



WICKED

Beautiful

LIES

L.A. FERRO

WICKED BEAUTIFUL LIES

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Note to Readers

The characters found within these pages are unapologetically dramatic, the scenes are steamy, and the road to a happily ever after is sordid. This book is meant for audiences 18 years and older. A list of potentially triggering themes can be found on my website. Please read responsibly.

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PROLOGUE

"Does it still hurt?" He lightly feathers his fingers over my thigh where the rose bush dug into my flesh as I fell out of my bedroom window sneaking out to meet him. It's throbbing, but I don't want him to know that. I don't want to ruin this night. These stolen moments with him are the best part of my day.

"No, it's not too bad." My voice is unsteady, and he notices.

Pulling me into his side, he kisses my temple and says, "Let me check it."

When I showed up at the old tree house that his next-door neighbors have in their backyard, he pulled his shirt off and wrapped it around my leg. Honestly, the fall into the bush didn't even hurt that much. It wasn't until he pointed out that I had blood dripping down my leg that I noticed the gash. I'm not sure if the pain I feel is even due to the wound itself or the intensity of this moment.

"Mace, please, it's fine. You've done enough." I place my hand on his chest and nervously ball his shirt into my fist. If we don't start doing what we came here to do, I might chicken out. I'm beyond nervous. I'm borderline neurotic. All the playful jabs and jokes he harassed me with all summer morphed into subtle stolen glances and low-key touches that took my breath away. I've wanted this moment more than I should, and I don't want to let my brain get in the way of my heart, so I say, "Can we just, you know..." I trail off, not wanting to say the words. We both know exactly why we met tonight. There's no need to pretend that this will or can be anything more. His affection now will only lead to heartbreak later.

Bringing his thumb to his mouth, he sucks off the blood from where he wiped the excess off my leg. The move does things to me that it shouldn't. In

an attempt to push down the growing ache in my chest, I make light of the act. "Is this our pact? You taste my blood, and I taste yours. Once and never again?"

He moves his hand to my forehead and pushes the hair there back. With a coy smile, he says, "If that's what you want." Before I have a chance to respond, he takes his plump bottom lip between his teeth and bites down hard enough to draw blood. As the blood slowly drips over the curve of his perfect lip, he lowers his mouth to mine and says, "Suck."

Closing the mere inches between my mouth and his, I trace my tongue over his lip and claim every drop before pulling him into my mouth. Immediately I regret my antics because the tang that settles in my mouth is one I know I will forever crave. His hand cradles my face as I dip my tongue into his mouth, searching for more. His touch is so tender, and his mouth is too sweet. Those two things combined do funny things to my heart. Things I know are sinfully wrong. He's everything I want and nothing I can keep, but for one night, he's mine. A low moan of desire rumbles up from deep in his chest. Pulling back, he searches my face and asks, "Just this once, right?"

I pull in a shaky breath, trying to calm my racing heart and strung-out nerves before nodding in agreement and saying, "Yeah, just this once." He presses his lips together and slightly furrows his brow as if my words displeased him, but that can't be it. There is no mistake that this can't ever happen again. We can't happen, and that's when it registers; he must sense my nerves. He thinks I don't want this. So, I try to play it cool and say, "I mean, it's not like we're both not going to do this eventually anyway." Then, licking my lips, I add, "At least this way, we won't mess up when it's with the right one."

"Yeah, yeah, sure."

This time I hear the uncertainty in his voice, but before I have any more time to analyze his response to my words, his body engulfs mine, and his hands frame my face. Once he's settled between my thighs, he kisses my lips softly before saying, "Tell me if I hurt you. Tell me if you want me to stop, and I will." My heart is pounding with want, desire, and shame all at once. I want this and him with all that I am. I can't imagine ever wanting anything more than how much I want him right now, and when his ocean-blue eyes land on mine, I know I'm about to fall into depths I may never crawl out of, but I'm not asking him to catch me. I'm not looking for painless. I'm looking for worth it.

His mouth finds mine, and his tongue seeks entrance that I willingly grant. When he kissed me for the first time this afternoon, there was no tongue. It was two amateurs trying to figure out how to move their mouths, but now it feels like a lover's kiss. One filled with passion, hunger, and longing. When a subtle groan escapes his mouth, it vibrates into my soul, and I'm a goner. Reaching for his sweats, I start to push them down. He gently bites my bottom lip before saying, "Promise me, promise me you'll tell me to stop." I nod in agreement but give him no words because they would be a lie. There is no way I would tell him to stop. It doesn't matter that I will have a soul-deep ache in my chest that will eternally go unanswered. This moment is wicked beautiful, and I'm not messing it up.

CHAPTER I

"I LIE TO MYSELF ALL THE TIME. BUT I NEVER BELIEVE ME."

-S.E. Hinton



LENNOX

"K nox, wake up." Slap, slap.

"Ugh, just ten more minutes." I roll over and pull the blankets with me so that Ellis can't smack my ass again.

"Come on, babe, wake up. You'll be pissed if you're late for work when you haven't even had this job for a full month." *Shit.*

That pulls me out of my dazed slumber real quick. "Crap. What time is it?" Ellis has already started retreating out of my room when I hear him call out that it's 6:30 am. "Shit, shit, shit. You should have woken me up a half hour ago!" I hurriedly go to my en suite bathroom and wash my face. I'm supposed to be at work by 7 am. Unfortunately, there is no time for a shower at this point. I'll be lucky to make it to the office by 7:30 am.

Downtown traffic can be a nightmare. While I may only be fifteen minutes from my work in Palo Alto, that can translate to a half hour easy with traffic, if not more. Once my face is washed, I throw on some mascara and a little eyeliner before taking my hair out of the pins I had in when I crashed last night.

Running to my closet, I throw open the doors and search for my black pencil skirt and ruffled white blouse. The past two weeks have been hell trying to adjust to my two new schedules, which means it's been about that long since I've done laundry. I'm just about out of options. This is my last formal outfit before I either take clothes to the dry cleaner or I'll need to wash, dry, and iron them myself.

After pulling myself together, I hobble out of my room and into the living area, trying to jam one foot at a time into my black heels when Ellis spots me, cocks a brow, and gives me a snide smirk. "Don't look at me like that. I'm mad at you." I point my heel at him before bending down to slide it on. "You have been up for longer than twenty minutes and deliberately didn't wake me."

Looking around the living room, I scan for my purse, which I'm sure I left on the couch when I stumbled in last night around 1:00 am, but come up with nothing. Finally, walking over to the kitchen island, Ellis picks up my purse from a stool and says, "Looking for this?"

I stomp over to grab it, but when I get there to take it, he grabs my arm

and pulls me in. "Babe, I am not out to get you. You know this. Your alarm was in there ringing for twenty minutes before I ever entered. Knox, you're choosing this. It doesn't have to be this way." His steel gray eyes hold mine before he releases me. It takes me a second to collect myself.

Ellis is a very sexy, intimidating man. He's at least a foot taller than me, so probably 6'4", with olive skin and shoulder-length dark hair that he typically wears in a man bun. I swear the man constantly looks like he just stepped off a beach in the Mediterranean.

"If you keep staring at me, you will be even later than you already are." I'm just about to give him my best-annoyed glare when he thrusts a coffee thermos into my hand. *Damn it.* I can't even be mad when that's all I want to be right now.

"Thank you," I mumble out, which earns me a chuckle from him. He knows exactly how to push my buttons, and we've only been living together a little over six months. With my coffee in hand, I slip my purse onto my arm, grab my keys and phone, and head toward the door.

"I won't be home for dinner tonight, babe. So don't wait up." Ellis calls out just as I open the door.

I can't help but roll my eyes at his dramatics. Such a flirt and tease. I don't bother with a response as I shut the door behind me. Because I'm running late, I immediately opt for the steps rather than waiting for the elevator. By the time I make it to the parking garage, it is practically empty, another sign of my tardiness.

Hauling ass as fast as I can in my heels, I finally reach the blacked-out Porsche Cayman that Ellis has graciously let me use the past few months. He has indeed been a lifesaver. I'm not sure where I'd be right now were it not for him taking me under his wing. Yet another reason I don't play into his antics or allow my mind to drift with frivolous thoughts of a potential relationship. I have a good thing going here, and fucking would only stand to ruin that.

As I exit the parking garage and pull out into what feels like heavy traffic, I'm fully expecting to find the Bayshore Fairway gridlocked, but the cars seem to be flowing at a decent pace. Fingers crossed, I'll only be roughly fifteen minutes late. San Jose is not where I saw myself ending up. My family is from the Midwest, but ten years ago, my parents divorced, and my dad and I moved to San Francisco.

We both wanted to get out of that miserable town. At the time, I didn't know my dad was running. It wasn't until the plane landed in California that I

realized I wouldn't ever see my mom again. My father, William, was a wealthy man. He invested in his brother's start-up tech company early on, which turned out to be a sound business investment; however, the summer we left, they separated.

When William passed almost a year ago, I didn't expect to find myself homeless with a mountain of tuition debt from the University of San Francisco. William encouraged me to go to whatever school I wanted, pursue a degree of my choice, and live on campus. He wanted me to get the whole college experience and spread my wings. In a way, I thought it was his way of making up for running and keeping us hidden. You see, when we moved here, everything changed.

The minute we deboarded our flight, a man was posted outside the waiting Expedition that would take us to our new home. Before we entered the vehicle, he handed William two passports containing our new names. Ten years ago, I became Lennox MacNeil. To this day, I can still hear William saying, "Please don't freak out, but it has to be this way. If you want to live with me, we are no longer the people we used to be. I can send you back home to your mom tonight, but you won't see me again."

I remember looking out the window as he spoke, and all I said was, "I like the name Lennox." That would be our one and only discussion on the matter until his death. I should have asked questions, and I never did. I was happy to go along with this disguise, this new life. All I wanted from the moment I heard 'divorce' was out. I needed out.

Up until recently, I lived a pretty privileged life. While William and I never spoke about inheritance, I assumed I'd have one. But here I am, penniless. I've wanted to blame him countless times for my current predicament, but in the end, the only person I have to blame is me. I deserve all that I have, which is nothing. I've been on the run from my past long enough, and now my sins are reaping their dues. So here I am, working myself sick with two jobs trying to climb out of debt and make a name for myself.

This job I lucked into at Lark is the only current bright spark of light on my horizon. Unfortunately, the past year has been more than dark, and I'm determined not to let that flame go out before it can burn bright. I need this job.



I've barely had a chance to settle into my desk when Christopher comes barreling into my office. "Lenny, you're almost thirty minutes late! What the hell?" I clench my jaw and keep my eyes downcast, so he doesn't mistake my irritation with my tardiness as anger toward him. He has every right to be furious. I haven't even worked here an entire month, and he put his name on the line for me, the reason for which I still haven't determined. Pulling in a breath, I slowly let my lungs deflate before speaking.

"Chris, I am so sorry. It won't happen again, I swear it." His eyes do a slow perusal over my somewhat disheveled appearance. I'm typically more put together. Today's outfit was all I had clean. I'm wearing zero accessories and only mascara while my hair is in yesterday's curls. I didn't even have time to use dry shampoo. His lips purse in disapproval, and when his eyes meet mine, I see disappointment. *Shit.*

"Is there a reason you are not wearing your wedding band today?"

My eyes widen, and I thin my lips as I search for my words. His question was different from what I was expecting. Quickly I search for a lie. "In my rush to get here today, I must have left it on top of the dresser at home. I don't sleep in my jewelry. Hence the lack thereof today." I wave my hand down my front, emphasizing that I have no accessories today.

His eyes narrow on mine, and just when I thought I've blown it, he says, "You should consider that ring part of your uniform if you like working here. You won't forget it again." He wraps his knuckles on my desk before taking a seat in one of the two chairs flanking its front. My office is the anteroom of my boss Maryk's.

The entire office is minimalistic and modern, with floor-to-ceiling windows with a fantastic view of Shoreline Lake. Cedar plank floors run the length of the office, bringing in warmth to the otherwise cold interior. The walls are slate gray, the desks are glass, and the chairs are white. It's all very uncluttered, organized, and efficient. But I can't help but draw conclusions about what this design says about our boss. I am trying to imagine what the rent on this building runs. It's in a prime location near Intuit and Google offices off Casey Ave in Palo Alto. If Lark wasn't one of the biggest rising tech securities companies, I'd question where Maryk spent his budget.

"You're lucky, Lenny. Maryk was expected to be in the office today, but his flight was delayed in San Diego."

"Wait, he's not even technically back from his recent overseas venture, and he planned on deboarding and coming straight to work?" I watch as Chris

scrolls through his phone, most likely checking emails. He's technically in HR, which is on the opposite end of this floor, but I swear the man has made me a personal pet project or something. He is constantly in my office. At first, I assumed it was because he stuck his neck out for me to get this job. Technically, I've had no prior work experience that would warrant me landing this position.

I'm an executive assistant providing high-level support to board members. Technically, I still need to finish my degree. William fell sick in my last semester. As soon as I'm stable, I fully intend to return, but this job is everything now. This is a step in the right direction, allowing me to put all my course work to use. I studied computer science at USF to become an applications analyst. While my other current line of work would suggest otherwise, I'm actually fucking brilliant. Do I make bad choices? Hell, yes but—

"Earth to Lenny. Monday morning, make sure you are here on time with a ring on your finger. While you have yet to meet Maryk in person, he's your type-A personality to a tee. The man was born to multitask, and he does it like it's a sixth sense. He will expect you to know what he's thinking before he asks. He's impatient and is quickly irritated when delayed. The man eats, sleeps, and breathes his work."

I stop Christopher's rant before he gets himself any more worked up than he already is. It's clear that my holding this position makes him nervous, so I ask, "Why did you offer me this position if you don't have faith that I can do the job?"

His eyebrows rise, and his chest deflates before he speaks. "Lenny, I haven't been able to keep someone in this position longer than 90 days for the past year. They either can't put up with the boss or vice versa. So, I'm hoping you can be the difference. Hell, I'm sort of putting my own ass on the line here, and that's all I care to say on the matter."

I can't help but furrow my brow and fidget mindlessly with the pen on my desk as I let his remarks settle over me. We didn't meet in the most desirable location, but because he's a patron of the club I work at, I assumed he didn't judge my intellect based on my other line of work.

"Don't do that, Lenny. I'm letting my nerves show, that's all. You've been handling things well so far, but he also hasn't been in the office, which is what I worry about. I know you want this job, and I'm confident you will do it well. He's the one I'm worried about."

Before I can ask him to elaborate on that statement, his phone rings. "Christopher speaking." Immediately, he rises from his chair and exits the office without another word. The man is crazy busy, which is another reason his constant hovering irks me. As he leaves, I'm now left wondering what the hell could be so bad about Maryk that he has assistants fleeing left and right.

From the few emails we shared, he strikes me as your typical short-fused, demanding boss that expects you to be brief and be gone. His time is valuable. He's an intelligent man and doesn't need your analysis. Instead, he needs your CliffsNotes to settle whatever issue is at hand to his liking and be done. I could see how his personality would clash with most, but I see it as goals. Someone to model myself after and learn from. You only step into a position of his power with a certain disposition for adherence to structure, order, and time.



The day ran away from me. I spent the entire day with paperwork spread out all over the floor, trying to organize contracts and NDAs so that they were ready for Maryk to sign off on Monday when he returns to the office. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about meeting him. I know nothing about him, his background, his age, what he looks like—nothing.

Typically, when you apply for a new job, you research the company and your boss so that you're prepared to answer questions regarding where you see yourself in five years, your growth opportunities, and what drew you into the organization. Unfortunately, I did none of those things before accepting this position. Christopher is a regular at the club, and I got to know him working bar back over the past few months. That's how he knew about my computer science background and why he thought I'd be perfect for the job, regardless of my lack of experience.

After accepting the position, I did a little research in my spare time trying to freshen up on the company's background and look into my mysterious boss whose signature is strictly Maryk. The man doesn't even have a title listed below his name. I have yet to decide if that's because of his line of work or if he's just very private. Social media was a bust as well. Too many Maryk's listed to narrow anything down. When I've asked Christopher about him, it's never been the proper time. We constantly get interrupted, like this morning,

or he's simply vague, offering me nothing but crumbs and general observations.

"Knox, babe, let's go." My hand flies to my chest, heart pounding with terror when I turn around and find Ellis in the doorway to my office building. "Ellis, what the hell? You scared the shit out of me. What are you even doing here? This morning you acted like you wouldn't be home this evening."

"Change of plans. I had dinner down the street with a potential investor for another club. He dropped me off. Plus, technically, I didn't go home. I'm here, and you're about to be late. It's 8:00 pm. Let's go." *Shit.*



"Here, this is your uniform tonight."

Ellis opens the center console between us and tosses me a pair of cheeky black booty shorts and a sheer white scarf that is meant to be wrapped around my breasts. "Shoes are in the back seat." He glances over at me before returning his eyes to the road. I know the outfit and shoes were not in the car this morning when I drove in, but I don't question it.

"Why would I be wearing this behind the bar? This is for the VIP floor wait staff." He doesn't immediately give me a response which admittedly pisses me off. Ellis and I met when I was working at a local bar in Santa Clara. He was there with another group of men, and when he closed out his tab, he gave me a thousand-dollar tip along with a card with only his name and number. He told me to call him if I wanted more tips like that. Of course, I was elated and shocked all at the same time; however, there was no chance I would call him. I assumed he thought I was a booty call or something.

The following week he came back alone. Saddled up to the bar and ordered a whiskey on the rocks. The entire night went by, and I served patrons as he sat and watched, only refilling his whiskey as needed. His eyes never left me. At first, I felt unsettled and thought about telling a manager, considering he gave me such a large tip the week before, and I never called him. I assumed maybe he was back and mad that he had been stood up, but as the night drew on, my unease over his presence subsided. He knew exactly what he was doing by watching me, and he did it to get a reaction out of me.

My bartending attire in Santa Clara was nothing compared to what it is now. I wore tight jeans with a tank top and a pushup bra at my last job. That

night once I realized what game he was playing, I played right back, and truth be told, I liked it. If he wanted to stare at my ass and tits all night, that was fine by me. I have never been ashamed of my body. That's the one thing I got from my mom that I don't absolutely hate. My mother had one of those naturally fit bodies, and so do I. By the end of the night, as I closed out all the tabs again, Ellis was the last one at the bar, and when I went to collect his payment book, he placed his hand atop mine and said, "You didn't call."

I swear every nerve ending in my body fired off from his touch, and damn if I didn't want to call, but I wasn't so hard up for cash that I would start pimping myself out. His touch and line of questioning had me withdrawing my hand like it was on fire and saying, "Don't worry about the tab. Drinks are on me." I popped open my drawer, and before I took it to the back, I threw out a snarky quip, "Tips have been good lately."

I didn't want him to see how affected I was by him. I'll never forget the deep belly laugh he let out as I started to walk away. I keep a low profile and rarely does someone get under my skin enough to elicit a reaction from me. But that's what he got. I couldn't help but snap back. "What the hell is so funny?"

"It's funny that you think I'm propositioning you. I don't have to pay women to get in my bed." *Damn it.* He's right.

"What is it you could possibly want from me, then? What was the point of the more than generous tip and the card?"

He shrugs as if it's nothing and says, "Easy; I need a new bartender, and I think you'd be perfect for the job." The rest is history. Ellis spent the rest of the evening convincing me to work the bar in his exclusive gentlemen's club, Covet. Honestly, it wasn't a hard sell. All I had to do was sign a bunch of NDAs and wear a sexy black spandex dress that barely covered my vagina. But this, now—what he's asking is more. So much more, and he knows it.

"Before you say no, hear me out. When you took the job, you made it clear you would only ever work the bar at the club. You never wanted to hold any other position, and I respect that, but the last few weeks, I've been watching you struggle, and it's killing me, Knox. You don't have to work this hard. One night in the VIP area could pay your bills for a month, and since you're so damn stubborn and won't let me help, then at least let me give you this. One night. You want to be independent, and I respect that. Hell, I admire it. I'm not asking you to give lap dances or any other service. All I'm saying is put on that uniform and wait tables. A few weeks doing that, you'd be out of

debt, and then you could commit to one job."

Once he's done giving his pitch, I notice how his jaw sets while he rubs his hand over his stubble, clearly worked up. I can't get a read on his emotions, which makes me feel unsettled. Something feels off, so I ask, "Why do I feel like you don't want me to do this?" I hold up the scarf and shorts on one finger to drive home my point. His hands tighten around the steering wheel as his lips thin with irritation.

"Knox, I want you to take my money, but since you won't. You need to put that outfit on."



No more words are exchanged before we get to the club. I don't know what to say. Lately, Ellis has been acting differently. When I first took the job, I had my own place. William paid leases for a whole year at a time, but as soon as the lease was up, there was no way I could continue to live in the San Jose area as a single bartender with mounds of tuition debt. Ellis refused it when I submitted my notice, and after I explained my situation, he said, "You'll stay with me."

The finality laced in the delivery of those words had me closing my mouth and nodding along. I had only worked for him for roughly a month when I lost my place. We barely knew each other. When I left his office that day, I remember thinking, *'Lennox, what are you doing?'* I had just told myself I would never again rely on a man for my stability, and there I was, accepting housing from one. By the time the bus reached my apartment, I had it in my mind that I would not be taking him up on his offer. Instead, I would pack my things and be gone before he knew I had left. However, that night Ellis showed up at my place with a moving truck. It's like he sensed I was going to run.

Ellis is not an easy man to say no to. He is the epitome of the perfect man. Physically fit, devastatingly handsome, suave, and rich as fuck. We've been living together for six months now, and I've yet to find one damn flaw apart from the fact that he owns a high-end sex club. I could see how his profession could be a deal breaker. You'd have to be one very secure woman to know your man went to work every day getting his fill of scantily clad women.

Standing in front of the mirror, I take in my appearance from head to toe.

I'm wearing black platform peep toe heels with ankle straps, booty shorts that are more like underwear, and a sheer white scarf styled in a halter crop top fashion. I look hot. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bit excited to work this floor tonight. There's a reason I didn't push back on Ellis when he suggested I do this. A part of me wants it. Part of me needs it. But for the same reasons, I turned him down the night he tipped me a thousand dollars. I didn't want to be in this outfit. I don't want to feel like I'm selling myself for money. But the other half of me is dying to be seen.

