Mere at the desk, nervously tapping her fingers on the surface as her gaze stared blindly out of the front windows.

I didn't stop to think.

I just stalked toward her, grabbing her, turning her, and muffling her gasp with my lips on hers.

Her entire body was ramrod straight for all of ten seconds before she completely fucking melted into me, her arms going around my neck, holding on as I pressed her back against her desk.

I missed her.

That realization dawned on me, shocking enough that it almost had me pulling away.

But then she was letting out a little mewling sound that had my cock going rock-hard in my pants.

Reaching down, I sank my hands into her ass, dragging her up until she had no choice but to wrap her legs around my hips.

Then I was turning, walking her into the back room, and dropping her ass down on the table.

She hissed against my lips as the cold steel tabletop touched her legs.

I took the opportunity to slip my tongue between her parted lips, toying with hers until her hips were rocking against me, trying to find some relief to the need building inside of her.

I wasn't going to tease her.

I was too fucking needy myself.

My hand went between us, slipping inside her panties, already finding her wet for me.

My thumb went to her clit as two of my fingers slipped inside her tight pussy, her walls closing around them, holding on, making my cock ache to be inside of her.

I finger fucked her for a few minutes, until she was whimpering and writhing.

My fingers moved away from her, grabbing her panties tightly, and ripping them away, feeling my lips curve up at her surprised gasp.

Her hands were greedy then, too. Her palm moved over my cock through my pants as I fished in my wallet for a condom.

She was already undoing my belt and pants when I got the wrapper off, tossing it over on the table.

I let her stroke me for a moment before brushing her hand away, so I could slip on the protection.

Finished, I reached for her leg, hiking it up, and spreading it wide for me.

Moving inward, I let my cock slide against her for a moment, getting good and wet, before moving it down, and slamming deep inside of her.

Her cry filled the quiet room, damn near making me want to come right then and there as her walls closed tight around my cock.

Fucking perfect.

Like she was made for me.

“Fuck, you feel good,” I growled, starting to fuck her, too far gone for trying to drag it out, make it last.

I needed a release.

And judging by how quickly her whimpers became ragged moans, she was just as desperate.

I was feeling her walls tighten hard, a telltale precursor to an orgasm, when we both seemed to hear it.

The jingling sound of the chime on the door.

Her whole body stiffened.

Her eyes went huge.

My hand slapped over her mouth and continued to fuck her.

Her eyes went even wider for a moment, shocked at my shamelessness.

I didn't care if all of goddamn Balm Harbour wanted to show up right that moment and watch, nothing was going to stop me from making this woman come, from having her pussy squeezing my cock, dragging my own orgasm out of me.

And just like that, it was happening, her walls spasming over and over, her cries muffled, but not completely silent, against my palm.

“Hello?” a voice called, still far away.

Besides, no one came in the back room of a business, not even if they were looking for an employee.

I fucked her through her orgasm, coming on the end of it, my fucking vision going white with the intensity of it for a second.

By the time it returned, she was already stiff again, her hands pressing against my chest, pushing me back.

“Coming!” she called, voice breathless.

“You already did,” I said in a low voice, watching as her cheeks went pink at my words. “You're gonna have to go out

there without them,” I told her as she jumped off the table, looking down at her panties.

And, fuck, if she wasn't too damn pretty when she was freshly fucked, pink-cheeked, and just a little scandalized.

“I'm looking for a bouquet for my daughter-in-law,” a voice called as Mere readjusted her skirt and top, then started to brush past me.

“I can help you with that. Just one second,” she called when my arm went around her belly, yanking her back against my chest.

Leaning down, I let my lips tease the shell of her ear.

“You're gonna think of me each time you take a step and feel the air rush up under your skirt,” I told her, smirking when I felt a shiver move through her. “Text me after work,” I said, nipping her earlobe, then letting her go abruptly.

I liked it too much that she swayed for a second before she regained her composure and rushed forward into the shop, apologizing to the customer who had no idea she was walking around the store while the proprietor was getting thoroughly fucked in the back room.

I let myself out the back room feeling better than I had since I'd left her after the first time we fucked.

I went about my day, feeling lighter, anticipating what we might do later after she got off work.

I'd never really been in the position to court a woman. But I was suddenly full of ideas of things we could do. Even in the off-season. Places we could go before we ended up back at either of our places, fucking until we didn't have any more energy, then, this time, falling asleep together.

I didn't think for a minute that she wouldn't text or call.

Until five rolled into six, then six into seven.

And nothing.

I checked my phone for what felt like the fucking hundredth time.

Then I texted her first.

And called.

Again, nothing.

My stomach tensed as I tried to fight the urge to fly across town, to go to her apartment, to see what the fuck was going on.

I'd never felt such a strong fucking urge to be near someone before. It was almost overpowering.

The only thing that kept my feet planted in the living room of my house was the thought of my sister.

Of random men she didn't invite showing up at her door.

That power imbalance.

The threat it could represent.

The way it was overstepping a boundary that might have been placed.

Exhaling hard, I reached for my phone, bringing up the conversation, then shooting off a text to her.

I won't keep bothering you. If you don't respond to this, I will leave you alone.

I would stand by that.

I wasn't going to chase her down.

I wasn't going to force my way into her life.

I was going to stay away.

Even if it felt like something was crushing my chest at the very idea.

Maybe it was time to go back to the city. See my people. Get my fucking head on straight.

When there was still no text by the morning, I told Gav we were going to head out.

Or so I thought.

Until a frantic fucking Vega tracked me down.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mere

It had been a really long time since I cried myself to sleep.

Part of that was because, up until recently, I'd been really happy with my life.

I had a great roommate.

I loved my job.

Everything was just how I liked it.

Things were good.

Then Cesare Costa blew into town.

And everything fell apart.

Suddenly, I wasn't safe at work anymore. Strange men were threatening me and that roommate that I loved so much.

And I couldn't have the one thing I hadn't known I needed until I had it.

Him.

The worst freaking part of it all was that he wanted me too.

God, he'd been so clear. He didn't make me wonder and worry. He'd made his intentions and interest so apparent.

It was what every woman dreamed of. A gorgeous, successful, interesting, sexy man who wanted you, and never let you doubt how they felt.

And I couldn't have him.

I thought I'd somewhat managed to come to terms with things after he left the night after we'd had sex.

Well, to be fair, I just buried the feelings under endless cleaning and organizing tasks. My fingertips ached. My skin was overly sensitive from the chemicals eating away at layers of skin. I'd even tackled Vega's laundry pile when I ran out of other tasks to do.

But then he'd shown up out of the blue.

Things had gotten carried away too quickly for me to react, to push him away before things could progress again, reminding me of what I was missing out on.

I'd barely been able to get through helping that customer who'd come in when Cesare was still *inside of me* without tearing up.

When she was gone, I went back into the bathroom, letting some of the tears out because I knew that if I didn't do it while in private, they would pour out at an inconvenient and public time instead.

Then I splashed water on my face.

And scrubbed the walls of the shop. The windows. The floors.

I kept myself so busy that I couldn't spare a moment to think about him again until I was in my car, driving home.

I went ahead and had a little cry then too, making sure I took enough time for the redness to go away before I went home to keen-eyed Vega.

I held it together through dinner. Luckily, Vega got bored with my one-word answers, and went to go kill a bunch of trash-talking jerks on her video game, shouting out increasingly inventive insults as the time stretched on, allowing me to focus on cooking, cleaning, prepping for the next day, taking my bath, then curling up in bed to have a good, long cry.

I made sure I woke up extra early to ice my swollen eyelids, then went about my morning like my heart didn't feel like a deflated balloon in my chest.

I tried to make myself delete that final text he sent, the one I knew would be his last.

He'd made it clear what he wanted.

But he wasn't going to beg.

The man deserved to have his pride, after all.

I felt the sting at the backs of my eyes as I pulled my car into my parking spot. Leaning my head back against the rest, I closed them, taking several long, deep breaths.

Opening them, I looked at the shop.

The place that used to be my little sanctuary. Now, I dreaded having to step inside of it.

There wasn't anywhere that held any peace for me anymore. Not work. Not home. Certainly not in my own mind.

I guess that was just something I was going to need to get used to. Because there seemed to be no end in sight.

On a resigned sigh, I grabbed my bag, unlocked the shop, locking it behind me, and looking around.

Even the flowers seemed to have lost their vibrancy, I realized as I put my bag on the desk, then tried to shake some of the tension out of my shoulders before walking into the back room, ready to start pulling flowers out of the fridge to restock the displays.

"You fucking lied to me," a voice said, making a small shriek escape me as I froze.

My heart flew up into my throat, blocking my airway, even as my stomach dropped down to my feet.

A cold sweat broke out across my skin as the blood in my veins seemed to stop running, immediately frozen in place.

Because there he was.

The man from before.

With his threats.

With his dead eyes that told me he was more than capable of following through with them.

And there he was, fury wrapped around him. Not the heated kind. The frigid sort. Which, in my experience, was a much more lethal kind. I would take passionate and heated over calculated and cold any day.

Not that I had a choice.

“Lied?” I asked, feeling like I was gulping for enough breath to choke that one word out.

If I turned and ran, could I beat him to the door?

Even if I could, it was locked.

I would waste precious seconds getting it unlocked and opened.

Why hadn't I considered the need to start carrying some sort of self-defense item on me?

I could have taken one of Vega's. She practically collected them. Hot pink stun guns, mace that looked like a lipstick tube, little eye gougers in the shape of devil cats. She even had several expandable batons that looked like pens or umbrellas.

I literally could have snatched three or four of them to keep on myself without her even knowing any were gone and asking questions.

What was wrong with me?

My lower lip trembled at the complete and utter helplessness I felt at that moment.

There were razor knives in a cabinet a few feet away from me. Almost a dozen of them.

I wondered if I could get one without him seeing, keep it hidden until I needed to use it.

Could I use it?

I wasn't sure.

Just the thought of pulling the knife across someone's skin made me feel queasy.

I'd once cut myself with one of them. The blade had been so sharp that I hadn't even felt it slip into my skin until blood was pouring out of my finger, spilling all over the table, the flowers I'd been arranging, and my own dress. The doctor had remarked that I'd been lucky not to need stitches, just butterfly sutures.

"You wouldn't believe the kinds of injuries I've needed to repair thanks to those things. And nerve damage that no one can fix," he'd rambled on as he finished with the sutures. "You should look into getting the ones that have a hook at the end that protect the blade. Much safer."

I'd thanked him, but hadn't bought the new ones. Mostly because I knew myself. One misstep would make me ultra-careful from now until eternity. I would never lose focus using a razor knife again.

And I never had.

Maybe, if I tried, I could apply that focus onto the task of hurting someone with one.

I was dubious at best, but I figured if it was between dragging a blade across someone's throat or getting raped, I would likely be able to do anything.

"She didn't have a weapon," Vega had told me once, talking about a case she'd seen on the news recently, "so she did what she had to do. She bit the head of his cock off as she damn near yanked his balls completely off his body. Then she ran for help."

Anything could be a weapon if you tried hard enough. Even your own body. I had to keep that in mind. I couldn't lose hope.

Intention and mindset could be thanked or blamed for the outcomes of so many situations.

"Yes, lied. To my motherfucking face," the man snapped, his jaw so tight that his lips barely opened as he spat those words at me.

"What did I lie about?" I asked, trying to distract him, trying to get myself some extra time.

I shifted just a foot, but no more when his sharp gaze noticed the movement.

"Costa. You lied about Costa."