Applying a nude lip, I roll my lips before reaching for my wig and heading out to the floor. Tonight I don't have to be Lennox; I can be whoever I want, and that's exactly what I need.

CHAPTER 2

"A LIE THAT IS HALF-TRUTH IS THE DARKEST OF ALL LIES."

- Alfred Tennyson



MASON

"Martin, where are the printed Paris files I sent over on the plane?" My home office is a disaster. It's the one room in the house that I don't allow the staff to clean. It is secured and off-limits. The staff has been warned that they will be released if they even attempt to go near it. This is why Martin is staring at me from the doorway rather than walking in to hand me the file like a normal person. I can't help but pinch the bridge of my nose in irritation. His paranoia is only a reminder of my own.

When I started working for my dad six years ago, I didn't anticipate that I would become him. My goal was to be seen. I was interested in computer science, securities, and hacking because I wanted to impress him, among other things. I craved his attention. For years, I lived in an empty house. My dad dedicated his life to his work, and my mother was devoted to her boyfriends. That left me home alone most nights. While I do not have a significant other or children, I see his reflection in my actions, and good or bad, I don't care for it.

"Please, Martin, if you don't mind?" I gesture for him to set them on my desk as I walk over to my bar and make myself an Old Fashioned. I'm going to be in here for a while, so I may as well enjoy a drink. I take a sip before I turn around and find Martin awkwardly hovering as if he has something to say. "My god, Martin. Do I make you that nervous? You've been with me for two years. Surely, if I thought you were incompetent, you wouldn't still be here."

As I take my seat, he retorts, "Mason, you keep me because I know my place. I do as you ask when needed, and I don't speak unless spoken to. I am a trained butler. You do not make me nervous." I don't know what I was expecting him to say. I suppose I've been waiting for my American ways to rub off on him, but he is stoic and always true to his training. After all, that's why I hired him straight out of school from The International Butler Academy. I was tired of cycling through staff that didn't know their place. However, I know why he's lurking now, and it grates me.

"Do you have something else for me, Martin?" When he doesn't look at me and instead chooses to keep his eyes focused out the window, I know what he's going to say, and I can't help but clench my fists in irritation.

"Miss Moretti called this afternoon. She said the matter was urgent."
Fuck.

As if my day wasn't already shit, now this. I know whatever Gianna has to say to me isn't urgent. I have her watched regularly, not to mention if something was seriously awry, Ethan Grand would let me know. The part about Martin's message that has my temper rising is that she's still a Moretti. It's been five years since I left. Her damn last name should be Branson by now. I throw back the rest of my cocktail and head toward the door.

"Change of plans, Martin. I need a car. I'm going out."

Making my way down the hall, my head is instantly filled with memories. Gianna was the one beacon of light in my life. Her presence silenced my demons. She made me believe that I had something to offer and that I was worth her time. We were best friends. Until we weren't. I needed to move on and forget. I needed to do better and be better. Yet here I am, the same unchanged broken man I've always been.

Heading into my master bedroom, I make my way toward my closet and lay out my outfit for the night. Fitted black jeans, a white polo undershirt, a black sweater, and my black Gucci boots. Tossing them on the bed, I enter my ensuite bath and turn on the shower before undressing. I need to wash off the stress of this day and try to get my mind right. Calls like this set me back. They turn me into the guy I don't want to be. Gianna wasn't the only reason I left home. She was just the nail in the coffin that confirmed what I had known in my gut for years. There was no future for me in St. Louis. All that it had to offer was pain. San Jose was where I needed to be. It was the only thing that might bring me back from the edge of insanity.

Letting the scalding water flow over my back, I rake my hands through my hair and tug. I'm so tired, what I should be doing now is going to sleep, but I fucking hate sleeping. It's a waste of time and a part of my life I can't control. My sleep is cursed by nightmares, where I am the monster. In order to not succumb to the vile disgrace of a man that haunts me, I stay awake and numb the hate. Because Gianna called, no other distraction will suffice. I need to go out. I need to escape because I don't want to feel.



"Mr. Croft, we weren't expecting you tonight," Jameson, the club manager,

greet me as I saddle up to the bar and order a whiskey double neat. I don't turn to greet him in return. Instead, I take a pull of my drink and keep my eyes forward. I do not patronize this establishment to socialize, and now I'm reminded of why I never stop on this floor and opt to head straight to the VIP floor. Nothing about my face says 'talk to me' right now.

"Are you insinuating I'm predictable, or did I misread the discretionary clause in the club's membership agreement?" I do not need to disclose when I will be at the club, and I come here for discretion. This entire discussion is anything but. I don't come here to be seen. Tonight, or any other for that matter, is not a time I care to have small talk. Hell, that's half the reason I'm here. I don't do people, friends, lovers, or otherwise.

"No sir, Mr. Croft. You misunderstand my intent. While we do not track your attendance, it is our job to cater to your tastes and—" Holding up my hand, I stop him.

"Jameson, I've been coming to this club for over a year. In that time, have you ever seen me sit at this bar, drink in hand, and speak to any other person, patron, or staff?" As I gesture around the room with my arm, I finally give him my eyes before adding, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way to the VIP floor."

When I stand, he says, "I was only trying to tell you that Hailey isn't here this evening." I keep my face neutral while trying to keep my irritation at bay. It's not his fault I come here for one girl and one girl only.

"I was wondering if you might want to look at the tablet and make another selection for this evening." *Fucking perfect.*

I've had a shit day that I need to forget, and now the only girl that fits my particular set of tastes isn't here. Taking the iPad from his hands, "I'll take a look on my way up." No more words are exchanged as I walk off to sulk and browse in peace. As I scroll through the lineup, I am familiar with most of the faces. They are all beyond gorgeous. Most men would be elated to have any of them, but I'm not any man. I chose Hailey because she's nothing like the women I try to erase. She's taller than women I care to date. I prefer my women petite. Her long hair that runs halfway down her back is a natural shade of strawberry blonde and sets off her porcelain skin. Hailey is striking, don't get me wrong. She more than fits the bill to get the job done, but that's all it will ever be.

I've heard some women work here to try and land themselves a rich man. While dating is strictly prohibited in our memberships, I don't believe there

aren't some people still trying to bend the rules. Sure, there is a clause that you'll get your membership revoked, and you'd be out a year's dues, which is two hundred thousand dollars. However, those things are minor for people who have money to patronize Covet. The only part that makes members take note is the blacklisting. Covet shares its revoked membership names with its competitors. It's meant to keep the staff and other patrons safe. But at the end of the day, if you think you found wifey material, none of that matters.

When I reach the VIP floor, I walk across the dimly lit lounge area. Many men come here to socialize, not just with the beautiful women walking around half-naked but with the many high-ranking executives and celebrities who frequent this club. These men come here to be seen and flex. None of which is my style. Typically when I see someone that might recognize me, I duck out before they notice and try to come over and strike up a conversation.

Setting my drink down, I take a seat in one of the black leather half-moon booths that line the far wall. It's always my seat of choice before I get a room. While I don't care to flirt with staff or make small talk, I do like to people-watch. You learn a lot about a man by watching how he treats a woman. In the year I've been a member here, I've canceled two contracts just from witnessing scoundrel behavior from men who think they are above acting decent.

The club has rules, but some people skate those rules. Just because you're discrete doesn't mean you're not a dick. The girls can refuse any member for any reason without fear of retribution. Depending on the offense, and if the female found it worthy to note, the patron would get a mark against their name in the system. Just like baseball, three strikes, and you're out. Because I keep a low profile, clients usually have no idea I'm here. It's easy to do.

The VIP floor has low lighting sconces that direct light up and down, illuminating the wall's deep shades of indigo, while the tabletops are adorned with candles that put off just enough light to give guests the illusion of seclusion. In the center of the room is a bar with lighting that mimics the blue tones of the walls, only it's lit from below. The only time you get a good look at people is when they are near. You will only be seen if that's what you're seeking, which is why those contracts I mentioned were canceled.

The women on the VIP floor sign up for a certain level of service, which is listed on the tablet I have in my hands now. For all intents and purposes, they are on the menu. Their profile shows their picture and a list of services they are willing to provide. They can remove or add options anytime and

refuse a customer altogether for any reason, no questions asked. When you select a woman, they are notified that they have been chosen for a particular service. It's then their choice to move forward or not. They get a flat rate for working this floor alone, but some of the services come at an extra cost and are not covered by membership fees.

A membership to Covet gets you in the door and covers the cost of drinks, food, and looking, but anything else has a price. The two contracts I had to cancel stemmed from this very detail in club membership fees. One client was sitting around a table with two other men voicing his opinions on the rules rather loudly while slandering the women. Lack of discretion is a deal breaker for me. I run a multi-million-dollar security company. The fundamental element of every contract I enter is privacy, discretion, and tact. I don't advertise the big-name contracts I land, and I ask that clients do the same. The bigger you get, the more attention you attract. I don't need the clout associated with landing a contract. It just makes my company a target.

Suddenly competitors and hackers come out of the woodwork and actively try to break down your cyber walls and systems to prove a point. My father battled that shit early on in his career, and in the beginning, he spent more time fending off assholes looking to break his code than developing new technologies and expanding the company. The other contract was terminated because of conduct. I was walking out of my suite when I saw a man I recognized being thrown out. If he violated the terms of his contract at Covet, which aren't fucking hard to abide by, there is no way in hell I trusted him with my business.

"Would you like a refill?" A tall blonde-haired, blue-eyed waitress asks from the edge of my booth. Briefly, I let my eyes travel down her body, taking in every inch of her bared skin. She's beautiful, and I have no doubt in my mind she'd look amazing wrapped around my cock, but I avoid girls like her. "No, thank you, I believe I'm heading out—" The words have barely just left my mouth when a deep hue of red hair catches my eye.

She bites her lip before adding, "Are you sure I can't change your mind?"

"Actually, can you tell me who that is?" I nod toward the red-haired waitress who is now waiting for her drinks at the bar. The blonde in front of me furrows her brow before following my line of sight. "That's Knox. She typically doesn't work this floor." When her eyes return to mine, I can see that she's disappointed that I'm not interested in more of her time. Still, one of the reasons I respect this establishment and the women who choose to work

here is their level of professionalism. She could be catty or continue to shoot her shot, but instead, she simply says, "Would you like me to send her over?"

"No, that won't be necessary." I drum my fingers on the tablet beneath my palm.

"Oh, Knox isn't on the list. She is strictly serving."

But, of course, she is. Rather than take my irritation out on the woman before me, I say, "Then yes, please send her over with a whiskey neat." She nods before heading over to the bar to relay my message.

From where I sit, I only have a view of Knox from behind. I have yet to see her face, but I don't need to see her face. Her hair is red, not blonde. It can never be blonde. The rest I must be somewhat flexible on. Most people don't have green eyes, not the deep emerald shade of green that reminds me of Gianna anyway, and while blue eyes are more common, they are a hard 'no' as well. Blue eyes are a reminder of what I can never have. If Knox has brown eyes with that mess of red hair, I'll need to persuade her to get a room. Her fucking ass is divine. I watch on as the server who left my table delivers the message. She peers over her shoulder in my direction, and due to the lighting, I'm sure she can't see me. If anything, she's probably just making sure she has the right booth because her gaze doesn't last long. After sharing a nod and a few words, the girls switch trays, and Knox heads my way.

As she turns, I get her side profile, and from here, I can see she has full tits, more than a fucking handful for sure. However, I've never preferred one over the other. Some men like a nice ass over tits or vice versa, but I want the whole package. I'm equally fond of both, and Knox definitely has more than enough in spades. Once she reaches the table, she confirms my order. "You ordered a whiskey neat?"

I can't help but rub my chin in irritation when she's close enough that I can see her clearly. She's fucking perfect. Dark red hair, olive skin, brown eyes, and an hourglass figure I wouldn't mind exploring. Before I get a chance to bring my eyes back to hers and away from her chest, she has placed my glass on the table. Her hand trembles slightly as she slides it my way, and I can't help but place mine over the top of hers. When I look up, her eyes are wide, like she's seen a fucking ghost. The other server mentioned she doesn't typically work on this floor, so I assume her nerves are related to its uniqueness. In an attempt to put her at ease, I say, "I promise I don't bite."

Quickly, she pulls her hand out of mine and takes it to her chest. Her breathing is labored, and it's easy to see that I clearly make her

uncomfortable. But all I've done is order a drink. I'm not in the business of making women do something they don't want to, but for some reason, her reaction has me rock hard. Clearing her throat, she finally says, "I'll send Ashley back if you'd like anything else."

"It appears what I'd like isn't on the menu tonight." I'm not afraid to go after what I want, and that is her. Her brows slightly rise, and I know she's picked up on my meaning. She's not on the menu. "I'll give you ten grand for thirty minutes of your time in one of the rooms. Which room is up to you."

I watch as she lowers her clenched fists to her sides. Obviously, she's trying to rein in whatever emotions have her reacting to me in such a way. I'm aware of the rules, and I haven't broken one. Nowhere does it say we can't ask for services that aren't listed. I've made my interests clear. I haven't overstepped. Whatever has her reacting to me like this is not from my words. She rolls her lips, and when she moves to speak, I've all but convinced myself she's going to refuse my offer.

"Room five." There's a long pause as her eyes hold mine, and for a second, I think I see desire there, but it's gone as quickly as it came when she says, "You get ten minutes or no deal."

"Deal, but I expect you topless." Her jaw clenches in irritation before she says, "Fine, be there in five minutes."

I'm well versed on what each room is and what comes with them. While every room is open to interpretation between the consenting pair, room five is meant for a dance. There's a leather sofa and a pole. Because I was expecting a flat-out rejection, I had yet to put much thought into what room she might choose. In hindsight, given her reaction, room five makes sense. It is the tamest of all the rooms. But under those misplaced nerves, I'm sure she's anything but docile. Either way, I'm about to find out.



I made my way to room five as soon as Knox was out of site. She gave me ten minutes, and I'll be damned if I missed one second because I didn't make it to the room on time. Women don't typically get me this worked up. I get my dick wet, and that's it. While I enjoy a woman's company, I don't want any strings attached. That's why this club is perfect. I know what I'm getting. Members and staff are tested regularly, the women give what they want, and

the men pay.

Taking my seat on the black leather couch, I take a moment to scan the room. I've never personally been in this room; I've just seen it on the list of options. I've only been in two rooms here. Rooms thirteen and seven. Seven is their voyeur room. It was my introduction to the room scene at the club. I was a member here for roughly three months before I decided to get a room. In the voyeur room, you can be a participant or a viewer. I was a viewer not because it was my thing but because I was more or less curious. That's also how I found Hailey. She was servicing another client that night, and I knew then she'd be perfect for my tastes and not just because of her looks.

It was clear from watching her that this was strictly a job for her. Sure, she gets off on it, but I could tell she disconnects, and that's exactly what I needed. I don't need any complications. Room thirteen is where we spend our time. It's my room of choice because of the furniture options. Swings, bondage board, and Saint Andrew's cross. While I'm not into BDSM per se, I have my reasons for tying my women up.

My thoughts are interrupted when the door to the room opens, and Knox walks in, but she isn't topless as agreed. I rake my eyes up her toned, lean body, and when my eyes finally land on hers, her breath visibly catches. I make her nervous. *Good.*

"Is there a reason you still have your top on?"

She gently closes the door before pressing the button next to it that locks it and shows the room is in use. I watch as she waves a key card in front of an RFID reader on the wall. The lights in the room automatically dim and change to a deep magenta as a timer appears above the door. I'm about to question our deal when she finally answers. "I wasn't sure if you wanted me to take it off as part of the show."

Because I want to draw out my time, I say, "I want it off before the timer starts." She rolls her lips and moves to set her key card on the lighted shelving unit across the room. Again, no complaint. It gives me more time to watch her plump ass sway while she walks in the underwear they dare to call shorts. Then, with her back to me, she starts to remove her top, but I stop her. "No, face me when you take it off."

Her hands freeze before she pops her hip out and says, "Maybe we should discuss our rules before we get started, seeing as how I am not on the menu to begin with." I don't miss the irritation in her voice. The part I need to follow is why. She has the power here. At any moment, she can say no, and

everything stops. Knox didn't have to say yes to my proposition in the first place.

Spinning around, she meets my gaze and says, "I have one rule: no sex, oral or otherwise."

I can't help the loud bark of a laugh that escapes my chest at her insinuation of my expectations. Of course, her number one rule is technically never on the menu anyway. Yet another reason she's so damn tempting. We buy services, yes, but money in exchange for sex is not one of them; however, what happens behind closed doors is between two consenting adults.

"Ten minutes is not long enough for this ride." She rolls her eyes at my words which doesn't faze me in the least. I know I'm good in bed. I more than please my partners.

I'm not sure why she's taunting me or what her angle is, but it's piqued my interest. I see the moment she realizes her response didn't get the reaction she expected because when her eyes find mine those nerves reappear. "What are your rules?" She asks as her eyes narrow on me.

My following words should put her at ease, but because this entire exchange hasn't been at all what I expected, I'm doubtful it will. "No touching and no kissing."

I don't miss how her brows slightly rise, but any further assessments are halted when she once again gives me a view of that peach of an ass. Opening one of the drawers on the backlit wall, she asks, "Is there any type of music you prefer in these rooms?"

The tone in her voice is laced with patronizing disdain that should piss me off. She's judging me, but this club has nothing on my sins, and my patience for this game of hers is waning. So, I ensure she hears the condescension in my voice when I say, "Whatever music you prefer to get naked to is fine with me." Her head partially turns in my direction as if she has words but remembered her place and thought better of them. Giving the task at hand her full attention, my eyes linger over the smooth expanse of her back that I envision gliding my hands along as I sink into her from behind. *Fuck.*

She slams the drawer, drawing my focus out of my daydreams and back to the now. My cock is painfully straining against the zipper of my jeans, and when I shift to readjust myself, she spins back around and catches me in the act. Where I thought I'd find disgust, she shocks me once again, this time biting the corner of her lip and holding my eye as she draws her hands up

behind her neck to untie the scarf binding her breasts.

This woman runs hot and cold, and I'll be damned if I'm not enjoying it. I've always been attracted to crazy and off-limits. No sooner than her breasts fall out and her top hits the floor do I see the timer on the wall start out of my peripheral. Now her reaction makes sense. That sexy lip bite wasn't lust. No, it was her show. She's slipping into character and doing her job. *So why am I disappointed?* This is what I pay for.

That last thought has my eyes leaving hers. Fuck chemistry. My dumbass has been sitting here telling myself that's what's going on. *When did I become the asshole that comes to a club to find a girl for more than a quick release?* I clench my jaw and spread my legs, determined to remain unaffected by the emotions this new girl has me feeling.

If she notices the change in my demeanor, she doesn't show it, only confirming my analysis of this exchange. I'm a pro at disconnecting, and that's what I need to do now. Miguel's "Quickie" starts playing on the surround, and I can't help but internally cringe at the choice of song. How fitting that she would choose a song about a couple hooking up for quickie, nothing else.

I watch as she stalks over to the pole in the middle of the room, wraps her leg around it, and spins like it's not her first time. Her full tits sway with her movement, and I want nothing more than to take them in my hands and suck hard. I keep my gaze focused on her body, determined to disconnect the same as her, to use her in the same way she is using me. She wants my money, and I want her body.

As if she senses my thoughts, she rests her back against the pole and slowly drags her hands up her tanned skin from her thighs to the curve of her hourglass hips, over the valley of her soft stomach, and up the peaks of her supple breasts. Then, reaching for the pole behind her, she slides down and spreads her legs wide. My eyes immediately drop to her pussy and the thin black fabric covering the exact spot I'd like to be.

Knox falls to her knees before dropping onto all fours and forcing my eyes to meet hers. She's good, damn good, because right now, the heat in her gaze tells me she wants to ride my cock as much as I want to feel her wrapped around it. As she crawls toward me, seated on the couch, her eyes never leave mine until she's before me and forced to make a move. I bite my lip because I'm positive she forgot about my number one rule. No touching.

When she catches my knowing smirk, she raises a brow before plastering

on one of her own. Placing her hands on either side of my thighs, she lifts herself off the floor and into a leaning position over the top of me, where her breasts are on full display in front of my face. I bite my lip, biding my time before I give her a taste of her own medicine. She's judged me from the moment I requested her. For what I don't know. Maybe she's jaded by an ex who wronged her, or she thinks less of men who frequent these establishments, but right now, that look in her eye puts us on an even playing field. She may not want to like this, but there is no denying that right now, she does.

Spinning around, she shimmies her hips, making her ass shake and my fingers twitch. Fuck I want to smack it. When she bends down to touch her toes, her mini shorts practically turn into a thong, forcing me to bring my fist to my mouth and bite down. Turning back, she sees my reaction and decides to add fuel to the fire by bringing her hands to her ass and squeezing an ample amount of cheek in each hand before spreading them. The move draws her shorts farther up, ensuring her ass is on display before she starts to twerk. I know what she's doing. She's teasing me, tempting me. She wants me to break, but she won't refuse me when I do. Of this, I'm sure.

Knox wants me to grab her ass. I fucking feel it, and when I don't, she tries another tactic, one that puts her exactly where I want her, in my lap. When she bent down, I hadn't noticed she unstrapped her heels, but now that she has turned around and placed a foot on either side of my spread legs, I'm grateful. I typically like it when women leave their shoes on, but this is fucking hot and I'm sure those three inch heels wouldn't have allowed her to put her pussy in my face. Grabbing the ledge of the couch behind me, she cages me in and drops down into a squatting position, careful not to touch me. Once we're face to face, the moxie she had seconds ago falters, and she turns her head so that her red hair cascades down her front, shielding her from my heated stare.

"Don't do that, Princess. You were doing so good." My patronizing tone snaps her sass right back into place, and her eyes dart back to mine in challenge. Placing one hand between my spread legs, she leans back, putting her breasts inches away from my face as she throws her head back and rolls her hips. That's when I make my move. Leaning forward, I cover my mouth over her erect nipple and suck hard as I palm both breasts, pushing them together.

All that leaves her mouth is a euphoric gasp as she briefly relents to the

pleasure of my mouth, but it's short-lived. Before I have time to make my way to the other breast, she pushes me back against the sofa. "What happened to 'no touching'?" I can't help but smirk. I knew those words were coming before they left her mouth.

"I haven't broken any rules. I said, 'no touching.' I didn't specify whom couldn't be touched, and you didn't ask." A slight scowl forms as her eyes narrow in irritation, but I'm almost positive her frustration is because she got played, not because she didn't like my mouth on her. She huffs and moves to get off my lap, but I grab her thighs and hold her in place, catching her off guard. "Don't do that."

"I'm done. You can have your money back for whatever time is left."

I shake my head, which only makes her fight me more. "No, you came in here determined to make me the bad guy. I'm the pompous prick that pays for women to dance for him, but we both know you liked dancing for me as much as I liked watching." I loosen my grip on her thighs and slowly move my hand to trace my index finger up the inside of her thigh as our eyes stay locked. Her chest is heaving, and the glower on her face would suggest she's upset, but because she doesn't stop me, we both know stopping is not what she wants.

When my finger meets the hem of her shorts covering her pussy, I stop. "Tell me you don't want me to touch you here. Tell me you don't want me to make you feel good." She grits her teeth, determined to not like this, but offers no objection. I dip my finger under the hem and tauntingly run my tip over its length, giving her another opportunity to stop me, but then she says, "Are you going to tease me or give it to me?"

I bite my lip hard, before saying, "Oh, I'm going to give it to you."

Before she can process my words, my finger runs through her soaked folds and dips into her tight core. "Oh fuck." She moans as she brings her hands back to the headrest behind me. I run my free hand up her stomach until I reach her breast and bring it to my mouth. My god, she has some of the softest tits I have ever sucked. I want to let her have it. I want to bend her over and pound into her for more reasons than I can count, but mostly for acting like she doesn't want this as much as I do.

When I add another digit, I feel her start to clench. *Fuck*. My cock is weeping with the need to be inside her. I want to devour every inch of her damn body, but I can't. Reluctantly, I glance at the wall and see I have less than a minute, and while I know I could make her come, I won't. Not tonight.

She doesn't get to use me.

She's full-on riding my fingers, and when I feel her body relax as her walls tighten, I release her breast with a pop and wait until her eyes find mine to pull my fingers out. Her face is flushed, her breasts are heavy, and for a split second, I see hurt. I lift her off my lap and set her on the couch beside me before I stand and say, "Maybe next time you'll give me the full thirty minutes."

Rolling her eyes, she shakes her head. "Make no mistake, there will be no next time, asshole."

Bringing my fingers to my lips, I hold her eyes before I put them in my mouth and suck. Her lips slightly part in shock, and that's when I add, "That's a shame. You taste so good. I would have enjoyed sampling from the source."

Straightening my shirt, I turn and head to the door. Knox wasn't in my cards tonight, and it doesn't matter how much I want to break my rules. I made them for a reason. I'm not going to start thinking with my dick now. After all, I now know why I wanted her. She wasn't on the menu.

CHAPTER 3

"AND, AFTER ALL, WHAT IS A LIE? 'TIS BUT THE TRUTH IN A
MASQUERADE."

- Alexander Pope



LENNOX

As I exit room five, Ellis is storming down the hall. "Knox, what the hell were you doing in there? You were only working the floor tonight." Grabbing my arm, he ushers me down the hall. "You don't even have a profile in the database."

I have yet to put my shoes back on when we reach the elevator. My mind is anywhere but on anything Ellis has to say. I swear I not only saw a ghost, but I danced for him, and what's worse, I fucking liked it. Entering the elevator, I slump against the wall and close my eyes with a groan. *Why did I do that?* I should never have fucking said yes.

"Earth to Lennox. Are you going to continue ignoring me, or what? What the hell was that back there? Why were you in a room?" *Fuck.*

"I don't know, Ellis. I was working the floor when Ashley came over and said table thirteen requested me. She and I traded tables, and when I served table thirteen, he offered me ten thousand dollars for ten minutes in a room of my choosing. You know I need the money, Ellis."

His jaw sets, and his eyes zero in on mine. "Then take a loan from me, Knox. Don't do it this way."

"Ellis, you've always told me the women here are smart and empowered. They say when and who. I made that call tonight. What's changed?"

He takes my shoes out of my hand and asks, "Have you eaten anything tonight?" I scowl because he's deliberately ignoring me. "I didn't think so. Let's go."

Entering the parking garage, my feet are cold against the cement, and the uniform I am wearing tonight does nothing to shield the wind kicking up from the bay. Spring nights in San Jose are cool. I wrap my arms around my middle as we walk toward the Porsche Ellis lets me use for work. Slipping off his sport coat, he offers it to me. "Take this. The drive-thru waiter at In-N-Out Burger doesn't get to see all that." He gestures toward my body before clenching his jaw.

When we reach the car, he opens my door and lets me in, carefully ensuring I'm tucked away before rounding the front to climb in the driver's side. He's a big man, and these sports cars aren't exactly accommodating to his size, but he insists it looks worse than it is. Once he's in, he gives me a

once over, checking to see that I'm settled in and buckled up before starting the car and backing out. "Do you know who it is that you danced for tonight?"

It only takes a second for his comment to make me uneasy. I haven't said a word about what I did or didn't do, which now has me questioning the privacy of those rooms, but before I can give it any more thought, he adds, "Don't raise your eyebrows with me. I don't believe you would do anything else." There's a long pause before he asks, "Am I wrong?"

Technically, yes, he's very wrong, but not concerning my character. While I don't look down on the women who choose to work the rooms, I never thought I would be one. And yes, I suppose that is because of the stigma engraved into the female population from what feels like birth. We are not meant to embrace our sexuality and desires the same way a man can explore and sow his. Most women at Covet are like me—intelligent, educated women working their way through college or paying for it using what god gave them. We are not required to use our real names, that is optional, and a few women, like me, choose to disguise themselves to maintain some level of anonymity outside of the club. There's no one-size-fits-all in this business. We all have our limits, but the key is acceptance.

"Damn it, Lennox. Answer me."

His tone isn't demanding as much as it is pleading. He's the one that pushed me up to the VIP floor tonight. Grant it, he didn't put me on the menu or in a room, but still, his frustration is somewhat perplexing. "Yes, Ellis, I danced for him." I consider telling him the whole truth, but given his outrage from the mere thought of more, I don't. Instead, I turn my face to the passenger window and add, "Topless."

Am I trying to push his buttons? No, but at the same time, he doesn't get to pull some territorial couple bullshit. We've lived together for the past few months, and I don't pull this shit when I see girls sneaking out in the morning. When he hits the steering wheel, I jump. I risk a glance in his direction, and it's clear he's pissed. His jaw is set, and his one hand on the steering wheel is white-knuckled from the force. I know he feels my eyes on him, and when he doesn't meet my gaze, I say, "What is this, Ellis? Explain it to me. I'm working at the club you own at a job you pursued me to take. Tonight I worked the floor you insisted I work, and then—"

He cuts me off with, "Why him?"

His question catches me off guard for more reasons than one. The most

obvious is one I don't care to acknowledge, but the latter is what I presume to be jealousy, but that doesn't quite sit right. Ellis can pull any girl he wants. Jealousy is not a look I've seen on him, so I ask, "Why not?"

I watch as he rubs his jaw in irritation. He's searching for his words—again, something new. He still hasn't given me his eyes when he asks, "What do you want to eat?" That's when I realize I've been so consumed with observing his reaction that I hadn't noticed we pulled into the parking lot of In-N-Out Burger.

"The usual: cheeseburger, fries, and a vanilla shake."

He shakes his head and mumbles something about vanilla under his breath before pulling up to the intercom to place our order. Once we have our food, he pulls into a parking spot, and I pass him his burger. We always share the fries.

We're halfway through our burgers when he asks, "Have you saved enough money over the past six months to get your own place?" My chewing slows, and my heart sinks. *Great. Good job, Lennox.* You managed to push the sex club owner too far, and now even he doesn't want to put up with your crap. I swallow hard, forcing the food down before responding.

"Yes, Ellis. I've been saving. I can be out by the weekend if that's what you want." It's not like I'm a damn idiot who doesn't know how to manage her finances. I just never had to until suddenly, I had nothing. Then Ellis entered my life and refused to take rent money from me. Honestly, I've been waiting for this conversation. How long does a smoking hot, rich as fuck bachelor let someone mooch off their penthouse and drive their sports cars? I start wrapping up my burger because my appetite is now non-existent.

"Knox, that isn't why I'm asking. Let me rephrase it. You can leave. Why haven't you?"

That question hurts because deep down, I know why I haven't left. There are many reasons, and I think he already knows the answers to some. That's why Ellis and I clique. We may come from entirely different backgrounds, but our journeys left us the same inside. Ellis was raised poor and worked his ass off for everything he has. He is the poster child for the argument that people are a product of their environment. Ellis was raised in a dilapidated trailer with his parents and two siblings. His parents were addicted to drugs and could never find it within themselves to get their shit together and take care of the family they created.

Ellis ended up caring for himself and his two brothers from age eight. He

said before then, his parents hadn't completely checked out. If they came home, they would be so high out of their minds on whatever drug they could get their hands on that night that their youngest would get neglected. The youngest, Sebastian, was only two at the time and would cry for hours because he needed a diaper change or feeding, and his parents wouldn't answer. That's when he started stepping in and trying to help. I remember crying when I heard him recount memories of his parents abandoning him and his brothers to go on benders, or having parties in their trailer with nowhere for the kids to escape. He said he would take him and his two brothers into his bedroom closet with a flashlight and tell them stories during the parties so that they didn't have to witness the drugs or be subjected to fucked-up addicts while they tripped.

He was determined not to be like them. To be better and do better. Ellis wanted to give his siblings the world. He shielded them as best he could, but as they got older, his middle brother Milo started down the same path his parents went. Milo started using drugs during his freshman year of high school, and there wasn't much hope after that. Ellis tried his hardest to keep him clean, to ensure he wasn't hanging with the wrong crowds, but it wasn't enough in the end. Milo attended a party a few trailers down from theirs and overdosed on a bad batch of heroin. It absolutely wrecked him.

I'll never forget the night he told me because it was a night that I was at my lowest. The typical woe-is-me bullshit that everyone cycles through, but something about that night set Ellis off, and he shared his childhood with me. I was utterly rocked to my core. Never in a million years would I have ever suspected that Ellis would have come from such a shit background. I couldn't help but replay our conversations for days after. Not only because of how his stories shredded my heart but because I could never wrap my head around what set him off to begin with. While we live together, the man is an enigma. He's private and keeps to himself, and while he dates and has women over, it's never the same one. That's how I know this question about my departure is more.

"Are you asking me something else?" I slowly drag my eyes away from the parking lot and toward him, only to meet a smoldering gaze. When our eyes lock, I see it. I know damn well what he is asking. There's no mistake.

"That depends. Are you acknowledging we might have something else to talk about?"

Long seconds of shallow breaths drenched in silence pass as we drink

each other in. I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about Ellis sexually. Hell, I've got myself off more than once imagining what he'd be like in bed. The man has the body of a Greek god, and owns a damn sex club. But that's what this is, right? Every man wants what they can't have.

"Ellis, you have different women in and out of your place all the time. I think we both know that's not—"

Holding up his hand, he stops me. "Knox, are you seeing what you want to believe or what's real? Because I think if you took a minute to reflect, you'd see the error in your statement."

I furrow my brow, not immediately following his meaning. He sees my confusion, which flusters him. I've always considered his closed-off personality his way of keeping his life private, but right now, it feels like whatever words he's looking for are hard for him to express. I watch as he does what I've come to know as one of his nervous ticks, where he clenches and unclenches his fist.

"Lennox, when is the last time I've had a woman to the house?"

"Last weekend." Immediately, flies out of my mouth out of habit, and I know why. I'm trying to keep him at arm's length, not the other way around. Roughly two months after I moved in, I noticed he stopped bringing women home. Around month three, it was clear he was trying to make more of an effort to be around when I was home rather than working himself to death. Ellis practically lives at the club, ensuring everything runs smoothly. Then yesterday, he picked me up for work, which feels like something a couple would do. Sure, we both work at the same place, but we have different hours. I suppose he technically makes his own schedule, but still...

"Lennox?" His tone is terse, which snaps me out of my thoughts. He wants me to be serious.

I right myself in my seat and press my head back into the headrest, closing my eyes before I say, "I don't want to mess this up, Ellis. Do I want to ride your cock? Hell, yes, but what happens when you get me out of your system?"

Reaching over the console, he grabs my hand and brings it to his mouth, placing a soft kiss there. Pulling air into my lungs, I slowly open my eyes and roll my head in his direction. "So that's all you want from me?"

Of course, a typical man only hears the part about me riding his dick and not the latter, but my lungs deflate at the tenderness in his tone all the same. This is once again one of those moments where Ellis has chosen to show me

a side of him that I didn't know existed. The honesty in his statement settled his own nerves. Talking about feelings isn't easy for him, considering his upbringing. His parents neglected him, and he didn't have someone showing him love or expressing anything that looked like it.

"Ellis, you're misunderstanding. I haven't played into your hands because you mean a lot to me." Sheepishly, I shrug my shoulders and drop my eyes to our joined hands, where he's currently rubbing his thumb over the back of mine, before meekly adding, "You're kind of all I have."

Squeezing my hand, he says, "I would never hurt you, Lennox."

That's the problem, though. No one ever sets out to intentionally hurt someone. I learned at a young age that sometimes the things we want hurt us the most. Tonight was a prime example of that. Dropping Ellis's hand, I bring my hands to my temples and rub slow circles. "Ellis, please—"

I feel his hand brush the side of my cheek, and instinctively I turn into it. When I open my eyes, his brow furrows, and his thumb gently kisses my bottom lip as he says, "We'll figure it out."

I nod in agreement because he's not wrong, but my heart already hurts, because while I may know his secrets, he doesn't know mine.



The weekend flashed by. Usually, I would have had to work Saturday and Sunday at the club, but I made two weeks' worth of tips in one night by dancing for the one man I thought I'd never see again. After Ellis and I got home Friday night, I told him I'd like to take the weekend off, and if anything, relief seemed to flood his body. I'm not sure what he expected would happen putting me on the VIP floor, but I don't think he ever saw me dancing topless for another man as an option. While he may have pushed me into working the floor that night, in hindsight, I think it was his attempt at trying to tip the scales in his direction. He thought I'd give in and take his money.

My entire weekend was spent cleaning my room and doing laundry, which I haven't had time for in the past month, working two jobs. I've saved a lot of money, but I still have debts. I'm only paying the minimum on my student loans, but I've managed to pay off my credit card debt. Technically, I could pay off my student loan debt, and I will, but I want to avoid throwing

all my money at it and then not having a cushion should the bottom fall out again. If Ellis had asked me to leave the other day, the only reason I could have made it happen is because of the money I have in savings. Which is equivalent to what I owe in debt.

Now that I know how Ellis truly feels, I have some tough decisions to make over the next few weeks. I value our friendship. Apart from Christopher, who is more of my work friend/acquaintance, he's my only friend. When William and I left, we never looked back; truth be told, we didn't have much to look back on. I sent my mom a birthday card the year after we left with a number for a burner phone, and she never used it. That told me everything. She didn't care that I left. She didn't miss me. I was nothing.

A knock on my door draws me out of my thoughts. "Knox, you awake?"

"Yeah, Ellis. I'm good." I look toward the door to see if he'll open it, but he doesn't. So instead, I listen for his footsteps to sound on the granite floor, letting me know he's left. I listen for what feels like a small eternity before I hear him walk away, and it hurts my soul. While I may not have had to work this past weekend, it doesn't mean I caught up on sleep. In fact, it's been quite the opposite. When my mind isn't reeling over seeing Mason Croft for the first time in ten years, it's on Ellis.

I am still trying to figure out what to do with the knowledge of Mason Croft being in San Jose. He clearly didn't recognize me, but that's not to say he wouldn't eventually figure it out. We were teenagers the last time we saw each other. But it didn't make seeing him now any less jarring or painful. While my name may not have been the only thing I changed to conceal my identity, knowing the man I'll never forget doesn't even remember me hurts. What's worse is now I know Mason is a club member, so chances are good that I'll see him again.

It's the precise reason I've been up since 2:00 am fiddling with my clothes, hair, and makeup. I've obsessed over every minuscule feature on my body. Which has only made everything that much worse. It's forced me to recall the last time we were together and relive moments that forever changed who I am and why I'm the person I am today.

"Knox, you're going to be late." *Shit.*

I quickly grab my phone. There's no way I've been obsessing that long. Flipping my phone over to check the time, I see it's only 6:15 am. That means Ellis wants me to come out, and he doesn't know how to say it. Closing my

eyes, I recenter my focus and try to put my past out of my mind. Which is anything but easy.

Grabbing my purse and cell phone, I look around, ensuring I have everything, and head out. As I walk down the hall that leads to the open-concept living and kitchen area, I spot Ellis at the island. His eyes drag down my body, drinking me in from head to toe. I made sure I looked extra professional today since Maryk will be in the office. Today I'm wearing a high-waisted black leather skirt paired with a tight-fitting black turtleneck and leopard heels. My makeup is light, and my hair is pulled back into a high ponytail. It's classy chic, but the way Ellis is biting his lip has me rethinking my choices.

"Is it too much?"

He grips the marble countertop and drops his head. "No, Knox; you look fucking amazing."

When I reach the island, I set my purse down and make my way toward the coffee pot, but as I go to pass, Ellis reaches out and wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me into him. "Is there a reason you've avoided me since we talked on Friday?" I draw in a stuttered breath from all the emotions currently coursing through my body, the top one being lust. He knows why I wasn't at the club, but I haven't left my room, which isn't normal. When I do laundry, I usually watch tv in the great room with a glass of wine, and this weekend I did tons and drank alone in my room.

My eyes are pinned to his chest, too scared to look up and see what's on his face, but he forces my hand anyway, grabbing my chin and tipping it, so I meet his heated gaze. "Don't shut me out. I don't like it." His eyes search mine, and that's when I see it. Sure, he wants me, and if I made a move, he would no doubt reciprocate, but this right now is hurt. The man before me now is the boy that grew up poor with no love, and I've weaseled my way under his walls. Closing my eyes, I wrap my arms around him and hug him tighter than I've ever hugged anyone. His chin meets my head, and his arms wrap around me as he holds me close.

"I'm sorry, Ellis. It's not what you think. This wasn't about you. I promise." The last part was somewhat of a white lie, but for the most part, he was not the focus of my thoughts until I remembered where and with whom I'm living. After a few long moments, I move to pull away, and he relents.

I go back to the task at hand, making a cup of coffee for the drive in when he says, "Were it not for that ring on your left hand, I'd make you change."

Looking down, I fidget with the fake wedding ring I wear to keep my job. It only serves as a reminder of all the lies I tell. All the personalities I must keep straight. Married me, single me, club me, badass applications analyst me. While Christopher is my only friend outside of Ellis—like Ellis, he doesn't know my secrets. I show people what they want to see. The first night Christopher and I met at the club, he had seen me talking to Ellis. We looked intimate, like lovers. Ellis had me pinned against the bar from behind as he whispered in my ear. He was telling me to stop serving a particular customer, but Christopher saw it as we were together, and I never corrected him.

In the beginning, the white lie was to protect myself. I had just started working at the club, and I didn't know Christopher from Adam. Letting him assume I was involved felt less sleazy, like I wasn't one of the girls working the VIP floor. I no longer harbor the same sentiments that I did when I started working at Covet, but it doesn't change how I ended up in the deep water I'm in now. The day Christopher confronted me about the job, he specifically asked, "You're with the owner, aren't you? You don't wear a ring because of the club?"

His comment caught me off guard until I remembered my signed contract. It stated that married people couldn't wear their rings at work. At the time, I skimmed over it because it wasn't something I needed to worry about, but I'll never forget Ellis's reaction the first time he saw it on my finger. He spit out his morning coffee across the kitchen before asking if there was something he needed to know about. When I informed him of the mishap, he was doubled over in a fit of laughter.

As I press start on the Keurig, I scold, "You know this is all your fault. If something comes up at work and I must bring my spouse, you better be ready to play the part."

He laughs before coming up behind me and rubbing his hands down my arms. Then, leaning in, he says, "Would you like to start prepping me now? 'Fake husband' feels like a role that might require a little research."

I turn and swat his chest. "Ellis, be serious. When I forgot my ring Friday, Christopher was seconds away from losing his shit. I could tell it was a big deal. Why do you have that stupid addendum in the contract anyway?" Making my way to the fridge, I grab the creamer and add a splash to my mug before capping it.

Ellis starts up his own cup before responding. "The club is taboo enough as it is without advertising that some people are in open relationships. Bottom

line, I saw it as a complication." He shrugs like it's no big deal before grabbing his coffee and keys. "Let's go. I'm taking you to work today."

"Is there any particular reason?" Ellis has never taken me to work.

Heading toward the door, he throws over his shoulder, "Just practicing playing the part of the dutiful husband." When I don't immediately follow, he stops. "It was a joke. I'm dropping the car off for scheduled maintenance."

If it were anyone but Ellis, I might buy it. But it's not, and Ellis doesn't make jokes.



This is week four of working at Lark, and this is the first time I've been relieved to be at my desk. Maryk will be in the office today, and I beat him in. Christopher has yet to make his rounds to check on my timeliness and attire, and I can breathe. The tension between Ellis and me is thick, and this morning was almost too much. I needed out of that house and away from him just to clear my head. Here, I can finally have a minute to myself.

Logging in on my computer, I open my emails and get caught up on any that may have been fired off over the weekend. Unlike most companies, we are encouraged to turn our work phones off when we leave the office and aren't on the clock. Lark is forward-thinking in that way, promoting a work/home life balance. It's part of how they're able to recruit top-notch employees. They never have issues trying to find qualified help. There is a waitlist of candidates for any position at any time. Yet another reason I was blown away when I got the opportunity. All Christopher has said regarding hiring me rather than choosing from the list is that he's trying a new approach.

After finishing my coffee, I head to the mini fridge tucked away in a little bar between my office and the ensuite bathroom to grab my green juice. I've just sat back at my desk when the door behind me opens, startling the crap out of me. Luckily, I hadn't taken a drink yet, or I most likely would have spit it all over my desk.