Damnit.

"I couldn't have known he was going to come to the shop while you were here," I reminded him.

"I'm not fucking talking about that. Did it feel good?" he asked, making my spine stiffen.

"What?" I asked, tone an airy whisper. I could feel the heat bloom across my cheeks, and hated that transparency.

"Wasn't asking if his cock felt good," he said, eyes slitting. "I could hear you," he added, making my stomach slosh around, the contents making their way down my throat. I had to concentrate to fight the sick back down. "I meant lying to me. Did that feel good?"

"I... I don't know what you're talking about," I insisted. Lying through my teeth, and we both knew it. But what could I say? That I'd been sleeping with the man he told me to stay away from? Risking my own and Vega's safety in the process? Not likely.

"No?" he asked, pushing away from the table, and it took a lot of concentration not to start crying, shaking, begging for mercy. "You saying I didn't see him fucking you?" he asked, reaching out to put his hand on the table. "Right here on this very table?" he clarified.

Oh, God.

This wasn't happening.

This couldn't be freaking happening.

"You think maybe I should take you here too?" he asked, making it feel like all the blood rushed out of my body. I swayed on my feet, too lightheaded to even think straight. "You know... to make things right," he said, an evil smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

"Maybe you'd like my cock more than his," he suggested, taking a step forward.

Everything in me screamed to *run*.

But I couldn't seem to make my feet move.

Why the hell couldn't I move?

The words came back to my mind, ones I'd read dozens of times, heard hundreds of times.

Frozen in fear.

I thought it was a colloquialism.

But it was real.

And I was experiencing it.

Even if I decided to run, I don't think I could. I felt stuck to the ground, my limbs too heavy.

Suddenly, he was right in front of me, his hand lifted, reaching out to stroke down a handful of my hair.

"Nah," he said, and up close, that smile was even more chilling even as I smelt the faint trace of cigarettes clinging to his breath. Mingled with the overpowering scent of his cologne, I could feel the sick rise in my throat again. "No. I want to take you somewhere real nice and private. Where I can listen to you scream for hours while I fuck you," he said.

Just like that, my stomach roiled, the sick rose, and I threw up violently.

All over me.

Over him.

He let out a shocked, revulsed curse as he jerked back.

“The fuck? What the fuck,” he growled, his hands lifted, frozen, wanting to wipe the vomit off of him, but not wanting to touch it.

Suddenly, like the sickness had somehow healed me, my body unfroze.

I was still too far from the razor knives.

But there was a pair of scissors a few steps closer.

I ran toward it, knowing I didn't have long.

He was too strong.

He would fight me off before I could do any damage to him.

I knew that.

But I also knew I needed someone to know that something had gone terribly wrong, that I needed help.

A sign.

Evidence.

My clammy fingers closed around the cold scissors, and I opened them wide in my hand, then dragged the somewhat dull blade across my own hand.

“Fucking crazy ass bitch,” the man hissed, grabbing and tossing the scissors, then reaching for the back of my neck.

I knew what would come next.

A slam.

Blackness.

Waking up somewhere else.

So I did what I could.

I took my bloody hand, feeling oddly numb to any pain, and dragged it across every surface I could.

Over the table, under, down the leg, on a box, over some white roses nearby.

Then there was harsh pressure on the back of my neck.

I watched in slow motion as my head flew forward toward the table.

I was unconscious before I felt any kind of pain.

—

I'm convinced it was the stench that woke me. The acrid odor of dried vomit that clung to the front of me.

The taste of it still filled my mouth, making another wave of nausea rise in my throat.

I kept my eyes shut, trying to fight the sensation down, not wanting to make any sounds, draw any attention to the fact that I was conscious.

Not that bad things couldn't happen to me whilst unconscious, but the man had made it pretty damn clear that he wanted me aware and screaming. So I needed to seem as unaware as I could for as long as possible.

With those deep breaths, I could smell something under the scent of my own sick.

Something metallic and tangy.

Blood.

As if my brain remembering the injury made my body react, I could suddenly feel the pain.

The dull, but insistent throbbing sensation across my palm.

I watched the memory like a movie in my own mind, seeing the blade slicing across my palm in a deep, long line.

It likely wouldn't close on its own.

Then I'd gone and ran that hand across all the surfaces in the prep room that I could reach. Sure, I kept the place clean. But dirt and bacteria could have escaped my scrubbing, and was currently wedged in the open wound of my hand.

Maybe infection shouldn't have been at the top of worries right then. And I couldn't claim to know much about infection, but I had to wonder if maybe dying of sepsis would be less horrific than living through whatever the man had planned for me.

How long would it take before someone realized something was wrong?

Hours?

Half a day?

More?

I knew Vega would suspect something almost immediately if I wasn't home within an hour of when the shop closed.

She would text.

If that didn't get answered, call.

If that didn't work, she'd drive around looking for me.

Then she would go right to the cops.

From there, how long until they investigated? Saw the blood in the shop? Found my bag there?

You usually had to wait a full day to file a missing person's report. But this was Vega we were talking about. She would threaten to sue each and every one of them within an inch of their lives. They would get to work quickly.

Suddenly, a horrible thought burst into my mind.

What if he went back and cleaned up the mess?

What if there was nothing left?

And I hadn't told a single soul about the men, about the threats.

Would they maybe draw conclusions to Dennis being missing? To Rayna being hurt? Or would they see it all as coincidence?

A pathetic whimpering sound rose in my throat, but I fought it back before it escaped.

If there was no evidence, what would happen?

After I was tortured, that is. Because there was no doubt about that part. He'd been... painfully clear about the whole torture and screaming part.

Another memory came crashing back, making my stomach twist and the nausea to build once more.

Vega.

They wanted Vega too.

A different sort of torture.

The psychological type.

On me.

While they physically tortured her.

Damnit.

Damnitdamnitdamnit.

Tears stung, then slipped out even through my closed eyes.

I couldn't let them hurt Vega.

I wasn't exactly sure how I could stop it. Distracting them? Keeping them focused on me instead of her?

If she got the police involved, maybe they would be with her for a while. Long enough to keep her safe.

And, unlike me, Vega would have her self-defense items on her.

Also, unlike me, she'd gone to at least one women's self-defense class. Where she'd "accidentally" broken the nose of the instructor.

"You'd think, if you were the guy who was supposed to teach women to defend themselves against unwanted male attention would know not to hit on his students," she'd said when my eyes had gone wide at the information.

She was strong.

Much stronger than me.

And brave.

God, she was the bravest woman I knew.

If anyone could avoid being abducted, it was Vega.

I had to keep that hope.

Because the other possibility was too horrific to think about.

So I took those ones and locked them behind a door, reinforced it, and tried to focus on what I needed to focus on next.

Where I was.

It wouldn't do me any good to just lie there, eyes closed, oblivious to my surroundings.

I held my breath to hear better, and when I was sure there were no footsteps, no talking, I carefully fluttered my lashes open, peering through them while making my eyes still appear closed.

Wherever I was, it was big.

And it was cold.

I'd known that, feeling the ground seeping through the barely-there material of my lightweight sweater and high-waisted slacks.

I'd dressed in pants for a change because of Cesare. Because I feared he might show up again, and a dress would give him too good of access. At least pants would require

some work. Which might give me time to remember that I couldn't let him touch me again.

I was thankful for the outfit choice now, though. With the threat of hands I didn't want reaching for me.

And they provided a little more warmth than my usual thin, linen dresses.

The ground in front of me was dirty, covered in years worth of filth and uneven cement flooring.

I could feel that familiar skin crawling sensation rising, and banked it back down, knowing it was not the time to let my issues with cleanliness start up.

There were bigger problems to deal with.

The light was streaming in through oversized windows with black grates on them, making a sense of familiarity tug at me.

The walls were brick, but I couldn't see any higher than that unless I opened my eyes all the way. And I wasn't risking that. Not yet.

It had to be some sort of... warehouse, right?

It was big, empty, drafty.

And those windows...

Suddenly, a memory came flooding back, making me look back up at them again.

They were familiar because Vega's main social media picture was her standing in front of those very windows.

"It was part of the ghost tour!" she'd told me excitedly one morning when I'd asked.

"Do you really believe in ghosts?" I'd asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. But it wasn't about the ghosts. It was about the history. That place used to be a big manufacturing plant. Until an employee came in one day and shot everyone at their machines. Twelve dead, eighteen

injured. It's crazy. They never opened back up again. Well, except for creepy ghost tours."

That was where this was.

The site of a major tragedy.

If I remembered correctly, it was about fifteen minutes outside of Balm Harbour, kind of in the middle of nowhere.

"Yeah, it took the paramedics forever to get there back then, two people bled out in that time," Vega had told me.

I was close to the wall, and I couldn't help but wonder if there were old pieces of machinery behind me. Would there be loose metal on them? Things I could grab to help me defend myself against my attackers?

I wouldn't know until I moved, but I didn't want to yet.

I wasn't bound.

I guess that was a good thing.

But it could also just mean that my attacker was nearby, close enough that there was no chance of getting away.

Still, I had to count my blessings.

Not being bound meant I had my hands and legs to fight.

And, as Vega once told me, I had my mouth too.

I vowed to myself that I wouldn't hesitate to use it if I needed to. Lots of things could be bit off if you tried hard enough. And not just a penis. A nose. An ear. And while I was pretty sure I couldn't sever it, I could do some major damage to a finger.

It didn't have to severely maim, just distract long enough for me to run, to grab another weapon, or to get into a more public area.

I could do it.

I would do it.

I couldn't afford to be afraid. I had to try, for once, to be brave, to find that little spark of survival inside and fan it into a burning flame.

I wasn't going to cower.

Or freeze.

Those days were behind me.

I left them back in the prep room. Right before I sliced my own hand open.

I was going to fight.

"Christ. How hard did you hit her?" a voice asked, and my stomach tensed, but I managed to keep my body still.

Because I knew that voice.

Cold sweat started to slick my back as I realized who it was, who was behind all of this.

Dennis.

Freaking *Dennis*.

I hadn't spoken to him often, sure, but he had a distinct voice, somewhat breathless and nasal. It almost wheezed on certain words.

I would know it anywhere.

And here it was.

In the warehouse.

With me.

And the man who was going to torture me.

"Hard enough to knock the crazy out of her, I hope. I mean, I can still have my fun with a crazy chick, but I was kinda looking forward to that doe-eyed, all innocent chick."

"Yeah," Dennis said. "I know the feeling. Ever since she walked her ass into that shop, I wanted to hike up her skirt, and fuck her from behind. Maybe up the ass," he went on, letting out a wheezy chuckle. "All prim and proper girls, they hate that."

"Which only makes it more fun," the other man said, and both of them shared a chuckle.

I pressed my lips together, making sure none of the disgusted sounds that matched the way I was feeling could escape me.

Dennis.

“Missing” Dennis.

What? Was he hiding out from Cesare? Trying to screw him over somehow with the business?

“Can’t fucking believe that mafia bastard got to have her before me,” Dennis said.

Mafia bastard.

Mafia bastard.

The reality came crashing down around me, and suddenly it all made sense.

Because, of course, they were talking about Cesare. Cesare Costa. A more Italian name certainly didn’t exist. And he was from the city. Which had, historically, been the location of huge organized crime families.

Mix in the suits, the nice car, the beautiful house that he didn’t even live in full-time, and, yeah, it was all making perfect sense.

Why he was involved with a tiny little flower shop in Maine made less sense.

Except, of course, it wasn’t just a flower shop, was it? Something else was coming in with those shipments.

Something illegal.

Hence the bad guys.

And, of course, Dennis hiding from Cesare.

Had he screwed him over? Was that why Cesare was really in town? To figure out what was going on?

My mind was struggling to reconcile these two sides of the same man.

The one who had been soft and sweet with me. And the one who must have been calculated and brutal to survive in an

organized crime family.

Somehow, though, I wasn't upset about only seeing the one side. Or angry about the deception.

All I could seem to feel was relief.

Because if Cesare found out what was happening, he was capable of helping me, of doing... whatever needed to be done.

Vega would reach out to him, I knew it. She would even suspect him at first. That was just how she was. But she would quickly learn the truth.

Then they would save me.

I just had to hold on until then.

"Maybe we should wake her up..." Dennis suggested.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cesare

“Vega,” I said after pulling open the door to her insistent slamming. “What are you doing here?”

There were other questions.

Like *How do you know where I live?*

But the wide-eyed look in her eyes had me choking that kind of shit back down.

I couldn't claim to know Vega well. But I knew her well enough to know her as pretty unflappable. This Vega, though? She was freaked the fuck out.

“You need to come with me,” she said, reaching out, grabbing the side of my jacket, and yanking.

I was surprised for a moment how strong she was. Until I remembered that people got superhuman powers when they were in life-or-death situations.

“Vega, what is going on?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm, even though my mind was spinning.

Because I was sure there was only one thing that could get Vega this panicked.

Something happened to Mere.

“Get in,” she barked, letting go of me so she could jump into the open door of her still-running car.

Not having much of a choice, I rushed around the hood to get in the passenger side.

Gav stood in the doorway, brows pinched, and I gestured toward my car in the driveway, then to Vega’s car, giving him the order to follow us, then jumped in.

The door was still halfway open as Vega floored it back out of the driveway.

“What happened? Where is Mere?”

“So, Mere was weird yesterday. And this morning,” Vega said, her wild eyes staring out of the windshield, but I got the impression that she wasn’t really paying attention to the road.

“Okay,” I said, putting on my seatbelt because I’d be of no help to anyone if Vega slammed on the brakes, sent me through the windshield, and splattered me all over the pavement.

“So I just wanted to drop in on her at lunchtime, see if she was ready to talk. You can’t push Mere,” she said, seeming to talk half to herself. “If you try to, and she’s not ready, she shuts down. Or she scrubs the shine off the bathroom tile. So I give her emotional space, but stay close when it comes to proximity. You know, for when she needs me.”

“Alright,” I agreed, wincing as she took a corner so fast that I was pretty sure we went up on only two wheels for a second.

“So, I was bringing lunch. But the thing was... as I pulled down the street, there was this line out front of the flower shop.

“Something inside of me tensed up. Like I knew. I read about that somewhere. The ‘flinch,’ I think the guy called it. How something in you processes all the information at once and gives you that little flinch.

“I didn’t even find a spot. I stopped the car right there in the middle of the road, flying onto the sidewalk to ask what was going on.”

“And?”

“The shop had never opened. And people were waiting for arrangements. Mere went to work. She went. Her car was down the block. I could see her purse on the desk through the front windows. But the shop was locked.”

“Fuck,” I hissed, suddenly wondering if she could drive any faster, even though I knew she was already going as fast as the narrow, winding roads would allow.

“I need you to get in there. I need to see if she is hurt or... or something worse,” Vega said, voice tight. “You can do that, right? Mr. Mafia Guy,” she added.

My head snapped in her direction. The movement must have caught her attention, because she glanced over at me.

“Did you really think I didn’t know?” she asked, rolling her eyes. “Like I would let some rando fuck my best friend,” she added, snorting. “I did a full report on you, Cesare Costa. Capo in the Costa crime Family in New York City. The most powerful of the Five Families.”

She had done her research.

And, honestly, I probably shouldn’t have expected anything less. Vega, for all of her craziness, was sharp. She had good instincts.

Besides that, research was a part of her job. Of course she would have gotten curious and looked into me.

“Why would you let me get involved with Mere then?” I asked, knowing I should have been focusing on where Mere was, but there was nothing we could do about that until we got to the shop.

“I told you. I liked you with her. Until... whatever happened,” she added, fingers gripping the wheel.

“If it makes you feel any better, she was the one to end things, not me. I wanted more. She didn’t.”

To that, Vega looked over at me as we stopped at a light, her brows pulled together, looking at me like I made no sense.

“What?”

“Yeah. I sent her a text saying that I wasn’t going to keep bothering her if she didn’t answer me. And she... never did.”

“When?”

“A couple days ago. What are you thinking?”

“That Mere was happy with you. Did you see the way she looked at you? Like you hung the damn moon and stars just for her. It was sickening,” she said with a small smile. “There was no way she just... ended it. Something happened. Maybe something to do with this motherfucking flower shop,” she said as it came into view.

She braked so hard that my body flew forward, the belt cutting into my chest and stomach.

But then the car was, for all intents and purposes, parked. Sure, it was halfway in the roadway, but she was cutting the engine and jumping out.

I followed behind, running across the street as I reached for my key.

I didn’t need to use my “mafia skills” when I owned a stake in the damn place.

Whatever crowd that had been there before was gone, leaving us to rush inside unbothered.

Vega turned to re-lock the door as I moved through the front of the store.

“Mere!” I called.

“Mere, where are you?” Vega called, rushing up on my heels, then slamming full force into my back when I froze in

the doorway to the back room. “What is it?” Vega asked, tone tight as she moved out to my side, looking where my gaze was focused.

On the bloodied scissors on the floor.

On the bloodstains all over the table.

“Oh, God. Oh, goddamnit!” Vega hissed, looking around.

My gaze slid to a different pile. Vomit?

“Could she have just cut herself and gotten sick over the blood?” I asked, trying to put the pieces together.

“No. I mean, she doesn’t like blood, but she once sliced her finger really, really bad on a razor knife and she didn’t get sick. I felt a little sick looking at it,” Vega admitted. “And even then, she wouldn’t leave without her purse. Without her car. The doctor isn’t that close.”

That was true.

I had to follow her lead here.

She had years with Mere.

She knew her best.

“What are you thinking?” Vega asked, watching my profile as I tried to snatch one swirling thought out of the mess of my mind.

I’d known worry before.

I’d been in some sketchy-ass situations in my life.

But nothing had felt quite as intense as the panic that was gripping my system right then.

It was making my chest feel tight, my thoughts fast, but unreachable.

“Cesare,” Vega snapped. “Get it the fuck together,” she hissed, tone fierce. But it was fractured at the edges, evidence of how she was barely managing to do the same.

“I’m thinking that Dennis is missing and Rayna is in the hospital. And now Mere is hurt and missing too...”

“I’ll drive,” Vega said, already turning and running.

I didn’t know where she was planning to drive, but she seemed to have a plan, so I followed behind.

Right to the hospital.

“I’m sorry. I can’t allow two people to visit her,” the lady at the front desk said.

“Listen to me,” Vega said, leaning forward. “I get that you have a job to do, but don’t make me have you page Dr. Cutty. I doubt he would want to be dragged away from his very important work only to tell you to let us up on that goddamn floor. I mean, you would be lucky to still be employed tomorrow.”

No more than twenty seconds later, we were moving into the empty elevator car, and Vega was pressing the button for the ICU.

“Dr. Cutty?” I prompted, brows raised.

“I think I made him see the face of God when I sucked him off while he drove me home from our first, and only, date,” Vega admitted, a small smirk toying with her lips.

“Why only one?”

“Because doctors are married to their work. And I like a lot of attention,” she said, shrugging. “Here we go,” she said as the doors slid open. “Hey, Mary,” she greeted the nurse who looked up as we walked onto the floor. “Hope you haven’t heard from that shitbag ex-husband of yours since the divorce,” she said.

“He wants me back,” Mary said, smirking.

“I hope you told him to get bent. We’re here for Rayna,” she said.

“Right. Ah, okay,” she said, eyeing the two of us. “She’s at the end of the hall.”

“Is she conscious?”

“Yes.”

“Good. That’s all I need to know,” she said, turning, and charging down the ward like she owned the damn place.

Then again, Vega probably always walked like that. The impact was probably just stronger because she was all dressed up in her lawyer lady clothes, not a faux fur jacket and knee-high socks.

“Rayna, what the fuck is Dennis into?” Vega hissed as soon as she walked into the room where a dark-haired woman was nestled in a bed that seemed to swallow her up.

“Vega, what the fuck?” another woman asked, rising from her chair.

“Sandra, I swear to God, get in the way right now and I will personally take your wife’s case when she learns that you’ve been fucking the delivery chick and decides to divorce you and take you for everything you’ve got.”

That silenced the woman who dropped back down into the chair with wide eyes.

I couldn’t blame her.

Vega was in rare form right then.

“Rayna, what is Dennis into? What did he have you into too? Because Mere is missing, and if a single hair on her head is mussed, I am going to personally make you pay for it.”

On the bed, the woman’s eyes were wide.

There was fear.

I’d instilled enough of that over the years to recognize it.

But there was something else underneath.

Despair?

“Mere?” she gulped, eyes looking watery.

“Don’t. Don’t you dare cry right now,” Vega snapped. “Talk.”

Rayna’s gaze slipped to me, taking me in.

“Yeah, you know exactly who that is. And what he is willing to do to you if you don’t start talking.”

I never put my hands on women. I didn't even like that she was using the empty threat to instill fear in a woman.

But this was for Mere.

Sweet, innocent Mere.

Besides, if you got yourself involved with some shady shit, you had to expect it might blow up in your face one day.

Rayna made her choices.

"Dennis was getting greedy," Rayna said. "He thought he was doing all the work and you were getting all the money," she said, looking at me.

"What did he do?"

"He... made a deal with someone else. To bring in heroin with the flowers. In place of a lot of the guns."

So that was it.

Why there wasn't as much money.

Not because he was skimming, per se. But because not as much product was coming in to sell since he was filling the boxes with something else.

A vision of *Jake* flashed in front of my eyes.

That was nobody's henchmen.

That was a boss.

There overseeing the import, making sure the drugs all got handled properly.

"Why did you get attacked?" I asked, looking at her battered face, the cast on her arm, the many lines that were attached to her for... whatever other injuries she had that weren't immediately apparent.

"Because I was getting... uncomfortable with it all. I told Dennis I wanted out."

"Is Dennis still alive?" I asked, watching as her brows knitted.

"Yes?"

“When I first showed up, his house was fucking rancid.”

“The house on Miller?” Rayna asked.

“That’s his house, isn’t it?”

“No. I mean, yes. But no. He doesn’t live full time in Balm Harbour anymore. I don’t know where exactly, but it’s not here. Maybe he left it like that thinking you might show up eventually when the numbers didn’t add up?”

“And then I would figure he was missing.”

“He’s really not very smart,” Rayna said. “Just selfish.”

“Who is he involved with? Who was that Jake guy I saw at the shop?”

“Jake,” Rayna scoffed. “His name is Jameson. And he’s a heroin dealer. And vicious,” she said, gesturing at herself, making one of her lines pull.

“Where does he operate? Where would he take Mere?” Vega asked, desperate to keep moving. “Think, damnit,” she snapped, making Rayna jolt.

“He’s over in Bronzeville? I heard one of the guys talk about a factory once.”

She didn’t get a chance to say more. Because suddenly Vega was turning and storming back down the hall.

I caught up with her at the elevators.