A mess of blonde hair and Clark Kent glasses that I'd recognize anywhere stalk toward my desk, and my heart stumbles. The ocean-blue eyes that seduced my heart, marked my soul, and haunted my every other thought for the past decade are once again staring back at me. Then stopping before me,

he speaks, pulling me out of my stunned gaze. "I don't need a temp for the day. You can tell Christopher to place you somewhere else for the day."

His words don't even register because I'm too dumbfounded and aggravated with myself for letting this happen. I should have dug deeper. My mind has been anywhere but focused on my identity lately. Now here I am, face to face with my past, one I've run from for years.

"Do you need me to call Christopher for you?" He pulls out his phone, and his words finally start to sink in.

My voice is full of nerves when I manage to speak up. "I'm not a temp. I work here full-time."

I stop talking as he brings his phone to his ear and says, "Christopher, can you please stop by and pick up the temp you left in my office. I'll be fine for the day until Lenny returns." I'm not sure what Christopher says in return or if Mason even takes a minute to listen, but he hangs up, leading me to believe it's the latter, and considering I was speaking and he was ignoring me, this must be a habit.

"Make sure you have all of your things. You won't be coming back to this office."

For some reason, those words strike a chord with me. I've been working my ass off, running myself into the ground for the past four weeks, trying to prove my worth. Mason doesn't get to come in here and tell me to fuck off. Not again. Standing up, I set my green juice down on the desk rather loudly, drawing his attention back to me as he had already started walking toward his office. "If you would listen, then you would have heard me. I am not a temp. This is my position."

He rubs his jaw in irritation before dragging his eyes down my body, forcing me to double down and lock my knees. This man has always made me weak, and right now, under his intense stare, is no different. My entire body wants to melt into him. He has always been in shape, but the grown-up version of the boy I once knew is all man. His broad shoulders and defined chest stretch his white button-down in all the right places. Even with his blue sport coat on, you can see the swell of his biceps. "Lenny MacNeil works this desk." Then, waving his hand at me, he draws me out of my stupor and adds, "You do not look like a man named Lenny."

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise when I realize this entire exchange is the result of mistaken identity. What feels like relief starts to wash over me, and I step forward and offer him my hand. "That's me. Lennox MacNeil."

His eyes are zeroed in on my outstretched hand, but he doesn't move to shake it. Instead, his eyes find mine, and for a second, I feel like he sees me. It feels like he recognizes me. I drop my hand and absentmindedly run it over my skirt to tamp down my nerves.

"Maryk. Can I see you for a minute in your office?" Christopher says as he enters the office. *Shit.*

Of course, Mason would be Maryk. The sins of my past are here to collect. But they no longer taste the same. The ties that bound us then no longer apply. There will be no more running. I need to let go of my past and step into my future. I'm at this crossroads now because I've been living in my past. Maybe the time has finally come to step into my truth. Our truth.

CHAPTER 4

"TELLING ONE LIE ALMOST ALWAYS REQUIRES ANOTHER, AND BEFORE THE STORYTELLER KNOWS IT, THEY WILL BE CAUGHT INSIDE OF THEIR OWN WEB."

- Jenna Atatari



MASON

"Mason, what is the problem? Lenny has worked for you for the past four weeks, and there have been zero issues."

Walking over to the window, I look out over the park. He knows my rule, and he deliberately disobeyed it. The problem is, I like Christopher. He's been a phenomenal asset to Lark, and I consider him a friend to some extent. I'm wondering if that's not the problem now. I let him in, and now he's taking advantage of that as if he knows what's best.

"I was under the impression Lenny was a man. You know my rules, Christopher."

"Yes, well, playing by your rules has yet to work out over the past year. Lenny is your seventh EA this year, and she's also been here the longest. And, while I know your rule, I had to hire her. If we got audited, we could be in trouble. There are five men to every one woman that works here, and she's good."

My back is still to him when I hear him pull out a chair and take a seat before adding, "Plus, she meets the other criteria. She is married." She might be married, but she feels too familiar, and I don't like it. I've been in the office since 4:00 am. I came to escape the women threatening to consume my every waking moment, only to find my new assistant, who I've become quite fond of, happens to be one. I was hopeful my new EA would be the difference in my workload.

She has handled every assignment I've thrown at her with ease. Where other EAs have become overwhelmed or needed instruction, she has not. I've been able to offload countless time-consuming, sensitive clerical tasks. I felt like I was finally getting a break and that maybe I could allocate more time to my purpose for being in San Jose to begin with. Moving Lark to the tech capital of the country wasn't my only purpose. It was just an auspicious coincidence. But I need to get back to searching for something that was taken from me, and while Lennox is competent and capable, it will not work.

Turning, I meet Christopher's eye and say, "You're going to need to try again—" The words haven't even finished leaving my mouth when a light knock at the door interrupts our conversation, and the next thing we know, Lennox is walking in. She didn't even wait to be called in.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I was sure the two of you were in here discussing my position, and I thought I should be a part of it." She gets the point for moxie, but I have to deduct ten for her judgment.

"Never come into my office without first receiving my verbal approval. I could have had Christopher on my desk." I'm not into men and never have been. I love the female body. It is god's gift to man, but I need a reason to get rid of her. My comment does nothing to phase her, and that's when I see it. She and Christopher share a knowing look. It's the same guarded, critical look that's plagued my thoughts all weekend.

The woman whose pussy I wanted wrapped around my dick for the past two days is now standing before me, wholly different, yet still the same. At the club, she wore a dark red wig with a full face of makeup—which, in theory, would give her anonymity in passing any members outside of the club—but there is no mistaking that the woman standing before me with long brown hair that matches the color of her eyes, eyes that are no longer painted, is Knox from the club. Don't get me wrong, Knox is hot, but the woman before me is striking. I take my time dragging my eyes down her body in this new light. At the club, it's dark, but here she can't hide. I can't help but grind my teeth when I see her left hand. It's my policy. I shouldn't be mad that she's married, but the fact that she is pisses me off. I don't care for liars, cheaters, or false representation.

She undoubtedly recognizes me from the club and still has the nerve to stand before me like she doesn't. That's it; mind made. If she wants to play games, I'm in. When her eyes return to mine, I cannot help being irritated. I'm going to play, but only to teach her a lesson. There is no way I can keep her on, no matter how good she may be at her job. One lie casts down enough doubt for any truth. When I have her eyes, I say, "Two weeks. You have two weeks to prove your worth."

She straightens her spine, prepared to speak, when Christopher says, "Maryk, we can't keep cycling people through this position."

Leaning back in my chair, I unclasp the button on my sport coat and say, "I'm not where I am because I don't have a good judge of character. Now, if you'll both excuse me, I have work to do." I don't miss the way Lennox raises a brow in question of my words, but I leave it. I'll get to the bottom of her story before the end of the day. I'm too intrigued not to.

When neither makes an effort to move, I scold, "Now!"

Lennox startles while Christopher stands, and both make their way to my

door, but before Lennox exits, I add, "And Lennox. Never come in here uninvited." She nods before closing the door behind her. *Damn it.*

I shouldn't be entertaining this, but I'm too curious. As soon as I turn on my computer, I pull up the live feed from her office, watch as she takes a seat, and brings her head into her hands, which only confirms she knows I'm the man from the club. I want to go in there and call her out. Confront her for the treachery she believes she's pulling, but I won't, not until I know more.

It's not natural to be that schooled in your reactions unless you're practiced in the art of deception. There was no shock or surprise upon meeting me, and that's what hooked me. Lennox MacNeil has secrets, and I'll be damned if I don't want to know what they are. It's in my nature. I thrive on breaking codes and uncovering all the depraved things people try to hide. It's fucked up, but I find peace in the chaos of others as it distracts from my own.

Keeping the office cam up, I open the Ghost app on my computer to run her name through the program. This software put Croft Technologies, now Lark, on the map. This was my father's baby. It's untraceable and, therefore, un-hackable. I can pull up anything on anyone at any time. It is only fitting I use it now to research Miss MacNeil. The woman clearly has no problem leading a double life. Tech analyst by day and a club girl by night, but I want to know why. I know what I'm paying her, and it's a decent salary, one that she should more than be able to live comfortably on. *So why is a married woman working two jobs?*

She doesn't come up when I put her name into the program. Fifty Lennox MacNeil's that live across the United States appear in front of me, but none of them are her. There are only two reasons she wouldn't pull up on this search, either she falsified her documents upon being hired, or she was wiped from the system, and since I am the only one with access to that now that my father has passed, I know it can't be the latter.

Peering back at her on the screen, I watch her start to get to work. With her desk positioned in front of the camera, I can see the entirety of her face. I spent the weekend replaying our moment at the club when I had my fingers buried deep inside her. I memorized her big brown eyes, petite nose, and those plump, suckable lips and how they slightly parted when she was on the precipice of coming. But even my memories can't compare to the vision that sits before me. Fucking perfect, but there is something about her that I can't put my finger on.

Leaning back in my chair, I say to no one, "What are you hiding, Lennox

MacNeil?"



I t's Wednesday, and I've spent the past week and a half making Lennox's job hell. Week one was spent drowning her in work. I gave her ridiculous amounts of spreadsheets and lease language to comb through, and when that proved to be child's play for her, I had her start pulling contracts to review adherence. I knew this task would take copious amounts of time because that meant digging into customer profiles and day-to-day operations, ensuring terms were still as presented. But, of course, she did it all without complaint.

This week, I made her stay late every night just for teasing me with the outfits she had chosen to wear. Monday was a leather high-waisted skirt that hugged every curve of her delicious body. Tuesday was a tight-fitting black dress that hit just above the knee but had a slit up the back that showed off her delicious thighs every time she walked away from me. Today's outfit is a pair of black leather pants paired with a poet's shirt tucked in at her waist. Overall, the outfit is conservative, but her pants look like they've been painted on. They're so damn tight, and because I know what that pussy feels like wrapped around my fingers, I've been rock hard all day.

"Knock, knock. Do you mind if I come in?" I've left my door cracked today just to torture myself with her scent. Her perfume is every bit as hypnotic and alluring as she is, and I hate it. It's distracting, and because I can't find what I'm looking for on her in my systems, I've had to grasp at straws and try to figure out what makes her tick. Thus leaving my door open. I've been collecting pieces and trying to put together the puzzle. I even followed her home. I now know where she lives and with whom, both of which have provided me with details I didn't have before.

Ellis Lykos is the owner of Covet, but he has never been married. If anything, the two of them might be engaged, but I have a hard time believing that Ellis would be okay with letting his fiancée work at the club. I understand some people have open relationships, but I've met Ellis, and he doesn't strike me as a man who wants to share what's his. Enjoying female company in a club setting or, hell, even at home, is different than sharing 'the one'. I doubt she'd be working at his club if she was the one. This is why I've left my door cracked in hopes that I might overhear a phone call or a

discussion with Christopher, who appears to be close with her, that could give me more insight.

"Maryk? Should I come back?"

"No, come in."

She pushes the door wide and pulls in a nervous breath when her eyes land on mine. It happens every damn time she looks at me, without fail, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it. I more than like it. I fucking love it, even though it's distracting as hell. Walking to the front of my desk she says, "I just wanted to let you know I can't stay late tonight. I know we've been working on the Paris project all week, but I have class."

I can't help but quirk a brow at that. Her being enrolled in school is news to me. Rolling my lips, I take my glasses off and set them down on my desk before meeting her eyes. "Where do you attend college?"

Her eyes narrow on mine like she's perturbed by the question, but it's not unreasonable to ask. She's just mad because I caught her in a lie. "Evergreen Valley." Because I've studied her resume, I can't help but call her out. "I thought you graduated top of your class last fall from the University of San Francisco?"

"I did." She offers way too quickly, only adding to my theory that she's lying. "I'm working toward my Master's." This entire week has been one mental brain fuck for me. It rarely takes me this long to figure someone out, especially considering it is what I do for a living, but I'm also enjoying this little game of cat and mouse. It distracts me from other things I need to let go of, so I say, "Fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

Her brows rise just enough to show she's somewhat shocked I'm letting her go that easily, but she recovers quickly and says, "Thanks, I'll see you tomorrow. Have a good night, Maryk." Then, turning on her red heels, she saunters out of my office. While the details of her past and present may not be coming to me as quickly or easily as I'd like, I'm finding her to be more transparent than expected in some regards.

In the almost two weeks we've spent together, I've learned her tells, or at least the ones she elects to show me. When she lies, she stalls with sass or answers too quickly. If she's nervous, her breathing hitches, and when she wants my attention, she saunters. And because I'm starting to get a clearer idea of what I'm dealing with, I have no doubt where she'll really be tonight. The question is, will she want to play?



I t's 8 pm, and I'm just now getting ready to have my first drink of the day.

While I may have intentionally been keeping Lennox late for my own game, we truly have been working on this new Paris deal. Working on expanding overseas and ensuring I'm compliant with international laws has been challenging. So, I left work and came straight to the club, where I have no doubt I will find Lennox, or—better yet—Knox.

The last time I was in, I learned that she didn't typically work the VIP floor, so with that in mind, when I walk in, I stay on level one and saddle up to the bar. There are two levels to the club. The ground level is what I also consider the face or cover of the club. Ellis was wise when he came up with this idea. It takes work to operate a club like this. There is a ton of red tape, and the minute word gets out on what goes on at places like this, protestors and the media show up, and then the clientele stop coming out of risk of being seen. The ground level is the face of the club. There is a hefty cover charge if you aren't a member, so technically, it's open to the public, but the staff on this level are dressed similarly to women you find at a sports bar like Hooters. They wear barely-there black spandex dresses.

Covet is attached to a hotel, so unless you are a member, it's not obvious that elevators take you up to another floor of the club that is strictly members-only. That's where the women wear next to nothing and are on the menu, so to speak. Without fail, the second I take a seat, long red hair catches my eye at the other end of the bar. Lennox is working, not going to class, just as I suspected.

There are two bartenders, and of course, I sat at the end that isn't hers, but after she serves the man sitting in front of her, she walks to the center register, and our eyes meet. She holds my gaze for a few seconds, the other bartender notices and steps into our line of sight. Placing her hand on Lennox's hip, she leans in to speak, and I can't help but wonder if they are talking about me. After the other bartender walks away, Lennox finishes her task at the register before coming my way.

"Is there something I can get you?" I hold her eyes and keep my expression void of any emotion. I've yet to determine if she genuinely thinks I don't know it's her or if she does know and likes the game. I believe it's the latter. The tension between us this past week was incredibly potent. I wanted to pound into her before I ever discovered she was my EA, but her lies and

deception only made me want it more. Either way, the last time I was here, she told me I wouldn't get another shot, yet here she is.

"I'll take an Old Fashion double." I watch as she pulls a glass off the shelf and mixes my drink.

When she returns, she places it down in front of me before asking, "Do you want it to go on your tab?" Taking a sip, I nod in agreement as a slow smile starts on her face. "And what name would that be under?"

At work, she knows me as Maryk. It's the name I use so I can go undetected as the owner. I didn't like how people acted when they saw 'Mason Croft' on emails or when I introduced myself. It was as if everyone instantly dawned a mask, only showing me the parts they thought I wanted to see. So, when I rebranded the company two years ago, I also rebranded myself. Only a handful of people know that I am Mason Croft, and I've made them sign NDAs. The name here on file at the club is Mason Croft. Maryk is my middle name.

This is why I love playing this game with her. She thought she was pulling something over on me by asking me my name, but the second I signed up for a room with her last Friday, she had full transparency to my account. Once someone says yes, and a room is booked, it's reserved under the individual paying for the service, and the woman can see my entire profile. I know she looked. She was too nervous not to. Lennox just showed me another card. Not only does she know I'm her boss; she knows I'm the owner of Lark. If she wants to play dirty, that's fine with me.

"I think we both know the answer to that question." I take another drink from my glass, and when she doesn't move to walk away, I ask, "Are you going to let me have my time?" She bites her lip, and I can see her nipples pebble through the thin lining of her sheer black dress. *Fuck.*

"I can't say that I'm interested. Plus, I don't work that floor."

"Your nipples tell a different story."

"Yeah, well, my nipples forgot what my pussy didn't."

I wasn't expecting her retort to be so bold, but I like it, so I bite. "Yeah, and what's that?"

Leaning in, she grabs the bar top so that her perky full tits are on full display and says, "I like to come."

When she leans back to walk away, I grab her wrist before she can retreat and say, "Thirty minutes, thirty grand."

She looks down to where my hand is still wrapped around her wrist and

says, "Ten."

I counter, "Fifteen."

Twisting her arm, she pulls out of my grip and nods to one of the bouncers. I was so consumed with her I forgot myself, which doesn't happen. "Room five in ten minutes." She's just turned to walk away when she adds, "Same rules," and saunters off the same way she does in the office. I watch as she makes her way to the other bartender, probably to cover the shift before heading off. Taking one long pull of my drink, I finish it and make my way back toward the elevators. She may not want to break her rules now, but I have no doubt she'll be begging for my cock by the end of our time.



I've just entered the room when Lennox slips in right behind me and closes the door. The way she enters strikes me as odd, almost as if she's sneaking around, which makes my mind drift to Ellis. I have yet to have this woman, and she's already under my skin, making me possessive and jealous, which was why I joined this club in the first place. I'm here to be entertained, not feel.

Waving her hand in front of the RFID reader on the wall, she locks the door, and I make my way to the couch. I need to push out these emotions, and I have a feeling until I have her, I won't be able to. That's what this is. I need to get my dick wet and get her out of my system. Before I take my seat, I loosen my tie and say, "I want you naked."

When she doesn't immediately respond, I look up and find her staring at me, face ashen from nerves. I quirk a brow before saying, "I've already had your tits in my mouth. Is there a reason I can't see your pussy?"

Something snaps, and she's back in the room with me instead of a million miles away. "Same reason you won't let me touch you. It's too personal." To that, I have no argument. We all have boundaries. The point of this club is no attachments. She turns and hits a button in the drawer, simultaneously starting our time and the music. Jeremih's "Down On Me" starts playing as she removes her uniform.

When she pulls her dress off over her head, and her full tits are on display, I'm instantly hard remembering the last time I had them in my mouth. Her eyes find mine once her dress is off, and while I want her to

dance for me, I'd rather have her on my lap—but I'm not breaking my rules. On my lap, she'd be touching me.

Making her way to the pole, she wraps her leg around it and spins. Then, dropping to the floor with one arm on the bar, she leans into a back bend and grinds her pussy against it. It's hot as fuck, and my dick is jealous. I want those lips wrapped around my cock, but I stay seated. I'm sure I'll get what I want, but I need to let her work herself up to it. Dancing for me, lying to me, and playing this game turns her on, and apparently, it does the same for me.

Pulling herself back up, she does one more spin around the pole before walking my way. I take in every inch of her perfect body, committing it to memory because I don't know how long this charade will last. When she reaches the couch, she stands between my spread legs and drags her hands up her body until she reaches her tits, where she grabs an overflowing handful of each before tweaking her nipples. Fuck, that's hot. My dick is weeping with the need to come.

Her eyes are lidded with desire when she leans in and grabs the couch behind me. Shoving her breasts in my face, she says, "Suck."

I'm not used to a woman telling me what to do. In the bedroom, I lead, but I'll be damned if I'm going to fuck this up. I want to do more than suck her tits. Pushing them together, I run my tongue over her pert nipples before settling on one and sucking it hard, eliciting a delicious moan of pure ecstasy from her. These tits are heavy, every bit of full C cups, and I want to watch them bounce while she rides me. I know she wants my cock. There is no way she's in the room for just my hand, and the thought pisses me off.

Releasing her breast with a pop. I smack her ass hard and say, "Turn around." Her eyes narrow in question like she thinks I'm not going to let her come again, but I don't relent. She's going to come, but she's going to do it on my dick. When she doesn't move, I add, "Now," in a stern tone that gets her attention. Once she's standing in front of me, I say, "Bend over and touch your toes." Her head briefly turns as if she's going to argue before she concedes. Her sexy ass is in the air and level with my face. Sitting forward, I run my finger up the outer edge of her thigh until I reach her ass and the hem of the booty shorts she had on under her dress. Her legs and cheeks break out in goosebumps from my touch, and I have no doubt that when I reach her center, she will be soaked.

Because she decided to leave the shorts on, I tease her. Grabbing a handful of cheek in each hand, I squeeze hard before pulling the spandex

shorts up to display her bare cheeks. Then, bringing my mouth to her ass, I run my tongue along the exposed parts while I bring my other hand to her pussy and run it up her center, over her wet shorts. I hear her gasp from the sensation. But I don't want a gasp; I want her begging.

Pulling them to the side, her soft lips are exposed, and I run my finger through her folds. "Fuck yes." She pants, before slightly tilting her hips in an attempt to get my finger where she wants it.

I tease her entrance before asking, "Is this what you want?" I dip it in, making her moan. My cock is throbbing. I want to push inside her so damn bad. When she doesn't give me a verbal response, I pull out before demanding, "Say it. Tell me what you want."

"You know I fucking want it." Her smart mouth earns her two fingers when I push back in. This time she hisses but pushes back on my hand. I slap her ass hard as I pump into her. Fuck, she's so wet she's dripping.

"Let me taste you, Knox." I slow my pace, waiting for her response.

Then, just when I think she's going to stick to the rules, she says, "Yeah."

I don't waste a second. I reach for the hem of her shorts and start to pull them down, but she stops me. "The shorts stay."

Placing an open-mouthed kiss on her cheek, I say, "I'm going to make you feel good, baby. Let me pull them down just a little bit." *Fuck*. What am I doing? I just called her baby. My god, I need to come. That term of endearment must have worked, though, because she lets me continue my descent. Once I have her shorts pulled down to her thighs, I say, "Rest your hands on the stage." The pole is on a slightly elevated platform, and I know the second my mouth is on her, she will not be able to hold this position. Without question, she does as I command, and I take a handful of ass in each hand, spread her cheeks, and dive in.

A moan from deep in my chest makes its way up as my tongue dips into her pussy. Fuck she tastes good. I spear my tongue into her as I rub her bundle of nerves, and she pushes back on my face. "Fuck don't stop," she cries out.