“What is it? Do you know where she is?”

“There is one warehouse in Bronzeville. It was the home to a workplace massacre.”

“How do you know that?”

“I took a tour of it once.”

“How far is it?”

“Fifteen or twenty outside of town.”

“I mean, how far is it with you driving?” I asked, nodding at Gav as I saw him parked a few spots down from ours.

“Eight,” Vega said.

I reached for my phone as we got back in the car, calling my brother.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Mere was taken.”

“Who is Mere again?” Gav asked, and I felt rather than saw Vega’s gaze on the side of my face, eyes narrowing.

“It’s a long story. But she’s important to me and she’s missing and hurt and she’s in a warehouse. Likely being held by Dennis and some shithead heroin dealer named Jameson.”

“Alright. Are we expecting a lot of guys?”

“Definitely two,” I told him. “But there’s a potential for half a dozen more.”

“You’re going to need to arm her,” Gav said, and my gaze slid over to Vega.

“She’s not coming in.”

“Oh, like hell, I’m not,” she shot back, voice fierce, and I knew there was no way I could keep her in the car unless she was gagged and bound. Fuck, even then, I think I’d put my money on her getting out and charging in if she wanted to.

“I’ve got some extras in the trunk,” Gav said.

“I don’t even know if she knows how to use one,” I shot back. “But I guess it’s the only option,” I said, ending the call.

I couldn’t leave her alone and unprotected. So I had to give her a gun. And I knew for sure she wasn’t going to take the gun, but sit pretty and let us handle it.

“Just try not to shoot me or my brother then,” I said as we drove.

“Only if you’re asking for it,” she said, but there was none of her usual levity in her voice.

As soon as we were off the main streets, she floored it, flying through darkened back roads with the confidence of a damn getaway driver. The skills too.

“That’s it,” she said, nodding toward the windshield, making me look out to see an old brick building, all half-broken windows and total isolation.

Which was good if you were about to murder a bunch of people.

“Park here,” I demanded, pointing to a row of trees that would hopefully hide the cars from the windows of the factory if someone chose to look out.

I didn’t like having to make my moves in the middle of the day, especially with snow all around that would make us stick out like sore thumbs. But I damn sure wasn’t about to leave Mere at the mercy of her fucked up boss and Jameson, a guy who had evil in his eyes.

Vega said she’d been odd for days. But she hadn’t said anything about Jameson or being threatened.

He had to have threatened her, though, right? And maybe he got suspicious or thought she wasn’t doing what he wanted, and that was why he took her.

Nothing else made sense.

“I’ll kick out of them when we get to the building,” Vega said when my gaze went down to the ankle-breaking heels on her feet. “Don’t worry. I can run in them better than you can walk in yours,” she assured me as Gav wordlessly went into his trunk, pulling up the carpet, and finding the stash of guns.

Gav handed a gun to Vega without a word, without the lecture I probably would have given her if my mind wasn’t so preoccupied with Mere being in that factory, being at the mercy of men who might show her none.

His gaze slid to her feet as well, but he didn’t say anything about that either. “What’s the plan?” he asked me instead.

“Floor by floor,” I said, shrugging. “Me in front, you in the back.” It kept Vega in the middle. Safer in case shit went down. “If we’re in the middle of some shit and you see the chance, take Mere and run. Either of you,” I said, giving them a nod, then turning to run.

We stopped at the side of the warehouse, each of us taking a few seconds to even out our breathing, no one wanting to give ourselves up because we weren't as in shape as we would have liked.

It wasn't until I heard a sound that I was moving.

Not just any sound.

A cry.

We moved in unison, pushing away from the building, and flying into the lower level.

There was no one around.

Normally, I would be counting my blessings over that. But all I could hear was the scuffling going on somewhere above, the whimpers and grunts.

My mind flooded with the possibilities of what could be happening as I said fuck it to even trying to be quiet, barreling up the steps with Vega and Gav behind me, Vega the quietest of us in her bare feet, completely disregarding the chance of stepping on something rusty or filthy.

We were both too scared for Mere, for what we would find happening to her, for the lasting effects this might have on her.

"Hey!" a voice hollered.

I jerked, surprised that someone could have caught me off-guard, but I was too focused on Mere. It was giving me tunnel vision.

But there he was, one of Jameson and Dennis's henchmen, popping out of a door in the stairwell.

It wasn't me who reacted first.

It wasn't even Gav.

It was Vega who had her wits about her, moving so fast that it seemed like she blurred, turning her gun in her hand, and cracking it against the man's face before she was reaching out with the other hand, grabbing him, and tossing him over the banister.

Maybe there would have been screaming that gave us away.

But the shock of it all kept the man silent as he free fell through the air, only to land with a sickening crack below, his body bent at an unnatural angle.

Dead.

He was dead.

“Move!” Vega hissed, shoving her hand into me to get me running again.

Then we were, going up one more floor. The one where the sounds were coming from.

No one paused.

I grabbed the handle, and we all rushed inside.

Old crap was scattered all about, bits of machinery that must not have been worth much if it was still around. Or simply too big and heavy to move.

The whole warehouse seemed more like a meeting place than a place of business for this crew.

But not for long.

Because I planned to track down and make every last one of them pay for this.

The betrayal of my family, sure.

But more so, for involving Mere.

The sounds continued, louder now, hisses, grunts, curses.

Rage, fiery and unstoppable, burned through my entire body, making my very vision feel heated and red-tinted as I flew through the line of garbage and toward the sounds.

“Fucking hold her still,” Jameson growled, making my gut twist as I finally made my way around the edge of one particularly large piece of machinery to find the trio.

Dennis, with his hand pressed to his throat, the pressure not doing a whole fuckuva lot to stem the flow of the bright red blood that was seeping between his fingers.

Mere.

It was the only explanation.

Mere had found something and had sliced one of her attacker's throats.

Pride, unexpected and warm, spread through my body, banking down some of the burning rage for a moment.

Until my gaze went down to the ground, finding Mere on her back, her legs pinned to the ground by Jameson's knees as he tried to undo her pants.

Pants.

I never thought I would be thankful that the woman had pants on.

I had no doubts that if she hadn't, Jameson would be a lot further along with his assault.

He was more than far enough along, though.

Her top was off.

Her bra was askew, twisted, exposing her slightly.

I didn't even realize the savage growl that filled the room came from me until both Dennis's and Jameson's heads twisted in my direction.

I flew at Jameson, grabbing him by the throat, lifting him up off of Mere, and pushing him backward until I shoved him against the wall as I tucked my gun away.

I didn't want to shoot him.

Not yet.

I wanted to make him hurt.

I wanted to paint this room in a fresh coat of his blood.

I wanted him to beg for mercy.

Then I wanted to show him none.

So that was what I did.

He put up a good fight at first, but my anger trumped his survival instinct in mere moments.

My fist kept punching, though. Denting in his nose, his eye sockets. The crunch of bone and burst of blood only seemed to fuel the fire of my rage.

It wasn't until I felt a hand on my shoulder that I seemed to snap out of it.

"He's gone, man," Gav said, tone calm, even, helping to drag me back down into my better senses.

"Dennis," I said, breathing heavy as I wiped my sleeve across my brow.

"Left him for you," Gav said, waving toward where he was knelt on the ground, still holding his neck.

He was pale.

Losing too much blood.

He'd die even if I didn't pull the trigger of the gun I was reaching for.

Part of me wanted him to suffer too.

The other part, though, was aware of Mere's soft cries.

And all I wanted was to get to her, to tell her that she was safe, that no one would ever touch her again.

So I walked up toward Dennis, watching the fear fill his eyes.

In my mind, I thought of Brio, of all the inventive ways that psychopath would make this fucker pay.

But I wasn't Brio.

And I just wanted to be finished with this clusterfuck of a situation.

"I hope you made peace with God," I said, cocking the gun as I pressed the muzzle to his forehead. "Because it's too late now."

With a squeeze of the trigger, and the explosive sound of the bullet leaving the chamber, it was done.

Dennis's body fell to the ground.

I handed my gun to my brother.

Then I turned back to find Vega holding Mere to her chest, keeping her cousin's face averted, but her sharp eyes were watching every movement I made.

I didn't see fear or disgust in her gaze, though. Just a quiet sort of understanding.

They had to die.

Taking a deep breath, I moved forward, dropping down to my knees behind Mere.

"Sweetheart," I murmured, noticing that Vega had already righted her bra and shirt before she protected her from witnessing my revenge.

A part of me was terrified she would jerk away, would tell me she never wanted to see me again, would grab her cousin and run.

I hadn't been prepared for the way she lurched away from Vega to throw herself into my arms instead, squeezing me so tight that it was hard to pull in a proper breath as she buried her face in my neck and cried.

"It's okay. It's going to be okay," I told her, my hands moving up and down her back, offering what small bit of comfort I could while she worked through her emotions. "Come on, baby," I said, slowly getting to my feet while I held her to me, lifting her up and into my arms. "Let's get out of here," I said, aware of Gav's vigilant gaze around.

That was three men.

There were at least four or five more that we needed to worry about.

We needed to get the hell out of there. Then, when shit cooled down and the girls were safe, we would take care of the rest of them.

As we walked back to the car, Mere's cries quieted, but her hold on me never loosened.

Not even as I ducked us into the backseat of Vega's car.

"Follow us," I told Gav, who gave me a nod, and got into his car.

We were almost halfway home, Vega's worried gaze glancing at us in the backseat at least a dozen times, before Mere finally spoke.

"I knew you would come," she said. "Both of you," she added.

"It's all thanks to your cousin," I told her. "She tracked me down, convinced me something was wrong since the shop was closed. Then we went in and saw the blood."

"I should have told someone," she murmured into my neck. "About him. But he threatened Vega. And you."

Fuck.

She was trying to protect *me*?

If that wasn't the fucking sweetest, but most absurd thing.

"I didn't know who you were," she added, her finger tracing one of my tattoos. "Not until the warehouse."

"I should have told you."

I mean, it wasn't like anyone in the Family ever just casually blurted out over dinner conversation, "Oh, yeah, and by the way, I'm in organized crime."

I figured, if things kept progressing, it would be a topic of conversation. Shit had just hit the fan before I got that chance.

"I should have told you," Vega said.

"You knew?" Mere asked, pulling back for the first time to look toward the front of the car, giving me a good look at the bruise on her cheek, her split lip.

Suddenly, I wished we could go back to the warehouse, so that I could resurrect Dennis and drag the torture out for a few hours.

"Yeah. I mean... of course I looked him up," Vega said, shrugging.

“You didn’t think that maybe the fact that I was involved with someone in the mafia was something I should have known?”

“I thought you might overreact to it,” Vega told her cousin honestly.

Mere’s mouth opened, then shut, seeming to accept that Vega was right about that.

My stomach tensed, though, at the idea of her brushing me aside still. Those fears lessened, though, as she relaxed back into me.

“Thank you for saving me,” she said, raising her hand, and inspecting her palm.

It looked rough.

It hadn’t gotten cleaned out, and it really probably needed stitches.

“Any chance you got a tetanus shot the last time you cut yourself?” I asked.

“How did...” she started, then glanced toward Vega.
“Yeah.”

“I can clean that up back at your place. Might not heal super pretty, but we can avoid urgent care if you want to just relax.”

“Relaxing sounds good,” she said, letting out a deep breath. “It’s been a rough few weeks.”

“Next time anything at all feels shady, you have to tell me,” I told her, giving her body a little squeeze.