I add a digit and feel she's getting close. "Princess, I want you to come on my dick." I don't stop, but I slow the thrust of my fingers as I watch them disappear inside her tight hole before adding, "Let me have this pussy." When she doesn't immediately answer, I can't help but bite back my frustration. I know she fucking wants it, and when she turns her head to the side and presses her chin into her shoulder, I'm convinced it will be a no.

But then she all but hisses out, "You want it. Take it."

I don't care for the annoyance I hear in her tone. But it's why I started calling her Princess, to begin with. There's judgment in her eyes and condescension in her voice every time we speak. And I can't help but think it's because she hates that she likes this. I'm paying for an exchange. No strings attached. It's easy to judge me for it, but right now, I don't give a fuck. I need to be inside her. I undo my belt in record time and roll on a condom before lining up. I tease her entrance and give her one more opportunity to back out. "Last chance."

"Do it." She demands, and I slam in. "Fuuck." I hold in deep. She feels better than I imagined, even with a barrier between us. Her lush ass on my groin, her thick hips in my hands. "Fuck me." She chides as she pushes back.

"You better watch that mouth. I'd enjoy watching you choke on my cock." I pull back and slam in.

"Fuck, yes," she purrs.

"You like it hard?" I tighten my grip on her hips and go again, watching her ass bounce from the force.

"Mmm," she moans as I repeat the move, dragging back long and slow right over that bundle of nerves deep inside. Her arms start to shake, and she drops to her elbows, adjusting our angle and allowing me to go deeper still. "Fuck, this pussy feels so good."

With her ass in the air, I start my pace going hard, causing her to whimper as her walls begin to tighten around my cock. "Give it to me, Princess. Come on my dick. Show me how bad you want it." I reach around to rub her clit, and she comes hard, but I keep my pace. "You're going to give me one more."

When she doesn't answer, I smack her ass hard. "Say the words, Knox."

"Yes, I want more. Don't stop."

"I'm going to go hard, baby, and you're going to take it. " Fuck, there it was again: 'baby'. This woman is driving me crazy. I could go all night, but a bouncer will come knocking if we stay over our time. Pulling out to the tip, I slam in hard one last time, making her cry out before I hit it at a piston pace.

Her ass is bouncing, and when I reach around to palm one of her full tits, they're doing the same. I want to touch every inch of her body. When I tweak her nipple, her pussy clenches my dick, "You like that?"

In between moans, she says, "Don't talk. Just fuck me."

That doesn't work for me. Releasing her tit, I pull back and squeeze her

ass hard before saying, "My dick is buried deep inside you, Knox. Tell me whose cock you're taking. Whose making this pussy come?" My balls are tightening, and I'm on the brink of coming as her pussy really starts to choke my cock. "Say it, baby," I grind out.

"Fuck, Mace, don't stop."

As pissed as I am that she's playing games, that nickname out of her mouth strikes a chord inside of me, one I haven't felt in years, and fuck me if it doesn't send me spiraling. Reaching around, I rub her clit, ensuring she comes with me. I slam in deep one last time, sending her over the edge and finding my own release. She's fully bent over, leaning on her forearms as I gather my bearings and pull out. I feel her loss immediately, and it makes me sick. This entire scene is too much.

Pulling off my condom, I tie it off and throw it in the trash can next to the couch. I can't even bring myself to look at her as I tuck myself back into my pants and straighten my clothes. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I try to restrain myself from making my next dick move, but I can't. It was the plan all along, anyway. How I feel doesn't matter. Grabbing my wallet off the table, I exit the room without a word or a glance in her direction.



"Mason Croft, you better get your ass out here right now!"

Fuck. This is the last thing I need right now. Where the hell is Martin when I need him? That's when I remember he's out running errands, tasks he typically caters to when I am at the office. I should be at work, but I've avoided going in for the past two days. Ever since I fucked Lennox Wednesday, I've been losing my damned mind. I've worked out more hours than I can count and gone on more jogs in the last two weeks since she's been around than I have in the past month. I can't get her out of my head. I'm unsure why I thought I could fuck her once and get her out of my system, especially after I made her say my name. I knew Lennox would be different when I laid eyes on her, and I still pursued her. When I fuck Hailey, she addresses me as Mr. Croft or Sir. She never calls me Mason. It's one of my rules. It's too personal. Now, here I am fucking a club girl, who happens to also be my EA, and letting her use my first name.

For the past two weeks, I've been in denial. Telling myself that I needed

to get her out of my system and reiterating internally that there's just something about her I can't put my finger on, but I know damn well those are all lies I'm trying to spin to hide the truth. I'm attracted to Lennox because of her secrets and lies. Those secrets and lies are what has kept me around. They are precisely why it's Friday, and her two-week probation is up, yet I haven't made a move to fire her. I see a darkness in her that I only see when I look in the mirror. I don't feel like I'm tainting her because she has her own secrets. Ones I feel like she has gone to great lengths to keep, and in my experience, those are typically the ugliest.

The clicking of heels on the wood floors lets me know Vivian is on her way. She knows exactly where to find me. Without so much as a knock, she bounces through my office door. Vivi is one of a select few people who has been in my life for years, and I trust her implicitly, but I'd be lying if I said I was happy to see her. While Vivi and I keep in touch, and she comes to visit at least once a year, today's visit is on the heels of a call from Gianna, and I don't feel like the two are a coincidence.

Waltzing over to my desk, she plops down into one of the wingback chairs that flanks its front before saying, "You look like shit."

Taking my glasses off, I rub my hand down my face before saying, "I'm so glad you made the trip all the way from St. Louis to tell me that."

She takes a look around the office before spying what she wants. Then, standing, she walks over to my bar and starts rummaging for her vice. Vivi loves rum and coke. Tossing my glasses onto a pile of papers, I lean back in my chair and lift my legs onto my desk, crossing them at the ankles. I watch and take in her appearance as she makes our drinks. She's petite with long, dark brown hair and eyes to match, with thick thighs and a bubble butt for days. The mini skirt she's wearing barely covers her ass. She's not hard to look at by any means, but we've never been more than friends. If we weren't, I would have fucked her by now, but I'll never cross that line because I value her more as a friend.

"I know you like your whiskey, but you're drinking with me, so suck it up, buttercup."

She sets a rum and coke in front of me, and I take it. We both take a long pull of our drinks before she takes her seat. Then, because I don't want to draw this out, I ask, "How is she?"

Her eyes snap to mine, and she holds my gaze. "Who do you mean?" I've put one condition on our friendship since I left home four years ago, and

that's been to never bring up Gianna, but we both know her visit isn't spontaneous. "She's good, Mace."

I can't help but quirk a brow. I don't buy that. "Really?" I question sarcastically before taking another drink.

Setting her glass down on my desk, she says, "Okay, fine, no. She's not doing good. Ever since..." She trails off, looking anywhere but at me.

I have no doubt Gigi shared my incident with her, but she and I haven't discussed it, and because I don't care to now, I say nothing. Clearing her throat, she adds, "She's shutting down, Mace. Lately, Gianna doesn't even want to hang out, and my texts go unanswered for days sometimes. She let go as best she could. I think out of anyone, you understand that, but you know exactly where her mind is Mace. I know she's off-limits, and I'm not trying to bring it up, but I'm asking you to consider calling her back. Maybe you don't see it, but you both need it."

I can't help but close my eyes and let the barrage of emotions from her words wash over me. Anger, resentment, sadness, love. I feel it all, but she's not mine, not anymore. "Vivian, Gianna has more money than me, and if that runs out, her fiancé or, better yet, her brother, I'm sure, would be more than happy to set her up with the best care to get over whatever mental breakdown it is that she's having. But it's not me. It can't be me."

Vivian shakes her head as if she's thoroughly perturbed by my response. "You don't think I know that? She might be getting help. Of course, I wouldn't know because she's so withdrawn. She's my ride-or-die, and I know she's keeping secrets. She's not telling me something, Mace, and that worries me. Whatever is hurting her is bad. The only thing she said before she stopped talking about it all together was that 'only one person can help me, and he won't.'"

Her words have me questioning my earlier assumption that Gigi told Vivian the details regarding my incident. I know Vivi knows about the accident. It was all over the news, but I don't think she knows how Gigi was brought into it. Her silence earlier was her way of playing me. Trying to see if I'd slip and share details she doesn't know.

"And let me guess. You believe that one person is me."

"Mason Maryk Croft, I know it's you. Look, I've been caught in the middle of this shitty fallout for the past four years, and I've respected your wishes, but you need to pull your head out of your ass. You can't blame all of this on Gigi. She was there for you for years. She loved you, Mace."

I slam my glass down on the table before standing up and walking over to my window that looks out over the corner coffee shop. "I don't need a reminder, Vivian." I grind out.

"Look, Mason, I'm not saying Gigi is innocent. Hell, even she knows she's not but—"

I stop her before she can continue. "Vivian, drop it. Gigi and I had our closure. We said all that we needed to say. I don't talk about it because I know I made mistakes; I know I'm not innocent. I stay away because I care about her. I've never stopped. I still look after her, Vivian, you know that." Gigi is watched 24/7. My company runs cyber security for Grand Media, which she owns with her brother Ethan Grand. Ethan and I have an understanding that if there is a threat to Gigi, we'd inform each other. That's how I know this is not life or death. Gigi just needs more time.

I'm so lost in my own thoughts I don't hear her as she walks up behind me and hugs me around my waist. Then, resting her head against my back, she says, "And who's looking out for you, Mace?"

Closing my eyes, I pull in a deep breath and hold it before slowly releasing it through my nose, scared of doing anything more than just breathing, and even that feels like too much. I've closed myself off, thrown myself into my work, and shut people out, and for that, I am alone.

CHAPTER 5

"LYING IS EASY, BUT IT'S LONELY."

- Victoria Schwab



LENNOX

"Lennox, Lennox, where are you?" I hear Ellis's loafers clicking down the hall on the marble floors. Of course, I didn't lock or close any doors on my way in tonight. I just wanted to drown myself in this tub and wash away all the memories and hurt. For the past week and a half, I had been on the fence about whether or not Mason recognized me from the club. The man is smart as hell, and I know he didn't get where he is by not paying attention to details. But my presence at work didn't seem to faze him in the least, which left room for doubt to creep in.

Sure, at the club, I wear heavy makeup and a red wig, and while the place is dimly lit, he definitely saw me when he had me up close and personal in room five. My fucking tits were in his mouth while his fingers were buried deep inside me. Not to mention him recognizing me from the club was honestly the least of my worries. I've wondered if he at all sees the old me. The one who ran away. This past week has been a total mind fuck, to say the least. He's the last person I ever thought I'd come face to face with ever again. If I were a wiser woman, I would run. I don't need my past to catch up with me, but I also can't run forever, and what's more, a bigger part of me doesn't want to. Not anymore, not when I have my truth.

Ellis bounds through my bathroom door and sees me sunken under mounds of bubbles in my bathtub before the worry slowly starts to leave his face. "What happened? Why did you leave your shift without saying anything? Why didn't you come to me?" He runs his hands through his hair as he paces back and forth in my bathroom, and I feel terrible, but the truth is I would have felt worse going to him and seeking comfort in his arms, knowing how he feels. I want him here now, and it's selfish. I want him because I feel cheap and discarded.

I just let a man pay me for sex. I'm not sure what I expected going into that room with Mason. I suppose maybe I thought I'd find pieces of the man I used to know, but the truth is, I never really knew him at all. We were just kids the last time I saw him. The man he turned out to be isn't at all the one I envisioned. I have to remind myself I'm Lennox. I know, without a doubt, he doesn't recognize me as anyone else.

"Talk to me, Lennox. If he hurt you, he's more than out. I'll see to it

myself." I close my eyes as I let Ellis's words sink in. Mason more than hurt me, but he didn't break any rules. This hurt is all my own. I brought it onto myself. It's just a new wound that makes the old ones ache. "I'm okay. I... I just needed to leave."

He reaches the side of the tub in two strides. "I'm going to need more than that, Knox."

I want to give him more, I really do. Out of all the people in my life, which equates to a total of three, I genuinely trust Ellis, but this secret I carry isn't just my own. I've been in this bath for an hour, and I'm starting to prune. "Can you hand me a towel?" He reaches for the towel hanging on the wall and hands it to me as I slowly start to stand. His jaw sets when he catches a glimpse of my naked body before he turns his head. I'm not shy; I trounce around in a black dress that barely covers my breasts and ass at the club, but I don't think he's turning his head because he doesn't want to look. He's turning his head because he doesn't want to feel.

Wrapping the towel around my torso, I step out of the tub and make my way across the bathroom, where I grab my robe and pull it around me before dropping the towel. He follows me into the bedroom, and I take a seat on my bed. "Ellis, I want to tell you things, but some things I can't, and it hurts. I don't want to hurt you, but—"

Sitting in front of me, he cuts me off and says, "Try me, Knox. You can't hurt me. I've seen it all because I've lived it all."

I can't help but look down at the comforter and fiddle with the embroidery. My secrets are why I have zero friends. I've made peace with the choices that led me here, but how do you let go? I can't go back. I don't want to, but I'm not sure how to move forward either. For years, I've just been going through the motions, and I was happy. I had William, but now that he's gone, I have no one. Taking my hand in his, he draws my attention back to him.

"Ellis, I'm not who you think I am." He furrows his brow, clearly not understanding where I'm going with this. "I mean, I am, but I'm not. You see, I feel like I've lived two lives. I wasn't born Lennox MacNeil. That identity was given to me almost ten years ago."

His hand tightens around mine, drawing my eyes to his, and once they're locked, he asks, "Have you lied to me?" I shake my head 'no' because I haven't, other than the big identity revelation.

"No, if you don't consider this right now a lie, then no, I have not lied to

you."

He rubs his thumb over the back of my hand. "Knox, this isn't a lie. This is the past. We all have them. I'm sure you have reasons for not telling me, but you are now, and that means something to me." His eyes hold mine, and all I want to do is lean in and kiss his full lips. Isn't this what we all want, to be accepted for who we are without reservation? Before I can make a move, he asks, "Does this past have anything to do with Mason Croft?"

My spine straightens of its own accord at the mention of his name. I'm not surprised Ellis knows it. It's his job to know who his VIP members are, and I'm sure since he's here, he looked at the security footage before he left and checked the logs. He knows exactly who I was with before I left. I don't feel comfortable discussing Mason with Ellis for a barrage of reasons, but at the top of the list is that he's the reason I ran, and how do I say 'yes' without also telling him that Mason hasn't a clue who I am now? Knowing I need to give him something, I say, "Maybe."

Palm to forehead, I lay back on my bed and let out a groan of frustration. *How did everything suddenly end up so damn complicated?*

"Lennox, I don't like seeing you like this. This is my fault. I pushed you to work the VIP floor, and it backfired. Mason Croft has been a member for over a year. He never frequents the first floor, which I suppose is why you've never run into him until now. I could tell you not to go upstairs because I don't like it, but I won't because I respect you and your decisions—but I don't have to like them. If he had you and let you go, he's not worth your time."

The sentiment behind his words squeezes my heart, and while it's a small detail, it's a catfish all the same, and I want to be honest. I want Ellis to see me. Opening my eyes, I stare at the ceiling and say, "My eyes aren't really brown, and neither is my hair."

I hear him snort out a laugh, and as I turn to roll over on my side, he bursts out in a fit of laughter. I've never heard Ellis laugh out loud like this, and I love it. Over the past month, he's shown me a side of him the world doesn't get to see, but I've been pushing it away, afraid to embrace it and him because he's all I have. "What's so damn funny?"

"Oh, I don't know. You just admitted to being fake, as if that's not what every other woman walking down the streets of California is. Tell me, Knox, when is the last time you saw a woman without breast implants, Botox, lip injections, or hair extensions walk by?" He does have a point. Women out here are constantly jumping on the latest fad diet or pop-up boutiques

offering something that will make them look younger.

"You picked the perfect state to live in and become a new person. You can be as fake as you want, and no one would bat an eye, though I think you pull it off well. I didn't know you dyed your hair or wore contacts. You're sexy as fuck just like this, but I'd love to see the real you."

Reaching across the bed, I grab his hand. "Thank you, Ellis. This past year I've done a lot of soul searching trying to figure out who this new me wants to be, what she looks like now that her father is gone, but I've been faking it as someone else for so long, the lines have blurred. I don't want to go back if that makes sense. I love the girl I am now, but I also don't want to hide anymore."

"Then don't." Squeezing my hand, he asks, "Will you show me?" His voice is shaky, as if he's nervous, which makes me question his meaning.

Furrowing my brow, I ask, "Show you what?"

He gives me a half smile. "Your eyes. Eyes are like windows to the soul. They show its strength and speak their own language. Your eyes speak louder than your words ever will." Then, bringing his hand to my face, he adds, "Let me see you." *Who the hell can say no to that?*

Luckily, I just got out of the bath, so my hands are clean. Looking down, I slowly bring my finger to my eye and take out my contacts one at a time before blinking rapidly so that my eyes adjust. I only need to take them out once a month. Over the years, I've found that regular use of eye drops really helps with the daily no-changing wear that I subject myself to. When I look up into his dark brown eyes, his breath visibly catches.

"Lennox, you have the prettiest blue eyes I've ever seen." His eyes are searching mine, and his breaths have quickened as if he's truly seeing me for the first time, and I can't help but be just as enamored with him. He's seeing the real me right now, the parts I've kept hidden away, and it feels good.

"Can I kiss you?" I ask.

"Fuck, you never have to ask." He instantly pulls me onto his lap, but doesn't immediately move to kiss me. With our foreheads pressed together, lips mere inches apart, he says, "Are you sure?"

No, I'm not sure, but I know right now I need to feel something real. I want to feel him. It's been far too long since I've felt wanted, and tonight left me feeling anything but. "Yes." Is all I manage to get out before his lips are on mine, and my god, do they feel good. His arms immediately tighten around me as if he's scared I'll pull away, but I don't, and when he seeks

entrance, I grant it. When his tongue collides with mine, a groan rumbles up from deep in his chest, and I can't help but kiss him back with just as much appreciation. I've wanted to kiss him for months. I've dreamt about this moment. Wrapping my hands around his neck, I pull him even closer, eliminating any space that separates us. I'm drunk off how this man is making me feel. It feels too good to be held, and I don't want to let go, but when his hand runs down my back to grab my ass, I pull back breathlessly.

"Ellis, we need to stop. We can't do this. I don't want to hurt you."

Then, gripping my hips, he says, "Knox, don't worry about me. I want whatever you'll give me."

My eyes search his. "What?" is all I manage to get out.

"If you want a quick fuck, I want that. If you want to cuddle on the couch, I want that too, and when you must leave me for him, I'll be here when you get home. Don't get me wrong; I want everything, but I'll take the pieces."

My heart skips a beat from the rawness of this moment. Before this moment, we were walking a delicate line hinting at more, but that line is now gone. He's telling me without reservation what he wants. "Ellis, you deserve so much more than just the pieces."

Leaning his forehead to mine, he says, "Maybe. But tell me you'll think about it."

I close the distance between our lips and place a closed-mouth kiss on his mouth before pulling him tight to my chest. "I will."



The first week in the office with Mason was telling. He's not the same fun, carefree, tender-hearted boy I remember. No; now he's cold, closed-off, and guarded. I stopped keeping track of him years ago, so I don't know what happened since I left that changed him. When he walked into my office on Monday morning, I was stunned that he was Maryk. In hindsight, I should have known. Lark covered its history too well. He rebranded it to step out of his dad's shadow, and I'm willing to bet there's more to his rebranding than just that. Our histories are too sordid for there not to be more.

I know he didn't recognize me from the club at first sight. He was too stunned that his EA, Lenny, was a woman. Looking back, I now understand why Christopher was so quick to give me that nickname, which I despise, and

why he was so adamant about me wearing a ring. Mason doesn't hire women, and those who work here are all married. Christopher knew precisely what he was doing when he hired me while Mason was away in London. But for as much as Chris has been a thorn in my ass since I started a month ago, the past two weeks, he's been quiet—too quiet. It has me questioning his true motives for hiring me.

"Lenny, we need to talk." Speak of the devil, Christopher comes strolling into my office unannounced. Setting down my morning coffee, I lean back in my chair and prepare for the words that I know are coming: 'you're fired.' My two-week probation was up last Friday, and Mason hasn't been back in the office since we hooked up at Covet last Wednesday. I have no doubt Christopher is here to tell me the news that Mason apparently can't. *Fucking dick*. As soon as I realized Maryk was Mason, I knew my job here would be short-lived. I just assumed it would be ending on my terms.

"Maryk has been out of the office for the past few days, and I think we both know why." Immediately, my mind goes to the fact that we hooked up, but I remind myself Christopher has no way of knowing that unless Mason told him, which I'm sure isn't the case, making all of this even more infuriating. At work, he gave me nothing, which led me to believe there was a small chance he didn't recognize me. But then, he called my bluff and showed up at the club after I told him I was going to school, which means he knew who I was this entire time, and he still played the game. The man wears a good mask because he gave me no sign that he recognized me. I could barely get him to look at me, and fuck me if that didn't make me want him more.

"Lennox, are you even listening to me?" I pull my eyes off the desktop and give him my full attention but stay quiet, wondering if I got it wrong. After all, Mason is nothing if not punctual. Friday came and went, and I'm still here. He stares at me blankly, assuming I'm following his train of thought. Finally, when he can no longer stand my silence, he clears his throat, "Well, he's going to fire you."

I can't even find my words to give him a response. I'm too angry that I let this happen. Mason might be able to fire me, but I gave him the power to hurt me. Before I can put any more thought into the slow rage building in my chest, we're interrupted.

"Lennox, my office now," Mason clips out as he walks by my desk, where Christopher and I are obviously engaged in conversation. He gives neither of us a passing glance before he adds, "Christopher, out!" *Shit*.

I stay glued to my chair as I decide whether to fight or run. Ultimately, I wanted this. I returned after he debased me by treating me like a quick fuck. I might work at the club, where I am technically on the menu if I allow it, but this is different. He knows I'm his EA, but maybe it's what he doesn't know that's gnawing away at my ability to see if there can be more. This hurt inside is by my hand, not his. I let him have me because I wanted it. He is who he is. One night was never going to change him or us. We are who we are now; perhaps I did get what I needed last week. Closure. Mason only sees me as Lennox, not the girl I used to be. He wasn't looking for her then, and he's not looking for her now, so it's no surprise I'm still nothing more than a quick fuck. But when he called me 'baby,' for a second, I thought it was more. Given how the past few days have gone and the ire in his voice now, I know that's not the case. "Lennox, now."

Rising from my chair, I slowly make my way to his door. Pushing it open, I find him standing at his window with his hands tucked into his pockets. His body is clearly riddled with nerves. He's tense, his usually manicured blonde hair is unkempt but still incredibly sexy, and where he typically wears expensive suits in the office, he's wearing what I consider business casual today. Gray fitted slacks, brown leather loafers, and a blue sweater that I'm sure brings out every diamond speck in those ocean-blue eyes.

"Please take a seat." He says as he continues to gaze out the window. I nervously take my seat, not because I'm scared of getting fired. Hell, I'm expecting that, but now that I'm sitting here looking at him, the resolve I had to leave seconds ago has dimmed.

"I have company in town for the next week, which means I will be spending more time here than at my house. My door needs to remain closed at all times. If Vivian shows up here, you are to tell her that I am in meetings and therefore unavailable."

He pulls in a shaky breath, and I wrack my brain, trying to recall that name and why it feels so familiar. Once I do, my heart sinks. Vivian was his neighbor growing up, and the best friend of the girl I wished I could be. "I expect you to work late—"

Clearing my throat, I interrupt him, "I can't work late tonight. I have class." His head snaps in my direction, and his eyes narrow on mine. The look on his face is one of warning. It would appear my response is not one he wants to hear, but for whatever reason, he says nothing. If he wanted to discuss whatever the fuck we are or aren't doing, he could have come to work

Thursday or Friday. Hell, he could have opened with it today, but he didn't. It's now 5:00 pm on Monday, and instead of addressing the elephant in the room, he goes on as if it never happened. I never happened, and that's when Ellis's words pop into my head, 'If he had you and let you go, he doesn't deserve you.'"

Until last Wednesday happened, it could have been chalked up to an honest mistake. I didn't know he was my boss, and he didn't realize I was his employee. The past didn't matter, but Wednesday changed things. There's no mistake we know about each other. He may not see the real me, but the new me refuses to hide in the closet. I shouldn't have been a secret then, and I refuse to be one now.

When he continues to openly glare at me, I add, "My ride will be here any minute."

As I move to stand, he grinds out, "You don't have your own transportation? I more than pay you enough to afford your own vehicle."

I can't help but raise my eyebrows, shocked that he's calling my finances into question, but pissed enough to clap back. "My finances are none of your concern, and while the salary might be nice, I've only been here six weeks. That's two paychecks, in case you don't remember what it is like to receive those."

Tongue in cheek, he rocks back on his heels as if I've just slapped him. "Well, I'll get you a company car until you can afford your own."

"Really? You're going to buy the Executive Assistant that you put on a two-week probationary trial a car?"

Taking his glasses off, he pinches the bridge of his nose before starting, "That was—"

"Lennox, where are you at? Let's go, babe." A light knock on the door sounds before Ellis pops his head in. He looks between us and clearly sees the tension, but doesn't miss a beat. While he doesn't know who Mason is to me, he knows what he means to me and how he made me feel. I may not have sought out attention from Ellis this past weekend, but where he used to be a workaholic, never leaving the club, he sure was around a lot to watch TV, drink wine, and eat Chinese food as I nursed my hurt heart back to life. He reaches me in two strides, throws his arm around my waist, and kisses my head before extending his hand to Mason. "Ellis Lykos, I don't think we've formally met."

Mason doesn't move to shake his hand, but instead quirks a brow. I know

they are both very well aware of who the other man is. Ellis makes it his business to know who all his members are, especially VIP's, and Mason wouldn't frequent an establishment like Covet without doing his own research. "And you are whom, exactly?"

Ellis looks to me for a cue that makes my heart clench. This sexy, sweet man fucking cares, and it's everything. Finding my words and strength, I answer, "This is my fiancé. He's here to grab dinner with me before class. So..." I hike my thumb over my shoulder and watch as Mason sets his jaw. I may have secrets, but he's the one playing games.



"What was that back at the office?" Ellis asks as he parks his car in the garage at the club.

I don't answer his question because I'm too focused on the idea that Mason might show up tonight. I hate the way he left me feeling, and while he may have had more to say before Ellis showed up, it doesn't give his previous actions a pass. "I want to work the VIP bar tonight."

The ride over was quiet. Ellis knows Mason means something to me, that he gets under my skin, but he doesn't ask questions. While Ellis told me he'd take the pieces, I feel like crap only giving him that much when he's worth more. I'll never understand a man's mind and how 'casual' is fine. Before working at Covet, I assumed women were wired differently, but fifty women at the club smash that theory to pieces. It's a me thing. I'm the one who can't do casual. I tried, and felt like shit all weekend. Don't get me wrong; I hook up, but only one-night stands. Get in, get out, and never see them again. The difference between casual vs. one-night stands is the never see them again part.

"I'll make a deal with you. If I put you on VIP tonight, I want you to use me." With my head resting against the seat, I turn and look at him with a 'what the fuck are you talking about' expression that needs no words. He laughs before adding, "Make him jealous."

"Why would you want to do that?"

Grasping my chin, his gray eyes lock on mine. "I want whatever puts that mouth back on mine." He rubs his thumb over my bottom lip before releasing me altogether and climbing out of his car. Rounding the hood, he comes

around to open my door. "Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, Ellis. We have a deal." I step away from the car as he closes the door behind me, and we enter the club. *Shit.*

I don't know what to think about my relationship with Ellis. Since day one, he's worked his sexy voodoo on me. The man can get me to do anything with those pouty lips and his smoldering gaze that's always on. I mean, hell, I work at a sex club and live with him because he said so. Now, here I am, saying yes to letting him put his mouth on me. Ellis grew up poor, needing to learn street skills from a young age. He learned earlier than most how to read people's emotions and play on them. Now that my head is starting to come out of my own ass, I can see that is what he's been doing with me from day one. But for as much as I want to be mad at him, I can't. For one, I've used him, but the more significant part is I'm not convinced he realizes he's doing it. It's just how his mind works.



I've been behind the bar for three hours, and there's still no sign of Mason. In the office earlier, I could have sworn I saw more in his scorned look, maybe jealousy, but now I'm not so sure. Now I believe I was only seeing things I wished were there. Before the idea has time to marinate, I turn around to grab a mixer, and his ocean-blue eyes collide with mine, pulling me in deep.

No words are exchanged for what feels like a short eternity, and his eyes and presence endorse what I felt back at the office. This is more. As I'm about to ask him what he'd like to drink, Hailey comes up behind him, running her hand up his back. For a brief second, I'm jealous. The rules he gave me were no touching and no kissing. But when his spine straightens, and his head slightly turns to see who's joined him, I watch as she quickly pulls her hand away, confirming the rule also applies to her. Saddled up to the side of the bar, she sets her tray on top and says, "He'll have a whiskey double." Then, leaning into him, she adds, "Room thirteen will be ready in ten minutes."

Immediately I start making his drink so that the disappointment I feel doesn't register on my face. I avoid his eyes when I turn around to pour his drink, keeping my head downcast. Setting a coaster on the counter, I slide his glass forward, but his fingers wrap around mine. "Thirty minutes, room five."

I don't know which emotion I feel more—anger or offense from the fact that he thinks I would want to touch him after he fucked another girl. But it gives me the moxie I need to get over my pity party for a man who doesn't know I exist outside of a quick fuck. Here I was entertaining the idea that he showed up for me, but he already had Hailey lined up.

Meeting his eyes, I make sure there's no mistaking my disgust. "No, thanks. I sampled the goods, and once was enough."

Then, as I pull my hand back, he grabs my wrist, "Don't fucking lie to me. You loved every fucking inch."

"If that were the case, you'd have me in the light instead of her in the dark." I don't know if he catches the double meaning of the words. Maybe he doesn't now, but I'm hopeful he will later. He had a chance all week to talk to me, and he didn't, and then he came here tonight and booked a room with Hailey. Sure, he thinks I'm engaged, but that didn't stop him Wednesday.

Room thirteen is a darker room geared towards BDSM fetishes, complete with a swing and a St. Andrew's Cross. Yes, I hacked into the club's system over the weekend to check him out. How could I not? I know what room he likes to get. It's always the same, room thirteen. That room makes sense for the man sitting before me now. He wants to hold all the power and control the situation; however, a good Dom knows the importance of understanding the emotional responsibility that role carries in creating a safe place with their partners, and from my experience, he doesn't. All he knows is hurt. He's not using that room to be a Dom; he's using it not to feel, and Hailey is apparently okay with it.

Rubbing his jaw, he bites out, "That's what you want?"

I don't even finish processing that Mason just asked me what I want because Ellis wraps his arms around my waist and kisses my neck from behind. "I know I'm breaking the rules, but I'm the owner, so fuck it." He spins me in his arms and grips my ass hard as he crushes his lips to mine. Parting my lips, his tongue dives in. I grab onto his suit jacket to keep myself upright. His hunger is hypnotizing. The longer he takes, the more I realize his kiss is more than desire. It's jealousy. He may have said he wanted me to use him, but he wanted to claim me. When I hear a glass hit the granite bar top louder than necessary, I pull back on our kiss. Ellis places one last closed-mouth kiss on my lips before adding, "He's gone."



I got into the office extra early today to clean out my desk. There is no way I can continue to work at Lark. I'm torturing myself. Last night was a prime example. I can't keep my feelings for Mason separate from the club, from the office, or from his rules. I want more, and he's not capable of giving it. I've just finished cleaning out the mini fridge when I round the corner and find Mason staring at the box on my desk.

"What is this?" He points to the box on top of my desk.

"Those are my things. I think it's obvious this isn't going to work out."

When his eyes snap to mine, he purses his lips before asking, "Is this because I got a room with Hailey?"

I stand there and blankly stare at him because just when I think I've figured him out, he goes and says shit like this. "Is this you acknowledging that I exist outside of the club?"

"Of course, I know you exist outside of the club. But there are rules."

I set down my green juice and coffee creamer before bringing my hands to my hips and saying, "Really? Rules. That's what you're going with to explain your behavior?"

He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose before saying, "Lennox, this right here is why I play by the rules. If you want to quit, go ahead, but I'm not asking you to." He holds my eyes for a brief second before continuing into his office. I stare after him long after he's closed his door, trying to determine how I feel about everything that's transpired.

While I know Mason isn't the same guy I once knew, he keeps giving me glimpses of the man I thought he'd be, the boy I once loved—or, at least, that's what my young heart thought, even if it was wrong. I know why I ran then. I don't have to run now. If I run now, it's because I'm too scared to take what I've always wanted.

At some point, I finally snap out of my daze and decide to put my coffee creamer and green juice back in the fridge. Mason is not pushing me away; my two-week probation came and went, and I'm still here. I don't know what he wants from me, but in some twisted way, I believe he just asked me to stay.

Taking a seat at my desk, I put the box I packed underneath and turn on my computer. I'm not fully committed to staying. I need to talk to Christopher first. Immediately, I pull up my email and send a note saying I want to meet for lunch downstairs in the cafeteria.

I've wanted to talk to Christopher for the past week. He and Mason are

somewhat close inside the workplace. From what I can tell, Mason works too much to have any relationships outside of Lark. Which is why I was surprised when he said Vivian was in town. I wonder if she gets the old Mason or the version I get. Because he has hidden in the office since she arrived, there's a good chance it's the latter. Yet another reason I need to meet with Christopher.

In the past, when I've directly asked him about Mason, he would side step. I'm hoping I can corner him with a casual lunch to catch up. He's literally been MIA since Mason has been in the office. It's also one of the reasons I have yet to reach out personally. I consider Chris to be a friend, or I thought I did. Over the past two months, he and I bonded, but because I know I've led somewhat of a sheltered life regarding social norms, I've been rethinking our entire dynamic, which has me feeling uneasy.

While I may have been too distracted or, better yet, too comfortable to notice who I was working for, my eyes are now fully open. I haven't had to think about my identity in a while. When William died, I felt like my need to hide died, and that's how I wound up here. I got comfortable, let my guard down, and walked straight into my past. Although I might be choosing to stay to see if there can be more, I'm not the naive, impressionable girl starving for attention that I once was, and I'd like to avoid being played, and not just by Mason.

Christopher has been grooming me for this role, and in the beginning, it felt like training, but now that I'm here, it feels more like deception. I looked into the records at Covet, and Christopher is not a member as I assumed, meaning he paid a hefty cover charge to sit at my bar over the past few months and chat me up before suddenly having an opening at Lark. While Mason doesn't frequent the first floor and chooses the more exclusive part of the club where discretion is literally written into the rules, there is no doubt in my mind Chris had to have weighed the chances that we could run into each other. My gut tells me I was set up.



The morning went by super-fast. I'm not sure if it's from my nerves or the fact that Mason has kept me more than busy. While he hasn't left his office, he had me working on web analytics all morning looking at traffic and

hits on the company's website and researching situations where the software misinterpreted things. The task has been daunting, to say the least. We get hundreds of hits a day, and he feels that a small percentage of those hits are competitors or his next hacker. He likes to review the list to identify patterns. It's clear this is something he does on a regular basis. One thing I've learned is Mason is obsessed with his firewalls which is how I know the task he gave me today is one I'm sure he has already streamlined. In fact I'm almost positive there's an entire department that handles every task he's given me today. He didn't just come up with this spur-of-the-moment. This project was a test to see if I really wanted to stay. To see if I can deal. I contemplated sending him an email that read: stop fucking with me. In fact, I typed it up more than once but thought better of it. He's trying to get a rise out of me, but I'm not ready to give him one.

When the doors to the lobby open, Chris is there standing by the fountain, texting away on his personal phone. I make my way over to meet him and tap his shoulder when I arrive. "Holy fuck!" He screeches. "You scared the shit out of me."

His reaction catches me off guard for two reasons. One: we are in the lobby. People are coming and going all around us, which brings me to number two: guilt. He's startled because he's hiding something. Chris knew I was coming. My presence shouldn't have set him off. We've all been there, caught off guard talking about someone when that certain person suddenly appears. That's what this moment feels like.

Tucking his personal phone back into his suit pocket, he asks, "Are we staying or going?"

"We're staying. You should know I can't leave when he's here." That's not true. Mason has never said I can't leave, but this lunch is going to be filled with a lot of bullshit. I'm trying to get him to slip up and shed some more light on his truth for hiring me.

"What happened yesterday after I was 'dismissed'?" He uses air quotes, referring to when Mason told him to leave. "I texted you last night, but you never got back to me." Christopher did reach out last night, and that's precisely when things started to click into place for me. He didn't do what the Chris I've known for the past few months would have done, which would have been to shoot me a text immediately after leaving the office. Had he done that, I may never have called his intentions into question. When something crazy arises, you send your friend a text immediately saying, 'Oh

my god, let me know what happens.' That is not at all what occurred.

After the show Ellis and I gave Mason at the bar, Ellis told me to go home. I put up zero fight, especially once I confirmed Mason did indeed take Hailey into room thirteen. Right as I was getting in my Uber to go home is when I received a text from Chris saying, "Please tell me you still work at Lark." Instantly, my body broke out in goosebumps like I was being watched.

The timing of that text could have been purely coincidental, but for it to come through while I was leaving my shift early and Mason was still inside felt somewhat chilling. I went ahead and did a background check on Chris, something I haven't done in a long time, mostly because I haven't had anyone close enough to need one, but it came back inconclusive. The reason I say that is because there was nothing out of the norm; however, if someone wants to disappear or is smart enough to know how to falsify an identity as well as their virtual stamp, they would work at Lark.

"Well, I'm still here. For now, anyway." I don't give him more than that because I want to see what conclusions he draws, but as we continue on our way to the cafeteria, he gives me nothing—which is new. Since I started here, and even before, when he would frequent the bar at the club, there's never been a dull moment. Heck, it's half the reason I took the job. Chris makes me laugh. Granted, he takes his job seriously, but he always finds a way to sneak a wisecrack in there somewhere.

"What do you want to eat today?" We pause at the entrance and take a look around. The building shares a cafeteria with two other tech companies that all encourage their employees to take breaks often, meet in social settings, and work in shared areas. The majority of employees at Lark do not have assigned desks. They come in and sit wherever they want. There are sit-to-stand desks and large sofas with ample charging stations, and depending on what office zone you enter, the décor, lighting, and vibe are completely different. It's meant to inspire creativity and serve to benefit the employee. It's the same concept of how not everyone learns the same; well, not everyone works the same. Some people need quiet, serenity, and calm, while others like the noise and thrive off of it.

"The salad bar line is way too long, and I'm not in the mood for a hot lunch. How about a sub sandwich?"

He shrugs, "Nothing really sounds good to me today, so that's fine."

Making our way to the sub line, I ask, "So what have you been up to? I feel like I haven't seen you in a while." We are standing side by side, looking

up at the menu board, so I'm sure he doesn't notice that I catch him rubbing the scruff on his face. I wouldn't call it a nervous tick exactly, but it's something he does when he thinks. My question is not at all perplexing, meaning he's either really focused on ordering a sandwich or trying to come up with something to say.

"When Mason is in the office, we are all more than busy. You should know that by now." And there it is. The slip I was waiting for. I haven't spoken to Chris about knowing Mason's true identity. When he sat in my office yesterday, he still referred to him as Maryk. Bringing his fist to his mouth, he bites it before saying, "You're a smart girl. You've surely figured out who he really is, haven't you?"

Great, my plan was to keep talking as if I didn't catch his mistake, but now he's calling me to the plate. That's when I lie and hope it doesn't come back to bite me in the ass later. "Yeah, he told me." His eyebrows shoot up in surprise as the cashier asks him for his order.

Making our way to a table, he says, "You're tech-savvy. Were you familiar with Croft Technologies prior to coming here?" Now, that question somewhat throws me off because his tone sounds genuinely curious and not in a conniving type of way.

"Yes, I'd heard of Croft Tech. Hello, I'm a computer science major. I researched every tech company in Silicon Valley to find the best fit."

Taking a huge bite of his sub, he nods while pondering my words. At this point, I'm not sure how to decipher Chris's sudden personality swing. Whatever is going on could be completely unrelated to me, but it's doubtful, so I decide to go straight for the kill.

"Did you hire me to fuck Mason?"

His eyes bug out, and he chokes on his sub sandwich before reaching for his bottle of water. "What?" He coughs out. "Did you really just ask me that?"

"I did, and I don't think your reaction is because you're surprised. I think it's because you got caught." His eyes stay on mine as he guzzles water to recover from his choking episode, and I see it. There is no doubt that's exactly what he did. "Did you think because I worked at a sex club, I'd be a sure thing?"

"Lenny, hold on, wait a minute. You can't just throw out these ludicrous accusations and not let me speak."

I wave my hand in front of me and say, "I'm all ears," before resting my

chin atop my fist.

"Did I hire you because you were a woman? Yes. Do I know Mason's type? Yes. Did I specifically seek you out for selfish reasons? Again, yes, but hear me out: I've had to find eight Executive Assistants in just this year alone, and it's only June. The more I got to know you, the more I saw an opportunity and—"

I hold up my hand to stop him. "What opportunity?"

He shrugs meekly before saying, "Look, I swear I think you're qualified for the position, but I was hoping he'd notice you. Mason needs a distraction. He's constantly working, and while I admire his work ethic and respect what he's built, he's more than just a boss. The day I met you at the club, I wasn't looking for you. I was there to meet another woman, but you fell into my lap. Red hair, brown eyes, petite frame, and then you mentioned your major. Put yourself in my shoes for a second. You're a home run."

"So, you're telling me that you hired me to date Mason?"

He sits back and shakes his head. "Not exactly. I can't make two people like each other, but I was trying to set things in motion. I've worked for Mason since he expanded Croft Tech, now Lark, to the West Coast. The man doesn't date. He doesn't talk about his past or his family. Hell, anything personal he avoids. All I have are assumptions, and I've concluded he requires what he doesn't think he needs—a woman."

I walked into this lunch on edge, thinking the worst of Christopher because of my own past. I've lived a double life and shut people out for so long that I immediately assumed the worst. Some of the unease that settled over me eases up as I let my eyes roam over his regretful form. He truly looks just as displeased with himself as I am.

"Do you have more to add? You look like you might be sick."

He blows out a breath before resting his elbows on the table and dropping his head into his hands. "No, that's it. But the weight of everything over the past two weeks got to me. That's why I went MIA. I feel terrible, Lenny. We've grown close over the past few months, even more so since you started working here, and I know how important this job is to you. Shit got real when Mason put you on the two-week probationary period. Clearly, I didn't think all this out very well—or maybe I did, and at the time, I just didn't care, but when I saw how he treated you, it made me feel like an ass because I put you in that position. I set you up." His head snaps up, and he adds, "If he fires you, I'll help you get another job. I swear it."

If he had shown up in my office this morning before Mason had, I would have held him to it and left, but now I'm convinced that nobody really knows the man behind the suit upstairs.

CHAPTER 6

"THE ESSENCE OF LYING IS IN DECEPTION, NOT IN WORDS."

- *John Ruskin*



MASON

I've been on this call with Paris for the past hour, discussing building permits, occupancy limits, and terms. These are the types of calls I was hoping to start passing off to Lenny before he not only turned into a woman, but one I can't decide from one second to the next if I want to fire or fuck. Of course, nothing can ever be as it seems. The second I let my guard down, I get slapped in the face with reality. I trusted Christopher to hire someone capable, and while he did do that, he broke one of my most important rules: no women.

I'll admit, I don't pay much attention to women outside the club. While I love to fuck, I don't need distractions or complications, and that's all they are. Lennox is the exact reason I stand by my rules. At the club, it's about hooking up. I need to get my dick wet, but that's it. You get in and get out and go about your life with zero commitments or added anxiety that even the most platonic relationship is guaranteed to bring. Hell, my longest relationship, if you could even call it that, was platonic. The most I got with her was copping a feel under her shirt and dry humping her into my mattress. But I can't blame that all on the girl. Gianna deserved more than the tainted, fucked up shit I had living in my head. That's why I never crossed the line instead choosing to hookup when she wasn't around. I never wanted to hurt her.