Her head tilted up, her gaze holding mine, watching me for a long moment, before she gave me a nod.

“Okay.”

And I knew right then that there would be no more confusion, no more games, no more fighting what was growing between us.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mere

“You’re going,” Vega declared, standing in the doorway to my bedroom the next morning in a sports bra and a pair of men’s boxers, holding a steaming cup of coffee.

“What?” I asked, slow blinking at her through the harsh morning light.

How late was it?

It seemed too bright to be my usual waking time.

My heart leaped into my throat when my gaze landed on the clock to the side of Vega, clearly displaying that it was after ten in the morning.

Ten?

I’d never slept until ten a day in my life.

I shot up in bed, tossing off the covers.

“Relax,” Vega said, holding up her hand. “The shop is taken care of.”

“What? How?”

“That yummy man of yours has been up since the crack of dawn, moving and shaking, handling shit. Gotta admit, it was kind of hot. I mean, is there anything sexier than someone who is just... capable?” she asked, fanning herself with her hand.

“Wait... what? What was he handling?” I asked, feeling like my brain wasn’t quite working right.

“The shop. Obviously, you aren’t going back there. At least not for a while. He had his brother open the place this morning,” Vega said with a wicked little grin. “You should have seen the look of disgust on his face when Cesare told him that. It was priceless.”

“But... but he doesn’t know anything about flowers.”

“Neither did Dennis,” Vega said, and there was a moment of pregnant silence, all the things we weren’t saying filling the room.

About Dennis screwing over Cesare.

About him being a part of kidnapping me, trying to assault me.

About me slicing his throat.

About Cesare putting a bullet in his head.

It all felt so surreal in the morning light. Like something that had happened in a movie, not in real life. Not in *my* life.

But the aches in my body—my sore hand, now wrapped in gauze after Cesare treated it, my split lip, the bruise on my face, the bruises on my thighs from where *Jameson* had pinned me down—told me it had all been very real.

“That’s true,” I agreed. “But... but he doesn’t even know how to run the store.”

“Babe, let’s not overcomplicate flowers,” Vega said, shrugging. “People pick what they like, he wraps them in the plastic shit, then rings up what he sold. I’m not playing down

your role as a florist because you are magic with the flowers. But he can keep the shop running for the day.”

“Is that where Cesare is now?” I asked, feeling a surge of longing for him so strong that my chest hurt. My good hand rose, rubbing there like I might ease the ache.

“Yeah. He was going through the applications.”

“He’s firing me?” I asked, voice choked.

“No one is firing you. If you want to keep working there, I’m sure you can. But Rayna is in the hospital, and you need a little break after this whole ordeal. And he’s also decided he doesn’t like the idea of ever just having one person working in the shop at any given time now, so no matter what, there needs to be new hires.”

I would object, but I had to agree. I really never considered how terrifying it was to work alone. And even if it weren’t for the guys in the back and the danger they brought with them, even a rogue customer, or a random predator who knew you were alone posed a big threat.

“That makes sense,” I agreed, surprised with how much I wasn’t freaking out about my routine being messed with.

“Anyway, back to my original comment. You’re going.”

“Going where? To the shop?” I asked.

“To the city,” she clarified as my feet hit the ground.

“The city?”

“Yeah. He’s going. So you’re going.”

“He’s leaving?” I asked, hearing the mix of hurt and shock in my voice.

“He said he needs to have a meeting with his cousin. Who is, you know, the *capo dei capi*.”

“The what?”

“It means the ‘boss of all bosses,’” Vega explained. “See, with the mob, you have several Families. And in each Family, you have bosses, capos, and so on and so forth. But there

always has to be one big boss. Cesare's cousin is that boss. And he, for obvious reasons, needs to have a little sit down with him."

"How do you know all of this?" I asked, slow blinking at her.

"Well, while you two were making sweet, sweet love in the bath last night, I was doing some research."

I could feel my cheeks heating at the mention of that, at the memory of it.

I didn't expect to feel anything like desire after I'd heard Dennis's evil words, after I'd felt Jameson's hands pulling up my shirt and yanking at my bra.

But after Cesare spent so much time cleaning up and wrapping my hand, then drawing my bath, and climbing in with me just to hold me and reassure me that nothing was ever going to happen to me again, I'd felt the stirrings.

And it wasn't long before things progressed.

Vega was right, too.

It wasn't sex.

It was something a little deeper, more meaningful.

"He didn't mention going to the city to me," I said, climbing up out of bed, wanting to grab a cup of coffee to get my brain to start working right.

"It all came up this morning while he was making coffee," she told me. "He wanted you to sleep in. Said you were restless last night."

I had tossed and turned for hours before I was finally exhausted enough that sleep claimed me.

"I was," I said, going into the kitchen.

"Do you want to talk about it, or are you still processing?" Vega asked, and I'd never been so grateful to have someone in my life who knew me so well.

"Processing," I told her.

“Alright. I’m here if or when you need to talk, though. But anyway, yes, Cesare is going to the city for a meeting. And you are going to go with him.”

“Vega, he didn’t invite me,” I reminded her.

“That’s a technicality,” she told me, rolling her eyes. “We both know he is going to ask you to go with him.”

“We know no such thing,” I said, stirring my coffee.

“That man is into you big time. He wants you to go with him. He is going to ask when he gets here later. So I am just giving you a little warning, because I know you hate being caught off-guard, and like you are being put on the spot. But when he does ask, you are going to say yes.”

“If it’s a work thing—“ I started.

“Stop. Stop creating problems where there are none,” Vega demanded. “We were planning a trip to the city this spring anyway. So get a head start. I will come up this weekend. My case should be mostly wrapped up by then. We can hit the museums and Broadway in between your fun, sweaty, naked sessions with your little mob capo lover.”

“I... I will think about it,” I said.

“What is there to think about? Don’t you *want* to keep getting banged by that man while you also get a little trip away?”

“Yes. I mean... it’s just... it’s all very new.”

“A trial by fire is always a good option, in my un-humble opinion. Why not throw yourselves in fully? If you hate each other in a week, then no harm, no foul. You come back here and get your life going again.”

“And if it goes well?” I asked, looking up at her.

“Then you get married and have little mafia babies who say shit like *prujoot* and *regoat* and *goomah*. You know what, no, strike that. I think that last one means like whore or mistress or something like that. But if it goes well... you take the next step is what I’m saying.”

“But what about this?” I asked, waving an arm around the room.

“About what?”

“About Balm Harbour and my job and this apartment... and you.”

“Okay, well. Balm Harbour will still be here. Cesare will probably always have a home here. You can get a new job. Or not. Since I’m pretty sure that Cesare is loaded and would be happy to have a housewife.

“As for the apartment, I’m sure he has a better one. That is just begging for some feminine touches and some organization and deep cleaning.”

She made it sound so simple.

“And you?” I asked.

“Oh, come on. Like you could ever get rid of me,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Hell, maybe the mafia could use a lawyer or something,” she said with a smirk. “Come on, Mere. It’s a couple of hours away, not a whole world. We can see each other anytime we want.”

“I guess,” I agreed.

“Hey, look,” she said, putting down her mug and moving closer to me, her voice more serious than I’d ever heard it. “You can’t make life decisions based on your fear of the unknown, okay? I mean, sure, there’s a chance that things won’t work out, that you won’t like it, that you will need to change course. But maybe you will love it. Maybe you will be happier than ever.”

“And if I’m not? If it’s all one giant mistake?”

“Then we go back to how things were. You and me, we are ride-or-die. I’ll always be here for you. But can I let you in on a little secret?”

“Sure.”

“I really think you’re going to be happy with him, Mere. I’ve seen you with guys, remember? All you’ve ever had is

this vague, passing interest. And when they were gone, I swear you barely noticed. When you wanted Cesare but thought you couldn't have him, you were miserable. The whole icing your eyelids and eye drops schtick didn't fool me," she added, smirking.

"I am going to go grab us some brunch. Why don't you go ahead and start making a list of what you want to bring with you to the city."

She knew me too well.

I had already started a list in my head while we were talking.

But when she was gone, I got out my notepad, and started writing things down.

It made me feel a little bit more in control of the situation.

She was right about my feelings toward Cesare. They were strong and uncontrollable.

And as much as I was enjoying him, I struggled with things feeling out of my control.

List making, inventory of the stock I had, then straightening up the house gave me some of my control back.

Morning became afternoon, then evening dawned.

With still no word from Cesare.

Anxiety closed itself around me, a snake that seemed to constrict around my neck, chest, and stomach with each passing hour without hearing from him.

"I can hear you overthinking," Vega declared as I started dinner, not knowing what else to do with myself.

"I'm making dinner."

"Yeah," she said, pulling off one side of her headphones, and looking over her shoulder. "And wondering what it means that your mafia beau hasn't shown up yet."

"Why do you have to keep referring to him as mafia-this-and-that?"

“I don’t know,” she admitted with a little smirk. “I guess it makes it feel more real. It feels like something out of a TV show otherwise, doesn’t it?”

“It kind of does. But last night...” I said, letting the memories hang in the air.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Maybe... oh, there we go,” she said with a smile when there was a knock at the door. “Well well well, what do we have...” she started as she opened the door.

Glancing up, I saw a smile tug at her lips at whatever she was seeing.

“Oh, you’re good. You are good,” she said, shaking her head as Cesare walked in.

Then I saw what she was referring to.

He’d come with an enormous bouquet. Only, it wasn’t just one bouquet, because as I watched, he pulled it apart to reveal two, still quite large, bouquets.

But each was very unique.

One absolutely screamed Vega with its bright orange lilies, red peonies, and a few precious, exotic birds of paradise flowers.

The look on Vega’s face was pure shock, then joy.

Vega dated a lot. All different sorts of men. Very few ever sent flowers. None ever sent ones that suited her so well.

“Wow, you have an eye for this,” she said, reaching for her bouquet with *gimmie* fingers.

“Actually, Gav put that together for you,” he said, giving her a playful smirk. “Turns out he’s got an eye for this type of shit,” he said, then turned his attention toward me.

The playful, boyish look slipped away as his gaze fell on me, replaced with something softer, sweeter.

“Fucking missed you today,” he said, walking toward me. “Sounds stupid, since I just saw you this morning.”

“I missed you too,” I told him, since it was the truth. “You should have woken me up when you got up,” I told him, wiping my hands, then reaching for my own bouquet.

He’d gone all with white for this one.

White roses, lilies, carnations, and for a pop of uniqueness, white snapdragons. They were framed in the calming green of eucalyptus.

It was gorgeous.

“Gav?” I asked, smiling.

“Nah. This one was me,” he told me. “Did I do good?”

“You did amazing,” I told him. “Snapdragons are very under-appreciated.”

“I figured you’d like the unusual shit,” he said, taking the flowers from me, and tossing them on the counter.

I resisted the urge to move them further away from the food I was prepping.

But when Cesare’s arms went around me, I forgot I was even making dinner.

I could feel myself melting into him, needing to be as close as possible to him.

Suddenly, I knew Vega was right.

I had to try.

Even if it scared me.

Even if it would take some adjusting.

“Did you get some sleep?” he asked after pressing his lips to mine.

“Yes. But I would have preferred to wake up with you.”

“Plenty of time for that,” he said. “Speaking of. I wanted to know if you’d be interesting in coming—“

“Yes,” I cut him off.

I didn’t expect the devilish little smirk that toyed with his lips then. Or the light in his eyes.

“As much as I love the enthusiasm, sweetheart, I wasn’t talking about that kind of coming.”