She was my rock. We both had our demons; I just never shared how dark mine were. I liked the person she believed me to be. It made me think I could be that man. After nine years of friendship, I was finally ready to try, but it was too late. August Branson swooped in and stole her away, or at least that's how I saw it for the longest time. I no longer feel that way because I know I'm the one to blame, but I still haven't let it go. Gianna did nothing but love me, and I never accepted it because I didn't feel worthy.

What does that say about me when I let the best parts of me walk away? The part of me that made me want to be a better man. In the depth of my soul, I know why I did it, but the truth is dirty and despicable. No matter how many women I have, I've never been able to get past the darkness that lives deep inside. And because I can't get rid of it, I'll live with it alone.

"Knock, knock." Lennox inches my office door open and pops her head in. I glance at my clock and see that it's almost 9:00 pm. Taking my glasses

off, I pinch the bridge of my nose and gesture for her to come in. I should have fired her on the spot two weeks ago, or hell, even last Friday once her two-week probation I set was up, but I couldn't. Not after I'd had her. I'm well aware that I am fucked up. But I haven't pretended to be anyone other than who I am. The woman in front of me can't say the same. She has secrets, and I'm intrigued. Her skeletons call to mine. I can feel it every time we are in the same room. She was ready to leave, but she didn't. She wants to play, and I'll be damned if I don't want another taste.

When she moves to sit in the chair in front of my desk. I tsk and gesture with my index finger for her to come around my desk. She's more than pissed me off over the past 24 hours. First, her fiancé comes to pick her up from my office—a fiancé I'm not buying for one second. *What engaged man with loads of money doesn't buy his woman a car?* Then, to top it off, she not only bold-faced lied to me about not wanting my cock at the club, she fucking rubbed her situationship in my face.

Her eyes find mine as her fists clench at her sides. When she hesitates, I bring my finger down on the top of my desk, reiterating where I want her. She wore the perfect attire for what I have planned. It's a slim-fitted heather grey sweater dress with a deep-v that is borderline too revealing. The dress hugs every damn curve on her body, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't have her office cam pulled up all day. Every time she got up from her desk, I wanted to go in there and bend her over. Once she's beside my chair, I scoot back and gesture toward the edge of my desk.

"You want me to sit on top of it?" She questions softly. I nod and watch as she slowly lifts her right hip to set her ass on its top and slide back.

"Louis, can you make sure to go over occupancy and zoning with the committee for approval? This is the last thing we need to discuss this evening." Bringing my chair forward, I rest my hands on her knees before skirting my finger underneath the hem of her dress. Her skin immediately prickles, and her spine straightens from my touch, but she doesn't move. "Yes, Louis, if you don't mind clarifying occupancy as it relates to non-permanent employees."

She raises a brow in surprise at my English response to a call taking place in French. I point to the pilot translator in my ear before bringing my hand back to her thigh, where I slowly start kneading my way up, meeting no resistance as I continue to listen to the call. My eyes haven't left hers, and I can tell her breathing has become shallow as her nerves take over. If she

didn't want this, she would have quit this morning.

"No, Louis, we don't need to add any provisions for the parties involved." When I reach the apex of her thighs, I can't help but hiss out my own pleasure as I run my finger up the center of her silk panties, finding them deliciously wet. My god. I swear the woman is always ready for me, which only further pisses me off because I can't have her. No, tonight's a lesson. Muting the call, I say, "This pussy is pretty fucking wet for someone who doesn't want to ride my cock."

When she doesn't respond and chooses to bite her lip instead, I continue to tease, slipping my finger under her panty line but going no further. Until finally, she speaks. "What's it going to take to get you to pull those panties to the side?" That was not the comment I was expecting, and fuck me, if it doesn't take every ounce of control I have not to ram my fingers deep from her request.

"I told you. There are rules, and I'm already breaking more than enough for you." Dragging my index finger over the center of her panties once more, I draw out the torment. However, it's as much torture for her as it is for me. A bead of cum leaks from my dick when I feel the fullness and heat of her lips. She's swollen and ready.

"What rule have you broken?" Her voice is husky, and her eyes are lidded as I don't let up on my slow strokes down her center.

"I don't hire women, yet here you are sitting on my desk."

"That sounds more like a preference than a rule." I press my thumb hard against her clit, making her jump. Her pretty pink lips part as she moans and says, "Please, Mace. No one has to know."

There it is again, that nickname. One that friends from what feels like another life called me. But the way she says it, only one person has ever said it that way. It's in the way she enunciates the letter 'a.' She draws it out in a way that's more East Coast for a girl that was supposedly born and raised in California. I try to push down the ache that the familiarity in her tone brings, but my frustration only rises.

I'm only supposed to want her behind closed doors at the club, where what we do is a transaction. I'm not supposed to want this, and I'm definitely not supposed to have feelings about being her secret. Pulling my hand away, I lean back in my chair and rub my chin in frustration before responding to my call.

"Louis, I need you to handle inspections next week. Unfortunately, I will

not be able to make it out that way for another two weeks." I thin my lips in irritation and hold my tongue as I try to calm my urge to demand that she leave for making me feel anything. But as I keep my eyes downcast and off of hers, the faintest of scars on her upper thigh catches my eye. One I couldn't have noticed in the light of the club. It's only just barely visible now because her dress is hiked, and its whiteness contrasted against her olive skin catches in the light from the lamp she's sitting next to on my desk.

My palms instantly start to sweat as my ears begin to ring. I close my eyes and try to rein in the absurd thoughts that threaten to steal my sanity. There is no way the woman sitting before me on my desk is the same girl I spent the past ten years searching for. But just as I'm about to reconsider taking pills to help me sleep in fear that my ability to rationalize is in serious jeopardy, her request from the other night slaps me in the face. When I asked her to dance naked for me, her stipulation was leaving her shorts on. That detail, coupled with this scar and the way she calls me Mace send my heart racing. I want to call her out, but I can't. *If she is the girl from my past, why is she hiding?*

"Why do I feel like you're someone who enjoys breaking the rules?"

Those words from her lips now feel like a spiteful blow. One only she could deliver. If I'm right, and she is the girl from my past, then she fucking knows just how accurate that statement is. It's the bane of my existence, but damn it if I don't want to break the rules for her. My eyes are still pinned to her thighs when she reads the torment on my face as an invitation. Spreading her legs wide, she hikes her dress up further, slowly raking her hand up her thigh. I clench my jaw to keep my smart, unsure tongue at bay as she teases me.

She knows exactly what she's doing, and I'll be damned if having a perfect view of that pretty pussy doesn't make me want to break. But now that I have a semi-solid lead of what I'm dealing with, I'm going to give her a taste of her own medicine. I have to be right. Her reaction at the club the first night we met, the tremble in her hand when she delivered my drink, her shocked expression and the nerves she battled during my dance. It all makes sense, she wasn't expecting me. It had nothing to do with the nature of the club, it was me. But it's clear she wants to play now, and I'm in. After all, lies are what she and I have always been good at.

"Are you saying I should risk getting kicked out of the club and pay a steep fine for a quick fuck from a woman engaged to another man?"

My comment doesn't faze her. She doesn't relent. When her hand reaches the apex of her thighs, she pulls her panties to the side and runs her middle finger through her wet folds before asking, "Are you suggesting I quit to work for a man who wanted to fire me last week?" Her eyes start to close as she holds my gaze before throwing her head back on a moan, and that's when I look down and see she dipped her fingers in. *Fuck.*

I'm instantly out of my seat and on her. Stealing her wrist, I drag it away, and bring her hand to my mouth before sucking on her fingers. Her chest is heaving, and her eyes are heavy when she says, "Touch me."

She reaches for the zipper of my pants, and I tsk before reminding her, "No touching." That's the last thing I need her doing right now. I want everything from this woman, but I'm fucking pissed that she's hiding from me. Even if she's not the girl who disappeared, I know she's lying to me, and for that she'll pay. She's not going to get me tonight. No, tonight she's going to get the ache she gave, and not just for teasing me at the club last night, but for every truth she continues to hide.

Finally, the call I've been on for the past hour starts to wrap up, and I hear the men clicking off. Not bothering with a goodbye, I immediately hang up. Bending down, I kiss her neck and inhale her musky mandarin scent. It's fucking divine. When I reach her collarbone, I leave an open-mouthed kiss before bringing my eyes back to hers. "Give me a truth, and I'll consider it."

"I didn't want to quit this morning." I quirk a brow at her as I let my finger slowly start to drift down her chest until I reach the deep-v of her dress, where I stop. Then, holding her gaze, I wait for her to continue, because we both know that's not a truth I don't already know. I'm certain her show this morning was because I got a room with Hailey last night. But I wasn't about to watch her let another man put his mouth on her and just take it. Last night she wanted to play. So, I did.

When I showed up to the club, I went straight to the bar in search of her. I didn't request a room with Hailey. She set it up per usual when she saw me enter the club, and after Lennox's little show, there was no way I was passing it up. However, my usual with Hailey didn't go to plan. As I watched her head bobbing up and down on my dick all I could feel was anger. She wasn't the girl I wanted, and I hated that I didn't want to stay, that I couldn't take my mind off Lennox.

I avoided my office last week for the same reasons. I don't let pussy steal my focus, yet here I am, breaking my rules and fiending for another taste.

When she refuses to give me more, I say, "Try again."

I let my hand fall down her torso as a breathy, "What?" falls from her lips.

"Tell me a truth I don't already know." I want the truths that I know are deep within her soul, but I'll settle for whatever game this is now. I'm not convinced my sleep deprivation isn't catching up with me, or the fact that I haven't been able to break her squeaky-clean past isn't messing with my mind. I could very well be trying to make her into someone she is not. Someone with a black soul that matches mine. But damn if I don't want her to be.

Her dress is already hiked up, her legs are spread from when she dared to tease me, so when I reach her pussy it's nothing for me to pull her thong to the side and run my middle finger through her soft, soaked lips. I can't help but bite my lip hard as my strained cock twitches against the zipper of my pants. *Fuck I want to be inside her.*

Those big brown eyes, the wrong eyes, meet my penetrating gaze. My girl had the palest blue eyes I'd ever seen, and I can't help but wonder if they're behind the shade that's staring back at me now. Her eyes lull shut with a mix of lust and unease, and I know she's hesitating. Slowly, I start to circle her opening to bring her thoughts back to me and the pleasure she wants me to give. When her eyes finally open, she pins me with a glare that I know holds one truth I want to hear. "I'm not engaged." I instantly shove two fingers in hard, making her cry out, "Fuck yes."

My god, I want to take her mouth. I haven't wanted my lips on a woman's mouth in years, but I also want to feel every one of those delicious sounds vibrate throughout my core as I ring the pleasure out of her body. But I shove that desire down deep, instead opting to bring my mouth back to her pretty neck. I lick my way from the base up to her ear, where I suck her lobe into my mouth while applying pressure with my thumb to her sweet little ball of nerves.

The longer I give her what she wants, the angrier I get. Not only am I bending my rules for her, but she also just admitted to lying to me. And what's more, I feel it in the depths of my soul that she's hiding so much more. When her pussy starts to clench, I curl my fingers, bringing her to the brink of orgasm before pulling out.

She whimpers from the loss of my touch, and a part of my chest I didn't know could feel anymore tightens. I want to give her what she wants over

and over, but I don't trust her. The girl I knew wouldn't play me like this. But I've always been attracted to things I shouldn't want or can't have. My head is still nestled in the crook of her neck when I say, "Don't fucking lie to me again."

When she nods her agreement against my chest, I hold her for seconds longer than I should before collecting myself and stepping away. Standing before her, I straighten my tie and collect my phone and keys before adding, "Lose the ring. I don't want to see it again." I don't miss the annoyance written all over her face. If the roles were reversed, I'd be just as pissed. This is the second time I've withheld pleasure from her. I don't want to leave her the same way I did at the club, even though it's what feels the most natural to me, so, I ask, "Do you have a ride home?"

She doesn't give me her words but nods that she does, and while I hate the idea of her riding home with another man, I also know she lives with him, and that's not something I care to deal with right now. When she starts to pull her dress down, I give her privacy and make my way toward the door to leave. With my hand on the knob, I say, "And Princess, don't give me any more reasons not to give you what you want."

I purposefully don't call her Lennox. I can't. Not when I think I know who she really is. Without another word, I throw open the door and take my leave before she has a chance to reply.



"Mason, it's 11:00 pm. I know you've been avoiding me since I got into town. What the hell is going on?" *Damn it.* I pull in a deep breath before turning to face Vivian. *What are friends for if not to call you on your shit?* But this right now is the last thing I care to do. It's been a shitty three weeks since I returned from Paris to find out my new Executive Assistant was a woman. One that now consumes my every other thought, and after tonight she will undoubtedly haunt any slumber I do find.

"Hello, Earth to Mason. Are you even listening to me?"

My lungs deflate as I try to let go of all the pent-up frustration I've been carrying around. "Yes, I heard you." She's sitting on the sofa in my living room reading a book, which means she has clearly waited up for me. That tells me I need a fucking drink. I don't even give her my eyes as I make a bee-

line for the kitchen.

My penthouse is an open-concept floor plan for the most part. The living room, kitchen, and formal dining area are all open to each other, but I had walls erected for my office and library. There are some rooms that I need private and others that I pull tranquility from. Being alone with nothing but four walls to keep me company is typically the most peace I find in a day.

As expected, Vivian follows suit right behind me. "Would you like a glass of wine?" Typically, I go straight for the hard stuff, but it's Friday night, and I don't need any bad decision whiskey taking my ass to the club.

"If you're having red, yes."

I pour us a glass of vintage Chateau Lafite before leaning against the counter and waiting for her to start. Surprisingly she doesn't; instead, she just stares at me as we drink our wine. This means I either really fucked up or—

"You know what your problem is?" Here we go. "You need a girlfriend, Mason, or at least a woman, and not just one for a quick fuck." I can't help but shake my head and take another drink. "No, I'm serious. All you do is work. Obviously, you're not happy, Mason, and I know you're not stupid enough to think that Gigi didn't tell me about what happened in January." *Fuck.*

My January incident is the last thing I care to talk about, so I ignore it and jab her right back. "Why are you free to be single, but if I don't have a woman, it's the end of the world? When was the last time you had a steady boyfriend?"

She scoffs, "Please..."

And I murmur, "That's what I thought," before heading toward the living room.

"Fine, you want to know the difference, Mason? It's simple. You are relationship material. Don't think I don't know your dreams, Mace. I was there too, and—"

I cut her off before she can continue. "No, Vivian, you and Gianna saw what you wanted to see. What I let you see. You never saw the real me." It's true the real me is disgusting, and what's fucked up is I've never felt more alive than in the moments I was tarnishing my soul for eternity.

"That's one way of looking at it, or you just don't want to accept the man you truly are. You can't push people away forever, Mason. I'm not stupid enough to believe that whatever is going on in that tormented heart of yours is because of Gianna. She was a catalyst, but she wasn't the cause." I pull my

eyes off the floor to find Vivian's peering deep into my soul, and my skin prickles from how exposed I suddenly feel. While I know she doesn't know my secret, she's close enough to see my ruse. She doesn't miss my vulnerability and moves to sit next to me on the couch. Placing her hand on my back, she says, "It's been a rough year, Mason. I get that. Stop bottling everything up inside. You have people who care about you. The cycle has to stop somewhere."

I don't give her any words as I stare at the flickering candle in the coffee table's center. She's right about my dreams and the cycle. My problem is I started this cycle because I don't deserve the dreams and can't have the ones I want. Vivian misinterprets my silence by adding, "I saw your mom the other day, and she asked about you?"

"Vivi, I don't want to talk about my mother. Can we not go there?" This time, I lean back into the sofa and close my eyes as I rest my head on the back. My mother and I were never really close. After my father left her, she spent all her spare time with her boyfriends. As an only child, that left me alone more than not. My dad poured his time into his work, and my mother was absent. She has my number and doesn't use it. Her passing mention of me to Vivian was a way for her to save face and act like she cares. I will say, her lack of interest in me and my wealth has been surprising. She knew she wouldn't get a cent out of my dad, but it doesn't go unnoticed that she hasn't tried to leech onto me.

I feel Vivi shift on the couch next to me and briefly open my eyes to find her sitting the same as me. "Maybe I should date you."

My words don't even faze her. She knows they are bullshit, but it could make sense. Before I can give it any more thought, she says, "Don't waste any more time putting another ounce of that brilliant mind into that last thought. There will never be a you and me. Period."

I can't help but feel somewhat offended. Rolling onto my side, I prop my head up on my arm and ask, "Remind me why I'm not good enough for you."

She snorts but doesn't make a motion to move, instead remaining stretched out with her eyes closed. "Oh, Mason, where should I start? You held the key to my best friend's heart for almost a decade; that's number one, but beyond that, it is mainly because you're just not my type."

I wait to see if she's going to elaborate, and when she doesn't, I swat her stomach and say, "You don't get to leave the conversation on that note. Give it up."

Sitting up, she says, "Fine; while those deep blue eyes of yours are enough to make any girl go weak in the knees, I don't think we're into the same kinks."

"Fuck no, you didn't just say that. What the hell kind of freaky shit are you into?" She laughs, but I add, "I doubt there's something you like that I wouldn't be willing to give."

Turning, she raises a brow before saying, "I'm pretty sure you would demand monogamy from any partner you have."

I purse my lips as I go over her words. "Are you saying you like other people to join in?"

Laughing, she shakes her head and returns to the kitchen, saying, "It's more than just that. Lately, it has been threesomes, yes, but mainly because I haven't found someone who wants what I want."

"And what exactly is that?" I ask, still not sure I'm following.

"I like to swing." She says as if it's no big deal, and I suppose it's not. Everyone likes what they like, and lord knows I am not one to throw stones. But it's just not what I expected to hear from my best friend's mouth. I would never have predicted that was what she was into, but hey, to each their own. She's right, though. I couldn't swing with someone I was with. Hell, I'm not even with Lennox, and half the reason I'm irritated every day is that I know she goes home to another man. *Fuck*. I pinch the bridge of my nose in irritation from the thought alone.

"Does that repulse you?"

Releasing my nose, I open my eyes. "What?" Vivian is staring at me with the bottle in hand. "No, I'm not repulsed. The idea is intriguing, but you're right. It's not for me."

Tucking her leg under her, she sits with her topped-off glass. "So, what put that pained expression on your face?"

Reaching for the bottle, I refill my glass before saying, "A woman."

"Thank fuck! Spill."

CHAPTER 7

"I TRUSTED YOU, BUT NOW YOUR WORDS MEAN NOTHING BECAUSE
YOUR ACTIONS SPOKE THE TRUTH."

-Anonymous



LENNOX

"Knox," Ellis calls before opening my bedroom door to come in. It's Saturday morning, and I'm tired as hell. I pull my pillow over my head to block him out. He knows I like to sleep in on weekends. When I feel the bed dip beside me, I groan loudly to ensure there is no mistaking my irritation with his wake-up call. "Hey, come on, get up. You said you'd come with me today, remember?" *Shit*. That's right. He asked me earlier in the week to come with him to his partner's estate for a BBQ.

Ellis is estranged from his parents. The only person he still talks to is his younger brother Sebastian, who runs a Vegas club for his partner Nico. After his brother, Milo, overdosed, Ellis took Sebastian and left. He had five thousand dollars saved up and hidden away in the woods from odd jobs he worked as soon as he was old enough to start working. Before he was fifteen, he would try to earn money doing chores, mowing grass, walking pets, and anything to make a few bucks. Most of the time, he couldn't save because he had to use the money to feed himself and his brother since his parents were too high, but the second Ellis graduated, he ran.

Ellis bought two bus tickets to California, and they never looked back. Sebastian was happy to go with him. After securing a residence in a dilapidated trailer that he convinced a park owner to let them stay in, he started working three jobs. That's how he ran into Nico. Ellis was working as a busboy at a local diner outside San Jose. His clothes were dirty, and his shoes were all but worn through. He looked the epitome of poor. Ellis was working the closing shift at Gia's Diner when he found a leather wallet in the booth. It was loaded with hundred-dollar bills. He said he wanted to put the money in his pocket and throw away the wallet. He felt it was somehow owed to him for the shit life he'd been dealt. But the longer he stood holding the wallet, the uglier he felt. Ellis said a true test of character is what you do when no one else is looking. He came to California to make a better life and be better. Taking that money wasn't the way to start.

The wallet had a few business cards from the same person, so he picked up the diner's phone and called the number on one of the cards to inform the man he had left his wallet. Apparently, the man had been sitting in his car the entire time, watching to see what Ellis would do. When he came into the

diner to collect it, he offered him a job. Ellis was shocked by his offer, and when he asked why he would do that for a stranger, his reply was, 'Loyalty cannot be taught. It's innate. You have it, or you don't.' The rest is history.

"Knox, please," he draws out as I roll over onto my stomach.

"I'm going to get up. I really am. Just five more minutes." My sheets are twisted around my torso as I let one leg hang out to balance my body heat. I like to sleep naked so I'm cold at night, and right now, I'm not ready to get out of my cocoon. Ellis finds my bare leg and slowly starts to drag his fingers up, making my skin prickle in their wake. Fucking morning sex sounds so damn good right now. I want to be touched. Mason hasn't touched me since Thursday night, and even then, he didn't let me come. What's that saying, "If he wanted to, he would?" Well, fuck that. Right now, I feel like if he won't, someone else will.

Ellis's hand reaches the edge of where the sheet meets my ass, and he toys with the fringe. When he doesn't meet any resistance, he dips his hand underneath and groans when it meets my bare cheek. He squeezes it hard, making me yelp, before removing it altogether to straddle me. I feel him press his erect cock against my ass as he brings his lips to my ear. "Are you going to let me put it in?" When he licks the shell of my ear, I tease him right back, pushing my ass into his erection, making him hiss. He grabs my hips and pulls me against his cock, hard, and it feels delicious. When I don't protest, he curses, "Fuck, Lennox. Stop playing with me." Letting go, he slaps my ass hard before climbing off my bed and leaving the room.