A strange, strangled sound escaped me at that. “That’s not what I meant either,” I said, then watched as his brows rose. “That’s not *all* I meant,” I conceded.

“That’s my girl,” he said, letting one of his hands drift down to give my butt a squeeze.

“I meant... if you were asking me if I wanted to come to the city for your meeting...”

“Ah, Vega was doing some talking, I see.”

“Always,” Vega said, walking past the kitchen on her way to her bedroom, smiling down at her flowers.

“But, yes. I have to go have a talk with my cousin. And I was wondering if you wanted to come to the city with me for a while. Don’t worry,” he rushed on. “I have the shop set up. And Gav is staying behind to make sure things are running well and Vega is doing alright. If she doesn’t follow you to the city, that is.”

“You know her well too,” I said, smiling. “We were going to go to the city in the spring for a vacation. Looks like it is just being moved up.”

“Did you have plans?”

“Typical tourist things,” I told him. “Museums. Broadway. And Vega wanted to tour some of the bars because... Vega,” I said, smiling.

“Sounds like fun. And if you want a guide...” he said, leaning his forehead to mine.

“When do you need to leave?”

“We,” he corrected. “And tomorrow. Late morning, if that isn’t too soon. I know you need to... get things together.”

“That’s plenty of time,” I assured him.

I had to pack, but I had all the lists written. The house was clean, save for the dinner clean-up. All I would have to do was a load of linens.

If I had more time, I would have shopped and prepped some healthy food for Vega. But she was a grown woman. She would make do on her own. Sure, it would all be takeaway and sugar, but she'd survive.

"So, what are you making?" he asked. "Will there be enough for me, or am I on my own?"

"Plenty," I assured him. "Balsamic, rosemary, and cranberry roasted chicken with a side of parmesan orzo, and green beans. What?" I asked at his wide eyes.

"You might not want to let the women of my family know how well you cook, or they'll be making you cook for every function."

"How do you know it will be any good?" I reasoned.

"Because you don't do anything by half," he said, shrugging. "Alright," he said, moving away. "How can I help? After I wash my hands," he said when my gaze had immediately dipped to them.

Oh, this man.

It was early, yes, but something inside of me said that this was going somewhere.

Perhaps I should have been more freaked out about the whole... mafia thing than I was.

I mean... it was crazy, right?

Who got involved with someone in organized crime? Someone who made their money illegally. Someone who would be under constant scrutiny from the police.

If I decided to stay involved with Cesare, that would be a part of my life.

The police.

The illegality.

The concerns for his safety.

Maybe even my own.

The thing was, there didn't really feel like there was much of a *choice* to make.

I wanted him.

That meant accepting all the things that came with him.

I watched as he rolled up his sleeves to wash his hands.

I mean, after all, he was accepting all the things that came with me, wasn't he?

Without hesitation.

Without a second thought.

I would have to do the same.

Somehow, it seemed like a small thing. If I got to have him in exchange.

"Let me do the chopping," Cesare said, nudging me with his hip. "You're down a hand," he reminded me.

"Baby," he murmured a few minutes later, making my head jerk up from watching his hands as he chopped.

"Yeah?"

"You keep looking at me like that and dinner is gonna burn because I'm gonna need to drag you to your room and fuck you," he told me, smirking at me as I glanced toward the stove. "What?" he asked.

"I'm debating how much I want the chicken," I admitted, getting a throaty chuckle out of him.

To that, Cesare turned, walking over toward the oven, opening it, and checking it, then the time, before walking back to the sink to wash his hands.

"What are you doing?" I gasped when he grabbed me suddenly, turning me, and yanking me back against his chest, his lips finding their way to my neck.

"Got fifteen, maybe twenty," he said, his hands already drifting up my belly, then cupping my breasts through the material of my dress.

“But the orzo... and the green beans...” I objected, thinking of the timing, how I always had things done at exactly the same time.

“Fuck ‘em,” he told me as one of his hands moved back down, sliding up under my skirt, then panties, and working my clit.

My head fell back on his shoulder as my eyes drifted closed, so I could slip fully into the sensations.

He was right.

Fuck the orzo and green beans.

Cesare’s fingers slipped inside of me, stroking gently, then faster as my breathing got quicker, as my hips rocked against his movements.

“Cesare, please,” I pleaded.

“Please, what?” he asked, teeth nipping the shell of my ear.

“I need you inside of me,” I told him, shameless in my desperation to feel him filling me once again.

The little growl he let out vibrated through him and into me, and the next thing I knew I was pushed forward, my hands on the countertop with my skirt up around my hips, my panties around my ankles, and Cesare standing behind me, slipping on protection, then stroking his cock against my cleft.

“Cesare,” I whimpered, rocking back into him.

Another of those little growls escaped him before he was suddenly slamming inside of me.

His hand slapped over my mouth as a moan escaped me, muffling the sound against his palm.

There were no teasing touches, no slow exploration.

Cesare fucked me hard and fast, his hand staying over my mouth, but it wasn’t long before even that was barely able to quiet my cries as he pushed me further and further toward that edge.

His free hand moved between us, working my clit as he continued to fuck me.

“Come for me,” Cesare growled. “I need to feel you squeezing my cock,” he added.

Then just like that, I was coming, the sounds sharp against his palm as the waves crashed through me over and over.

Cesare slammed deep, coming with me, leaving us both panting and half-collapsed over the kitchen counter afterward.

The oven alarm chimed, making Cesare let out a sexy little chuckle.

“Fuck, I’m good,” he declared, moving away from me.

And, yes, yes he was.

In so many unexpected ways.

I knew there was so much that was still unknown.

But I was uncharacteristically excited to step into that uncertainty.

So long as it was Cesare walking beside me...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mere - 1 day

Apparently, the boss of the New York City mafia operated out of a gorgeous, historic brownstone.

I don't know exactly what I had been expecting. Some dark, creepy warehouse, maybe.

But as Cesare led me up the steps and in through the front door, all I was met with was someone's very lovely, multi-million dollar home.

"Just give me ten minutes," Cesare said, squeezing my hand as he pressed me into a chair in the dining room.

Somewhere upstairs, a baby was letting out deep belly laughs, and I swear to God, I felt an ache in my womb that I had never experienced before.

I'd never understood the term 'baby fever' before. Perhaps because I'd never been around a man I would even consider starting a family with.

My hand went subconsciously to my belly, thinking of it swelling one day, of a baby with Cesare's smile and my eyes.

It was the front door slamming and footsteps moving down the center hall that had thoughts of babies slipping away.

I tensed in my seat, feeling wholly out of place, unsure what I could say if someone asked me why I was there.

Could I claim I was Cesare's girlfriend? Or would that freak him out if it got back to him?

I expected another suited man, like the two we had walked past outside. But this guy was wearing black jeans, a black t-shirt, and black boots.

His gaze was forward until he saw or sensed me, making him freeze mid-stride, his dark gaze slipping in my direction.

His head nodded a bit as a strange upside down smile tugged at his lips.

Then he was turning.

And stalking right toward me.

Stalking.

That was how this man walked.

Like a predator.

He stopped right in front of me, dropping down to a squat in front of me, and reaching out for my chin, turning my face side to side, then looking down at my hand.

A muscle was ticking in his jaw when he looked back up at me.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"I'm... sorry? Who was what?" I asked.

"Who did it? Who cut you up and beat you up? Give me a name."

"Oh, um, Jake... Jameson," I corrected.

"Jameson," he said, nodding as he got to his feet.

He was back at the doorway of the dining room when another man suddenly stepped in, pressing a hand to his shoulder to stop him from moving.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the new man, one in a suit who had a really silly “cocky” belt buckle.

“Gotta find a guy named Jameson who thinks it’s okay to beat up on girls,” the other man said, making me jump up out of my chair.

“You can’t,” I squeaked, watching as both men looked at me.

“I can. And I’ll enjoy it,” he said, a evil spark in his eyes.

“No. I mean... you can’t. He’s dead already.”

“Oh,” he said, the man deflating like a balloon. “Did he suffer at least?” he asked.

“Judging by Cesare’s hands, yes,” the other man said.

“No shit? You’re Cesare’s woman?” the scarier guy asked. “Whose wife are you?” he asked, making the other man swat him on the back of the head.

“This is Brio. He has no manners,” the other man said. “I’m Emilio Costa,” he added. “And you must be Mere,” he said, giving me a smile that would have been completely charming if it reached his eyes.

“Yes,” I said, giving him what I hoped was a warm smile. “Cesare thought that maybe your, ah, boss might, you know, want to talk to me about... everything that happened.”

At my fumbling, Emilio’s face softened a bit more, and for a moment, his eyes were warm.

“Honey, you don’t need to explain yourself. You’re with Cesare, that’s all the explanation anyone needs from you. You want a cup of coffee?” he asked, gesturing toward the hall.

“Sure,” I said, giving him a smile.

“Hey,” Emilio called to Brio who was walking back out toward the street. “Where the fuck are you going?” he asked. “You’re supposed to be talking to Enz next.”

“You know, I think I’m cool with not getting my ass chewed out for another day or two,” Brio said, shrugging, then disappearing.

“It’s gonna be a lot of names and faces over the next few days,” Emilio told me as he made a fresh pot of coffee. “No one is going to get their panties in a bunch about you not remembering them. Except maybe Cesare’s immediate family.”

“I met Gav,” I told him, getting a smirk out of the man.

“I’m sorry,” he said, making a laugh escape me.

“He’s really not that bad!” I objected. “He probably wouldn’t be so grumpy if Cesare didn’t pick on him all the time.”

“Yeah, that’ll never happen,” Emilio said, shaking his head.

“Do you have a brother like that?”

“My brother seems to have a rare talent for fucking up his own life all the time. He doesn’t need my help. Do you have siblings?” he asked.

“No. I’m an only child. I really only have my cousin.”

“So this is going to be a culture shock for you,” he said as he got me a cup.

“I’m kind of looking forward to it,” I said, shrugging.

“Good,” he said, reaching for his phone as it rang. “Because you’re about to be very in demand. Sorry I can’t be a better host,” he said, grimacing at his phone. “I have to take this.”

“No, please, don’t worry about it,” I assured him, giving him a smile, but he was already distracted as he brought his phone up to his ear as he walked away.

I finished making my coffee.

And it was about ten minutes later, the coffee gone, that my anxiety started to niggle at me.

There were dishes in the sink, so I turned my attention to them, washing, putting them in the drainboard, then drying and finding their homes before I started to scrub the sink itself.

“You must be Mere,” a soft female voice said, making my stomach drop as I whirled around, a soapy sponge still in my hand.

And there she was, a pretty, petite, dark-haired woman with a baby on her hip.

“I’m *so* sorry,” I said, suddenly realizing what I was doing. Cleaning someone else’s home. Without permission. She must have thought I was a psychopath.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked, beaming. “Don’t ever apologize for doing my dishes,” she said. “They probably would have sat there another day at least otherwise. This little monster is in a clingy phase. I haven’t showered in two days either,” she admitted, wincing. “Would you tell me if I smelled?” she asked. “Lorenzo said he would, but he’s a total liar. You know, in a good way. He told me I was beautiful with my head in the toilet with morning sickness kind of good way. But a liar nonetheless. And I’d really like not to smell.”

“You don’t,” I assured her.

“I’m Giana. Lorenzo’s wife,” she said. “And you are the woman from the flower store.”

“I am,” I agreed, nodding.

“Word to the wise, maybe don’t advertise that you’re a florist to the family. Or you will be arranging flowers for every event from tomorrow until the day you die. It’s why Cesare’s sister, Lore, doesn’t cook often, even though she’s the best in the whole family. Are the boys talking?” she asked, glancing around.

“Yeah. About the whole... Maine thing,” I said.

“They have a lot of their little meetings. And you are always welcome to tag along and do my dishes,” she said. “Clean the weird, sludgy bag of vegetables out of the back of my produce drawer, move the family of spiders out of my closet corner...” she said, smile getting warmer the more she

spoke. “What I am saying here is... welcome to the family. Here’s a baby,” she said, practically tossing her kid at me and turning to almost run out of the room.

I stood there frozen for a moment while the baby looked up at me, wide-eyed, lower lip trying to decide to tremble or not.

“Hey, you,” I said in a chipper voice. “I think your mommy really needed that shower. You really should let her do that every once in a while, you know,” I told him as I settled him on my hip, then went back to rinsing down the sink.

That was exactly how Cesare came upon us a moment later.

And the look in his eyes, God, it made my heart swell up in my chest.

“Gotta say, I like how that looks,” he said, nodding.

“Are babies frequently thrown at you in this family?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said almost immediately, giving me a smile. “And there are a lot of them. Everyone reproduces like rabbits around here. He likes you. And he doesn’t like anyone but his mom.”

“I used to babysit,” I reminded him. “I like kids.”

“Yeah? You want to have some?” he asked, moving closer, his gaze intense.

“Some?” I repeated.

“Or a shitton of ‘em,” he clarified.

“Did you like being a part of a big family?” I asked.

“I mean, I pitied my dad. We were a nightmare and he was so outnumbered. But yeah. You always had someone to get into trouble with around.”

“I think I’d like that. For my kids. To have friends around. It was kind of lonely being an only child.”

“You think maybe you want to have a bunch of those kids with me?” he asked, a hint of vulnerability in his voice.

“I think I’ve never really given it any thought until you,” I admitted. Then, feeling a little exposed, I rushed to change the subject. “I met Emilio and Brio.”

“Oh, shit,” Cesare said, shaking his head as he looked at the floor for a second.

“What?” I asked, stomach tensing.

“I was hoping that your first Brio encounter would be with me around,” he said. “He’s... intense.”

“By ‘intense’ do you mean ‘murderous’ by any chance?” I asked.

“Jesus Christ,” Cesare said. “What did he say?”

“He wanted to know the name of the guy who did this,” I said, waving to my face. “And I got the feeling that he was willing to m-u-r-d-e-r every Jameson in the city to make sure he got the right one.”

“Don’t think you need to worry about spelling around him yet. And you wouldn’t be wrong about that. Brio is a different breed of crazy.”

“Emilio was nice.”

“Yeah, Emilio is pretty level-headed.”

“Is that my wife sounding like an old Herbal Essence commercial upstairs?” another male voice asked, smooth and confident, as he walked into the room.

I think I pictured a mafia boss as a lot older. More like the guys in the movies.

Which was silly since I knew that Lorenzo was close to Cesare’s age.

But he was a tall, dark, handsome man with knowing eyes and a confident carriage.

“She was worried you are lying to her about her smelling.”

“I might have been,” Lorenzo admitted, smirking. “It’s nice to meet you, Mere. I’m sorry the Family has been such a pain in the ass for you,” he said, coming over to take the baby from me, and I almost immediately missed the feeling of having him in my arms.

“I’m not complaining,” I said as Cesare moved in at my side, curling me into him.

“Funny how it works out that way, huh?” he asked with a knowing smile. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I am going to go toss this to his Uncle Milo while I go talk to my wife about baby number three,” he said, disappearing.

“Wanna go back to my apartment?” Cesare asked. “We can give it a good, deep clean,” he offered.

And I swear that while I’d been teetering on the edge of it for days, I finally fell fully in love with the man right then.

Cesare - 1 week

I was actually impressed that Giana had managed to hold off the aunts, cousins, and sisters off for a full week.

One blissfully quiet week where Mere and I got to spend our days having sex, exploring the city, and learning more about each other.

But I always knew that, eventually, the whole family was going to want to meet the woman who finally made me think about settling down.

And, it seemed, today was that day.

So I almost expected to wake up alone in the early morning to find that Mere was up and scrubbing already.

It seemed that the almost compulsive need to clean and organize eased a bit when she was enjoying herself, when she was distracted by exploring the city, then falling into bed with me.

She still made sure everything was *just so*, but aside from the first day when she'd given the whole house a deep clean with my help, she hadn't been going too overboard.

Hell, we'd even passed out on the bed after fucking without changing the sheets.

But now she was worried about the dinner party, so she was...scrubbing the bathroom tile grout with bleach and a toothbrush.

"Sweetheart," I said, voice soft. "They're going to love you."

"What if they don't?" she asked, not even trying to pretend that wasn't the reason she was stress-cleaning. We were beyond that.

"They will," I assured her. "You've already met a bunch of them and they liked you."

She couldn't argue with that.

"Okay, but they weren't your, you know, immediate family."

"Gavino likes you," I told her. "I mean... as much as he can like anyone. Think he likes you more than he likes me, actually," I said, smiling at how her eyes went a little warm.

"But what are the others like?" she asked.

"My sister, Lore, is really chill. A bit like Vega that way, honestly. And my other three brothers are all different. One is

younger, boyish still, thinks he's hot shit. The two older ones have their shit together and are more serious. And you'll have Giana to talk to. Brio, Salvatore, and Santi's wives are all great too."

"None of your brothers are married?"

"Not yet," I told her. And no one would have thought that I would be the one to reach that milestone first. Yet, that was definitely where my head was at.

Rings and vows and a couple of kids who looked like us.

Mere rose from the floor, discarding her bucket, cleaning the toothbrush, then putting it with the bucket up under the sink.

But looking no more at peace.

"Guess what?" I asked, as she glanced around, trying to find something she hadn't already cleaned.

"What?"

"I have an entire fucking closet in the spare room that is jam-packed full of crap. I haven't even opened the door in months. It's all yours," I invited, watching as a big smile tugged at her lips.

I figured, once she got the place as clean as she liked, she could start in on the decorating and organizing. Plenty of tasks to keep her occupied and therefore ease the transition from Balm Harbour to the city.

I knew it wouldn't be an easy one.

But she'd told me herself that La Flora had once felt like a sanctuary to her, but ever since the men in the back room, and the threats from Jameson, it felt more like a source of anxiety than peace.

Now she had the choice not to go back. She wouldn't need the money. I made more than enough. But if she wanted that source of independence, there were plenty of shops in the city where she could work. Even just part-time.

The bigger concern, I was sure, was Vega. Namely, the lack of her. The one person who had always been around to ease Mere's anxieties, to coax her at times to step out of her comfort zone.

I hoped, eventually, that Mere would be able to find all of that in me.

But I knew that missing her cousin was going to be the hardest part of this. Even if we did end up going back to my place in Balm Harbour to visit often.

Mere had the entire contents of the closet spread across the floor when there was a knock at the door.

It wasn't uncommon for family members to drop in, so I thought nothing of it as I pulled the door open.

To find Vega herself standing there.

A few feet behind her was a surly-looking Gav who seemed to be playing valet to Vega, because he was carrying no less than three bags, plus a rolling suitcase.

"Vega," I said, jerking back. "What are you doing here?"

"My case is finished. I'm in town to visit," she said. Then, leaning forward, she glanced around, looking for Mere. Not seeing her, she went on, "I figured that it might help ease this transition if I am here for a little bit. Not *here* here. Like in your apartment," she clarified. "I just need to stay for one night. I have a reservation for a hotel tomorrow. But when my man Gav here told me about the dinner party tonight, I thought that maybe you might need some reinforcements."

"She's really anxious about it," I admitted. "She'll be happy to know you're here. And you're invited to dinner, of course."

"I am down for some genuine Italian food. Maybe I will meet my own hot mafia dude. Not this one," she said, waving a hand back at Gav. "He told me that my ass isn't big enough."

"No, the fuck I didn't," Gav said, looking a little outraged.

"I directly asked him if my ass looked fat in these pants. And he said *no*."

“I thought you wanted it to look smaller!” Gav objected.

“When is a small ass ever the goal?” she shot back, rolling her eyes.

Gavino looked at me, eyes lost, looking for some help.

“You fucking kidding me, man? You want me to help you against a lawyer? Fuck no. You’re on your own,” I said as Vega breezed into my apartment, leaving me to take the bags from Gav.

“I was stuck in a car with her for ten hours,” he declared, face grim. “You fucking owe me.”

“Come on, how bad could it have been? What?” I asked when a pained look crossed his face.

“She listens to death metal and Taylor Swift, literally fucking nothing in between. And she sings it. All of it. But she can’t sing. Oh, and she flashes people for fun, and demands to stop for coffee every fucking forty-five minutes.”

“She was probably fucking with you on purpose,” I told him.

“Yeah, well, mission accomplished,” he said. “I’m going home to sleep for the rest of the day.”

He never did make it to dinner.

And, thanks to a little help from Vega, and the eagerness of the women of the family to welcome someone new into the fold, Mere had lost most of her anxiety within fifteen minutes of walking into the door.

My aunt, the one who was particular about things like how to vacuum, was even keen enough to invite Mere to help with the clean-up after dinner.

“It was just like the movies,” Mere declared later as she walked toward the bed where I was already waiting for her. “Better, even. But louder,” she added.

“Eventually, you’ll be used to the noise and will get through the night without a headache,” I assured her, reaching to rub one of her temples as she curled up on my chest.

“I kind of don’t want to get used to it,” she told me, taking a deep breath.

“Why not?” I asked, feeling myself tense.

“Because then it will feel like I’m taking it for granted,” she said, her fingers moving out to trace the edges of one of my tattoos. “And I don’t want to do that. You have so much love in your life, do you know that?” she asked, turning her head up to look at me.

I heard what she wasn’t saying.

Do you know how lucky you are? Do you know how much I wanted that growing up?

“I do. I’m really fucking lucky. And now you’re gonna have all that love too,” I told her.

Her smile was soft, but a little shy, before she ducked her head again.

“I think Vega had an even better time than I did. What was she talking to Brio about for so long?” she asked.

“Honey, trust me when I say that you don’t want to know,” I told her, recalling Brio telling her of all his favorite torture techniques while Vega just ate that shit up.

“You’re probab—“ she started, cutting off when there was a slamming sound against our door, making us both sit up.

A second later, the door opened, and there was Vega, drunk off her ass. She’d gone out after dinner with some of the guys. And they’d apparently gotten her shitfaced.

“You, sir,” she said, voice raised, pointing a finger at me from her outstretched arm. “When you marry Mere, you’re going to have to marry me too. We’ll be sister wives. Except I don’t want to fuck you,” she said.

“Vega!” Mere hissed.

“No, see, I have to be in this family,” she told us, waving a hand out in a very ‘it is what it is’ kind of way.

“Babe, you are in this family,” I told her. “You’re Mere’s family, so you’re this family too.”

“That is... very true,” she said with a big hiccup. “And I don’t have to fuck you. That is a win.”

“For God’s sake, Vega. Get some sleep,” Mere hissed.

“I’m going to go shoot some people. In my game, my game!” she clarified when my brow raised, a little concerned about her newfound interest in murder. “Also, if you hear the buzzer, that’s for me. I ordered cake. Did you know you can order cake, to the house, after midnight? ‘Cause you can!” she said, eyes round. “This city is where I belong,” she said, turning to head back out.

“Oh!” she said, swinging the door open, and swinging in *with it*. “And tell Ant that I’m sorry about his hand.”

“Jesus Christ. What happened to his hand?”

“We were playing the knife game.”

“What knife game?” Mere asked.

“You know, where you stab the knife between your fingers really fast?”

“Why were you stabbing the knife between Anthony’s fingers?” I asked.

“Listen, you ask too many questions, my man,” she told me. “What happens in the Family, stays in the Family.”

“I am the Family,” I reminded her.

“Right you are,” she said, nodding hard for emphasis. “Okay. Off to do murder. I’ll have my headphones on, so get as loud as you want. Okay byeee,” she said, closing the door, and stumbling into the spare room.

“So, it sounds like Vega is moving to the city,” Mere said.

“And you too?” I asked, tone hopeful.

“I think I might like it here. But what about Balm Harbour?”

“I’ll always have a house there.”

“And La Flora?” she asked.

“Will continue to run. If you want, you can oversee that from afar.”

“Will there still be... imports?” she asked.

“There will. But this time, those will be run by the Family, not some third party. The employees will be safe.”

“It would be nice to be able to go there a few times a year. Especially in the spring and summer.”

“I can swing going away pretty much anytime you want,” I assured her.

“If Vega and I can find an apartment—“

“Sweetheart, figured this part was clear. But seems it’s not,” I said, pulling back to look at her. “I want you to move in with me.”

Her smile was sweet.

“But what about Vega?”

“If she needs a place to crash, we have the spare room.”

She would need some time to get her life together if she was moving. And I liked Vega, as over the top as she was.

“Hey, Cesare?” Mere called a moment later.

“Yeah?”

“Can we take a trip to the hardware store? And some place to get baskets and acrylic bins?”

I didn’t plan on being in the apartment for much longer, especially with a woman to take care of, with the potential for kids in the future.

But if she wanted to fix up the place, to settle in, to build a nest, then I saw no reason to get in the way of that.

“And some big box store to get shit like drapes and bath mats?” I prompted, watching as she smiled at me before rolling on top of me.

“Hey, Cesare?” she asked between light kisses.

“Yeah?” I asked, trying to think straight through the desire building in my system.

“I think I might be falling in love with you,” she said, her voice a small whisper.

“That’s convenient,” I said, reaching up to tuck some of her hair behind her ear. “Cause I think I fell for you the first time I saw you.”

Mere - 1 year

“What is all of this?” I asked, looking at the bags in Vega’s hands.

“Well, in one bag, there are chocolate bars and a soft blanket. In the other, there is a cake and champagne. Since I don’t exactly know which outcome you are hoping for when you pee on the stick. Well, the six sticks.”

I honestly wasn’t sure what I was hoping for, either. I wanted kids with Cesare. There was no question about that.

That said, we had just moved into our new home. A four-bedroom limestone townhouse that I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around being able to call home.

It had been ostentatiously expensive. Though Cesare claimed it was a “steal,” because it needed a lot of work.

Which was what I had been throwing myself into the plans and the paint chips and material swatches.

And I was really enjoying it.

Reaching for the pharmacy bag that would hold the answers I was seeking, my engagement ring caught my eye.

He'd had it specially made.

A flower.

He'd gotten me a flower engagement ring.

"Whatever the outcome is, I will be happy with it," I told Vega, realizing it was true.

If some of the renovation plans were rushed or not as thoroughly thought-through as usual because I was expecting, that would be just fine. And if this wasn't the right time, and a baby would come later in our relationship, that would also be just fine.

I just wanted to know.

And wrap my head around the result.

That was why I was having Vega bring me the test, not having Cesare do it.

"That is a good mindset to have," Vega said. "So, that means I can dig into the champagne now, right?" she asked, already pulling out the bottle, so she could pop the cork.

"Rough day?" I asked.

"You would think that working for mafia guys, I'd be working on murder trials or drug charges or something. Not paperwork. So much fucking paperwork."

Vega didn't work exclusively for the Costa Family. She also worked for the Esposito Family. The Morelli Family. And even the D'onofrio Family. Four of the Five Families of the New York City mafia.

She mixed some normal cases in as well, for appearances sake, but she took a page out of her mentor's book and tried to work as little as possible.

The difference here was that Vega worked for herself. And she was making an obscene amount of money working just a few days a week.

“They own a lot of businesses,” I said, nodding.

I moved to the kitchen, grabbing my big water bottle, and chugging some of it.

“How goes the wedding planning?” Vega asked.

“I have no idea,” I admitted.

True to form, the ladies of the family had sort of... taken over that task. They were leaving the flowers to me, but had decided to do all the rest themselves.

I’d agreed because the pictures from all the other family weddings had been amazing. Far superior to anything I could have done. Though, objectively, I could have personalized the bouquets to the bride’s personalities.

Which was my plan for mine.

But that was all settled weeks ago.

“The house plans are in full swing, though,” she said, pushing some of the plans out of the way. “Might have to work a nursery into the plans.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, opening one of the boxes to read the instructions. “I mean... definitely. Eventually.”

Twenty minutes later, I had three of the six tests spread across the bathroom counter as Vega and I watched the countdown on her phone.

“And... time,” she said, and we both took a deep breath in unison before glancing down.

Negative.

They were all negative.

“I feel like a hug is appropriate,” Vega said as her arm went around me, the side of her head pressing into mine. “How are you?” she asked.

“I’m okay. A little sad, but also a little relieved. Somehow at the same time.”

“That makes sense, I think. You want Cesare’s babies. But maybe just not right this moment.”

“It would be nice to wait until after the wedding. Did you go to your dress fitting yet?”

“I did. Did I mention how impressive it is that you managed to find me a dress that tastefully shows off my underbust tattoo?” she asked as we went back into the kitchen. And this time, both of us drank champagne.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she said a while later. “Can you make me a custom bouquet?”

“Always. For what? And who?”

“Well, I need something that says: *I’m sorry I set your shirt on fire... while you were wearing it.*”

“Anthony?” I asked, cringing.

“Really, it makes no sense how it even happened,” Vega said, shaking her head. “I’m starting to think that guy has a curse on him or something. So can you make the bouquet or not?”

“I don’t think there is a flower for accidental incineration, but I can certainly try.”

“You’re the best. Okay. I’m going to go murder some people,” she said.

While so many things had changed, some things never would. And there was a certain amount of comfort in that.

“Baby,” Cesare said later that night while I worked on dinner in the middle of the construction zone that was our kitchen.

“Yeah?” I asked, half-distracted by the carrots I was glazing.

“What’s this?” he asked, making my head tilt up to find him holding the boxes of the pregnancy tests that I’d left in the hall bathroom.

“Oh,” I said, wincing a bit. “Yeah, that. They were negative.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, baby?”

“I wanted to wrap my head around it first. I was going to tell you over dinner.”

“Did you want them to be positive?” he asked.

“Maybe not yet,” I said. “But I was a little sad when they were all negative.”

“I get that,” he said, coming around the island to wrap his arms around my waist. “How about we see if we can get a positive one after our honeymoon?” he suggested.

We’d decided to go to Balm Harbour.

Nontraditional, sure, but I liked the familiarity of it. We’d only managed to get back to Maine twice since I’d first come to the city. Once, to pack all my things up. Another, for a meeting Cesare needed to have with his new imports staff.

I wanted a chance to really dig in and explore all the events that I enjoyed so much in Balm Harbour.

But this time, with Cesare at my side.

“I think that sounds perfect,” I decided.

I ended up getting pregnant on our wedding night.

“It’s like looking into a rip in time,” Vega declared as we sat on the porch in Cesare and my Balm Harbour home, watching our daughters down by the water.

She wasn’t wrong.

See, Vega had gotten pregnant almost at the same time that I had.

So our little girls had grown up like sisters.

And like she said, they were like mini versions of us.

Vega’s daughter was tall and lean with a mop of red hair—though hers ran more mahogany than copper. She was wearing a pair of bright orange corduroy bell bottom pants and a flowing, colorful Stevie Nicks bell-sleeved duster.

Whereas my daughter was in a very simple navy blue sundress with her dark brown hair pulled back into a neat bun.

She wasn’t fully me. None of our children were. For example, she had my sense of style and a like of all things pretty and neat, but she was bold and charming like her father. One of our sons was the biggest slob in the world, but was reserved like me.

As it turned out, we carried on the Costa family tradition of reproducing “like rabbits.”

Four planned.

One a whoopsie baby when the rest of our kids were already ten and up.

Vega, always one to buck tradition, had only had her one daughter. Who she raised to be an even bigger badass who had been doing martial arts since she was practically a toddler, who’d always been at the top of her class, who had never—not

one day in her life—bucked to convention, sacrificed her own style or interests for what was popular.

“I’m glad you guys could come this year,” I said, smiling over at Vega.

They usually used spring break to go jet-setting somewhere. While adult Vega liked having roots, and had no interest in raising her daughter as a nomad like she’d been raised, she did believe that travel was an important part of life. So they were always going off to explore somewhere whenever they could find a time away from school and work.

“Me too. There’s a big part of us in this town,” she said, looking around. “I like knowing the kids get to experience small town life too. Gives them some balance. Oh, there’s your man,” she said, nodding toward where the car was turning down the street. “I’m going to take those two out to go fuck up some shit,” she declared, walking down toward the girls.

“Where are they rushing off to?” Cesare asked as he walked around the side of the house.

“According to Vega, to ‘fuck up some shit,’ which I am pretty sure means order the biggest sundaes at the ice cream place,” I told him, smiling at the bouquet he’d brought me.

He was good at that.

Surprising me with flowers.

Especially after I did kind of fully “retire” after our children came into the world.

He knew I missed having flowers around. So he would drop into a florist on his way home and have something pretty made to keep on the kitchen counter.

On our first wedding anniversary, he’d filled the entire house with white flowers. Thousands and thousands of them.

Whenever he brought me one, I would pick one special flower to press between the pages of a book, drying it, saving it for a collage I was going to make one day. Thousands of little proofs of his love.

“You’re amazing,” I said, taking a deep breath of floral-scented air. “How was the shop?” I asked, knowing that was part of the reason we were in town.

There weren’t concerns anymore about strange men and dangers to employees. Not since the Family took over the operation, but Cesare liked to show his face every now and again to remind the local Family members that he was still the one in charge.

“They’ve really expanded your houseplant section. Plants are big now, apparently.”

There was a warm sensation moving through me then, undeniably glad that there were small pieces of me still left behind in that shop, even after a couple renovations over the years.

“Do you ever miss it here?” Cesare asked as we looked out at the sea.

“No,” I told him honestly. It was nice to visit. But it was my past. Like a childhood home that still brought you a sense of nostalgia, maybe even some longing, but that you wouldn’t truly want to return to.

My life was in the city.

With him.

With our family.

“Do you miss the flower store?”

“Are you kidding?” I asked, rolling my eyes. “With all the spring and summer weddings planned this year with the family?” I asked. “I have more than enough work to do.”

He’d been right after that first dinner party.

I did eventually get used to the noise and craziness.

But I had never taken it for granted, not a single day in my life.

Or, for that matter, Cesare.

“Hey, the kids are gone,” he said, wrapping an arm across my belly, making heat immediately flood my system, sure he was going to say something sexy. “We could finally tackle that mess of a pantry.”

God, I loved this man.

“I have a better idea,” I said, giving him a wicked smirk as I took his hand and led him inside.

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