Here's the thing, though: the move he made just now was every bit of a taunt as mine. He wanted me to get up right when he told me to, and because I didn't, he was trying to get me to fly out of bed and start getting ready. It's his personality. I make him late, and he fucking hates it. A month ago, that flirting tactic would have worked. I would have jumped out of bed to avoid crossing any boundaries. The problem is, recently we've been blurring the lines. First with the kiss, then the cuddling, and now this. Reluctantly, I throw off my sheets and head to my bathroom to take a cold shower.



Ellis didn't give me any details about the BBQ, but considering Nico is Ellis's partner, I'm sure this BBQ isn't anything like the Midwest BBQs I

attended in another life. Going to an event like this makes me nervous. I don't do events. They put me in front of people. Working at the club also does that, but it feels different because I'm in disguise there. I wear my wig and paint my face with tons of makeup I don't usually have on. At functions like this, I'm forced to be me.

Walking out of my room, I look around, expecting to find Ellis standing by the island, furious that I'm five minutes late, but he's nowhere to be seen. "Ellis. Ellis, I'm ready." I call out but receive no answer. I pull out my phone just to double-check the time as I walk to the island, and, yep, five minutes late. "Ellis," I call out a little louder. Still nothing. Pursing my lips, I tap my fingers on the counter before deciding to take a walk to his room.

When I reach his door, I knock and say, "Ellis, I'm ready." I wait for him to respond, and when he doesn't, I get anxious. This isn't like him. Worry immediately floods my body, and I throw open the door. His room is immaculate, with not an article of clothing in sight, no wrinkles on the bed, and nothing set atop his dressers. I've never been in Ellis's room. I've stood at the doorway, but never stepped foot in. The door to his closet is propped open, so I make my way across his bedroom, and as I do, my senses are assaulted with his warm, earthy scent. The scent deliciously warms my insides. Reaching the closet, I slowly push it open, "Ellis?" Once the door is open, I find it's empty.

His closet is enormous, lined with expensive suits, shoes, and his man purses. In the middle is an island that I can't help but walk up to and run my hand across. The top is glass, and underneath is his costly Rolex collection. That's when I hear a noise that snaps my attention back to the task at hand: finding Ellis. Exiting the closet, I expect to see him in his room, but no, and that's when I hear the sound again, but this time there is no mistaking the sound that I heard. It's a moan of ecstasy, one that makes my insides clench. My immediate thought is to exit the room because I now know where Ellis is, and he's more than okay, but that doesn't stop my feet from taking me in the opposite direction.

My hand rests on the doorknob when I hear him hiss out, "Fuck." Slowly, I turn the knob, knowing this is the last damn thing I should be doing right now. I know exactly what I'll find when I open this door, and there will be a price to pay when I do, but I do it anyway. As the door swings open at an unhurried pace, my breath catches, and my nipples harden at the sight of Ellis in the shower, one hand resting on the clear glass and the other stroking his

cock.

The movement of the door swinging open catches his attention, and his eyes slowly find mine. His lust-filled gaze doesn't leave me as he strokes his length. Water ripples over his defined shoulders and down his chiseled chest, and I have to close my eyes to stave off my desire to rip my dress off and join him. I want him, but my heart wants someone else, and I don't want to use him, but just as I grab the door to back out, he echoes my thought. "Use me."

"Ellis..." My voice is barely a whisper out of my mouth, but he hears it all the same and pushes open the door to the shower. I step toward him, but stop in the middle of the room. This isn't a good idea. This will only end badly for both of us. When I stop, he steps out and closes the distance. Dripping wet, he puts his arm around my waist and pulls me tight against his wet body before taking my mouth. When he moves to part my lips, I let him take it. I want him to have it. I kiss him back with the same lust, want, and need that I've felt building inside me since I moved in. His hand trails down my arm until he reaches my hand, where he squeezes lightly before placing it on his hard cock. "Stroke me."

His velvety cock feels so delicious in my hand, and I can't help but do exactly as instructed, drawing out a heady groan from deep in his chest that vibrates throughout my body as he plunges his tongue deep. I tighten my grip and work him harder as his hand grabs the fabric of my dress and slowly bunches it up until my bare ass is on display. He palms my cheek and squeezes before slipping his finger under my thong and running his finger down its length between my cheeks.

"Babe, let me make you feel good," he says against my lips as I stroke him. I want that, but I don't. I don't give him an answer; instead, I pick up my pace, and when his breath hitches, I know he's close. Knowing he's close, I break away from his mouth and let my lips trail along his jaw until I reach his lobe, where I lightly bite down before sucking it into my mouth sending him over the edge. "Fuck." He rasps out as he continues to pump into my hand and loses himself.

The next thing I know, I'm hoisted up, and he sets me down on his vanity where I don't even have a chance to protest before he spreads my legs, pulls my thong to the side, and licks me up my center. *Shit*. God, it feels so good. His tongue spears my pussy as he greedily devours me. My hand flies to the back of his head and tangles in his hair. "Fuck, Ellis, don't stop."

He sucks my clit into his mouth and gently bites down, and I immediately

start to spasm. "Give it to me, Knox. Fuck, I want it." When he flattens his tongue against my pussy, the coarseness of his stubble assaults my lips, and that roughness, coupled with the way his tongue strokes me, sends me spiraling. I come hard, and he greedily laps it all up. I've been so fucking wound up all week. It's no surprise. When I stop spasming, he places one last kiss on my inner thigh before making his way up to my mouth. "You taste so fucking good, babe." He murmurs against my lips before plunging his tongue deep. Our tongues tangle, and I can't help the feeling of warmth that takes over. In my heart, I feel like Ellis could be mine. We could be good together, but just as the thought crosses my mind, so does another. I gave my heart away years ago.

Pulling back, his eyes meet mine, and he says, "I want more. So much more, but I need you to walk out of here and get changed, because I'm fully aware you're not ready for more, and we have somewhere we need to be."

"Ellis..." His name is a pinched plea off my lips.

"Don't, Knox. Just leave it." Leaning forward, I take his face in my hands and cover his mouth with my own. He doesn't move to hold me; instead, he remains stiff and cold, unwilling to feel, and I know it's because he is aware that he's not the one. I place one last closed-mouth kiss on his lips before scooting off the counter and exiting the bathroom. Ellis is everything I should want, and maybe if Mason hadn't shown up, he would be—but even as the thought comes, I know it's a lie.

It couldn't ever be anyone but him. It's always been him.



"I'm going to pull over and grab some cigars to take with us from Bristol's."

I pull myself out of the book I just opened and say, "Okay, do you want me to come in?"

He shrugs in response before asking, "Do you think we should bring wine too?"

I smile because when it comes to Nico, Ellis has a soft spot, a nervousness that he doesn't have for anyone else. Without words, I know Ellis respects Nico, admires him, and looks to him like a father he never had, and his inability to make a call now lets me know he wants my help. "How about I pick the wine, and you get the cigars?"

He rubs his chin, mulling it over before saying, "Okay, don't get anything too expensive but don't go cheap either." I can't help but smirk at his comment, and he notices. "What?" He questions.

"Nothing," I say.

Pulling up to the curb outside Bristol's, he says, "Tell me. What is it?" I just smile and move to open my door, but he steals my hand. "Don't you dare." Before I have time to question him, he exits the car and comes to my side to open my door. He holds out his hand for me to take and when I do, he pulls me out and into his arms. "Tell me." He playfully growls, making me laugh before spinning me around and setting me down.

"It's nothing, Ellis, but I've known you almost six months, and you seem different. You want to impress him. He clearly means something to you. And your nerves, well..." I look away, unsure how to phrase the next part without adding on to the moment we had earlier.

Grabbing my chin, he brings my focus back to him, "Well, what?" He questions.

"It looks good on you, is all. I feel like I see you in a new light."

Then, brushing my hair behind my ear, he asks, "And what light is that?"

Movement over his shoulder catches my eye, and my heart drops when I see Mason stand up from the table he was sitting at. He angrily throws money down before bringing his eyes to mine. He holds my gaze for long seconds before turning on his heel and exiting. Ellis follows my line of sight, but Mason has already left. He doesn't question me or press me any further. Instead, he takes my hand and pulls me into the shop.

Once we're inside, he asks, "Are you good?" I nod, and he says, "I think he likes red. Go with something from Italy." He gently squeezes my hand before heading back to the cigar room. That's when my phone pings from a text.

Unknown: Meet me outside.

My heart starts pounding out of my chest for a multitude of reasons. The first is that I don't give out my number, and I've spent years hiding, so it's only natural to feel like someone watching me has found me. My next thought is of Mason, but he left pissed off, so I reply.

Lennox: Who is this?

Unknown: I'm not in the mood for games. Get out here now.

Were it not for the mention of games, I'd be heading toward the back to find Ellis, but now I know exactly who is outside. The nerves I felt after seeing him watch me moments ago are nothing compared to what I feel now. I told him I wasn't engaged to Ellis, and we all but looked the part standing on the curb. When I step outside, I don't immediately see him. I feel him. Looking to my right, I find him leaning against the wall of the alley that splits the cigar shop and the neighboring deli.

His eyes trail my body from head to toe as I approach, but the look on his face isn't one of lust. It's indifference. I remind myself that I'm in control. He can only make me feel things that I allow, and right now, I'm letting his indifference make me feel like shit even though I've done nothing wrong. Once I'm in front of him, he doesn't make a motion to move or speak. So, I make the first move.

"Look, Mason, I don't know what this is, but if you don't have something to say, I need to get back inside."

Pushing off the wall, he says, "If he's not your fiancé, then he doesn't need to touch you." His words render me speechless because they weren't the ones I was expecting from the detached man standing before me.

"Mason, what is this?" He casually shrugs before stepping into me and taking all the oxygen in my lungs for his own.

"You wanted my attention, you have it, but Princess, it's his hands or mine." When I furrow my brow, he raises his hand to the side of my face, and it takes me great effort not to lean into his touch. It feels intimate regardless of the setting, and it's the one thing I've craved from him from the start. His eyes are trained on my mouth as he runs his thumb over my bottom lip and says, "You're a smart girl. I'm sure you'll figure it out." Briefly, his eyes come back to mine, and before any emotion can register, he takes off across the street, leaving me thoroughly aroused and confused all at once.

After I watch him disappear, I pull myself out of my thoughts and walk back into the cigar shop. Luckily, when I enter, I can see that Ellis is still in the back room talking over his selection with the attendant. I hurry to the wine aisle because, while my mind is anywhere but here, I don't want to let Ellis down. He asked me to do this one thing for him, and I can tell it means something to him to get it right.

William was a wine connoisseur. He had a wine cellar that housed wines

he collected from all over the world. It was his one guilty pleasure. Some of his favorites came from a valley outside the Mt. Etna region. The wines from that region aren't expensive, but they are good, so I grab a label I recognize and head back to meet Ellis. When he sees me waiting outside the room, his eyes dart to his wrist to check the time. He closes the box in his hand and heads over to the counter to gather the selection he's already picked out.

"You should have come in and told me I was taking too long." Then, putting his hand on my lower back, he ushers me to the front of the store to checkout. The move is innocent enough, but Mason's words replay in my mind, 'It's his hands or mine,' and my stomach knots.



"Is there a reason you haven't spoken a word since we left Bristol's?" The drive to Nico's is two hours long, and where I'd usually talk his ear off, I haven't uttered a word. Rather, I've opted to stare out the window and reflect on all the stupid choices that have landed me right here.

"Ellis, look—" I start, but stop when he turns down a gravel road with a stone gate that reads: Serra Estates. My jaw drops, and I turn to look at him in utter disbelief.

He furrows his brow. "This morning was that bad, huh?" I slap his chest. "Ouch, what was that for? You liked it."

"Stoop," I draw out. "You didn't tell me your partner was Nico Serra."

He pins me with a serious glare before asking, "Does that name mean something to you?"

Again, my mouth drops open. "You can't be serious right now. I am a computer science major, and he happens to run one of the biggest software companies in the US. His cloud technology is unmatched." He gives me a half smile, and I add, "If I had known we were coming to Nico Serra's house, I would have picked a better wine." His eyes bulge, and he's about to comment when I say, "Relax, I'm just joking. He might be rich as sin, but sometimes money doesn't equal quality. This is a good wine. If he's smart, he'll taste it."

When we pull up to the circle drive, a valet comes to open my door as another rounds the car to take Ellis's keys. I make sure I have everything before I step out. Ellis finds my side, and we start making our way up the

stairs that lead to a sprawling Tuscan-style villa, complete with a fountain that rivals The Maderno in Vatican City. Once we reach the top, his hand grasps my hip, and I can tell he's nervous. "Lennox, I should probably—"

He's cut off by another male voice echoing behind us. "Ellis." A tall, striking young man closer to my age comes stalking up the steps, and as I get a closer look, realization sets in. This is Sebastian, his younger brother. The two could pass as twins. Ellis is ten years older than me, which puts Sebastian at roughly four years older than me if I do the math right. They share a sincere hug before Ellis pulls away and says, "Seb, this is Lennox MacNeil. Lennox, Sebastian Lykos, my younger brother."

He comes in to kiss my cheek. "It's about time I get to meet the girl I've heard so much about."

When my eyes find Ellis's, his are void of any emotion. Clearing his throat, he says, "Okay, that's enough talking. Let's go find Nico."

Serra Estates is absolutely breathtaking. It's nestled on the outskirts of Napa Valley, and as we walk through the outdoor courtyard and toward the back of the property, I can't help but feel its bones. It's not ostentatious as one might expect from someone of Nico's wealth and status, but this place somehow feels like a home. When we reach the backyard, my heart is instantly full. I could stand still in this place forever and just take in the view. The estate sits atop a hill that overlooks nothing but vineyards for miles, and I'm in awe.

Ellis takes two steps away from me before realizing the ground has grown roots and refuses to let me move. His expression softens when he realizes how enamored I am by the property.

"Buon pomeriggio," rings out from behind us. I know very little Italian, but one of the housekeepers William hired a year before he died was Italian. She came over straight from Sicily to be closer to her grandchildren. Her English was decent, but out of habit she said a lot of things in Italian. After a while, you kind of pick up on their meaning.

We turn to see an older gentleman with dark hair that's starting to gray around the edges and crystal blue eyes I'd know anywhere greeting us. Nico is no stranger to the public. He does commercials promoting his latest tech and has even been known to appear on the occasional talk show. Unlike Lark, Nico actively promotes Serra Tech.

"Ciao, Nico. Grazie per averci." I say in greeting.

Stopping in front of me, he raises his brows seemingly surprised by my

greeting, before asking, "You speak Italian?"

I shake my head. "Oh, no, I only know a few words."

His eyes stay on mine in an assessing manner that makes me nervous, but before the unease can fully take root, Ellis steps to my side and wraps his arm around me. "Nico, this is Lennox MacNeil, the roommate I was telling you about."

He extends his hand in welcome, and as I place my free hand in his, he says, "It's nice to finally meet you, signorina," before placing a kiss on the back. "Let me show you to the kitchen. We can open that lovely bottle you brought."

As we walk, I ask, "Oh, you know it?"

"Yes. I'm very familiar with the Etna region of Sicily. It's where my family is from."

Ellis and Sebastian follow silently behind us as we walk through the living area. A stone fireplace runs up its center, flanked by windows overlooking more incredible views. Unbeknownst to me, my pace slows in awe once again at the beauty of his house, and Ellis places his hand on my lower back to keep me moving. "Have you ever been to Italy?"

"Um, no; I'd love to go, but I haven't ever left the country. However, it's on my bucket list."

He reaches the kitchen and extends his hand toward the enormous island in its center. "Please set your things down and take a seat while I grab the glasses."

Ellis pulls out a seat for me before pulling me into his side, kissing my head, and saying, "Babe, relax." I can't help but think he's saying it more for himself than me because I don't feel nervous.

"Pass me the bottle," Sebastian says from across the island. Unlike Ellis, he seems more than comfortable in Nico's home.

I'm not sure what's causing it, but Ellis has had this nervous energy pouring off him in waves since we pulled down the driveway. As I slide it in his direction, Nico comes back with the glasses and adds, "Most people pick a wine from the mainland. Not many choose a Sicilian wine."

Without thought, I say, "Yeah, my father's favorites came from this region, so I knew they were good." The hand that slid me a glass slowly retreats, and I don't miss the tick in his jaw from my words. William and I lead very secluded lives for the past decade, and while I know he was briefly involved in the tech scene, that was another life, one no one in this room

could possibly know about, but Nico's reaction to the mention of my father makes me uneasy, nonetheless. Yet, another reason I avoid situations like this.

Breaking eye contact, I stare down at the glass in front of me as I feel Ellis's hand subtly grip my thigh in reassurance. "You said 'was'. Is your father no longer with us?"

I don't bother giving Nico my eyes. I'm sure his comments are innocent enough. The typical get-to-know-a-person inquiries. They're questions I'm sure any father figure would ask when their son brings home a girl and he's trying to get to know them—but I'm not any girl. I'm a girl with secrets. I shake my head 'no' before taking a big swig of my wine. When I finally find the strength to look at anyone, it's Sebastian. He's casually leaning against the counter with his feet crossed at the ankles and taking a sip of wine.

Attempting to take the attention off me, I say, "You should come to visit Ellis sometime soon."

He smirks as if he's knowingly caught on to my tactic. "I would, but someone moved into my bedroom."

I'm sure my face heats fifty shades of red, and Nico scolds, "Seb, you're making my guest uncomfortable. Come, let's join the others out back."

As we follow Nico to the backyard, he says, "Ellis tells me you just started working at Lark. How are things over there?"

I can't help but side-eye Ellis and pin him with an angry glare. He knows how private I am, and here he is, sharing things about me. "I've been there for over a month now, and things seem to be going okay."

Once we reach the top of the stairs that lead out to the backyard that's been professionally set for this gathering, he says, "Boys, I'd like to have a word with Lennox alone." Ellis meets my eye, but where I thought I'd see empathy, I see nerves. He's not asking me if I want him to stay. Instead, he's telling me he won't. Sebastian and Ellis don't give Nico any words and continue their descent down the stairs. "You are always welcome in my home, signora Lennox. You've turned into a beautiful young woman. Spero che un giorno non sentirai il bisogno di nasconderit."

My heart starts racing, and my legs feel like they might give out. I don't speak Italian. I made that clear when we arrived, but none of that even matters. The only words I heard were, 'you've turned into.' He said them as if he knew me. The thing is, I know for a fact I've never met Nico Serra a day in my life, and when I look over to see where Ellis walked off to, his eyes are

pinned on mine, and I can't help but feel betrayed. He set me up.

"Thank you. Can you point me in the direction of a bathroom?"

"Si, right down this corridor to your left." If he notices my nerves, he doesn't show it, which makes this all the more confounding.

I nod and say, "Thanks," before heading in the direction he pointed out. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I scroll through my contacts, the entire five I have. I need to get out of here. I could call an Uber, but I already feel thoroughly creeped out. I don't want to drive another two hours home with a complete stranger. I go to my contacts in search of Christopher's number. After all, he owes me. But when I open my text screen, the last message I received came from an unknown number, one that I want more than anything in the world right now. While I'm not ready to share the sordid truth of our past with him, he's the only thing that feels like home. That feels safe.

Before I can talk myself out of it. I send him my location and a text.

Lennox: I need a ride. Please.

Once I find the bathroom, I rush in and lock the door. Closing the toilet, I sit and put my head in my hands. The one thing I never got out of William is why he ran. We never talked about his ghosts, and he never asked about mine. He took me away and hid me from the world without ever supplying a reason, and I was stupid not to ask, but we were happy. I never felt deprived or lacking until now, when I find myself incredibly anxious and overly worried about people discovering my true identity—but the truth is, I never had a reason to hide. I ran to free myself from the torture of loving a man I couldn't have, but for as much as the sins of my past are no longer relevant, their stain still haunts me.

"Lennox, open up. Let me in babe, please." I stay quiet in hopes he'll think he knocked on the wrong door or believe someone else is in here, but then he adds, "I know you're in there." As much as I don't want to open the door and let him in, I also can't hide in this bathroom for two hours. Plus, I have no reason to believe Mason would come for me. While I want everything with him, I need clarification on what he wants from me.

My hand is on the knob, ready to let Ellis in, when my phone pings from a text.

Mason: I'll be there in 10.

Immediately, I double check the location I sent him because there is no way he could possibly be here in ten minutes. We are two hours outside of San Jose. I'm about to text back asking if he meant 'I'll be there at 10:00 pm' when another text comes through.

Mason: I expect the truth when I get there.

"Open up, Knox. Come on." Ellis's fist hits the door. "Fine. Stay in there, but at least talk to me."

"I just need a few minutes to myself. I'll be out in a minute." He's quiet, and I listen to see if I can hear the heels of his loafers click against the stone floor outside. I feel relief when I listen to them step away, but they don't go far, which leads me to believe he's waiting for me in the courtyard. I'm not scared of Ellis, but right now, I feel betrayed. I have so many thoughts going through my brain, and I need to be alone to decipher what's real vs. what I'm feeling. It's easy for us to distort reality and turn a feeling into fact. Ellis has been good to me, and I don't want to make him the bad guy if he's not.

Mason: I'm out front.

Well, that was faster than ten minutes. *Damn it.* I'm almost positive Ellis is outside this door, but I can't hide here all night. Taking a deep breath, I push open the door, and sure enough, Ellis is there. His head snaps up from the bench he's sat on in the middle of the courtyard, and his expression is pained. I give him a tight smile before heading down the corridor. I know he will follow me regardless of what I do, so at least if I start walking before he moves toward me, I have a good thirty feet between us.

"Lennox." He calls out behind me. "Wait up." I pick up my pace a little more, and so does he, but when I feel him closing the gap, I take off in a slow jog. I've never been more grateful to be wearing a wedge than I am right now. When I reach the top step, I see Mason standing outside the driver-side door of his black Ferrari with the same stupid look of indifference he had on his face earlier until he sees me running—then he's pissed.

He comes around to open my door, and right as I'm about to slide in, he grabs my wrist. "Did someone hurt you?"

I shake my head and answer, "No."

"Get in." Once the door is closed, I look up and find Nico and Ellis staring after me. Nico grabs Ellis by the shoulder, leans in, and says

something in his ear before retreating to the party.

"Lennox, look at me," Mason demands when he gets in the car. "You're sure no one hurt you?"

I nod vehemently again and add, "Yes, Mason. I'm not hurt. I promise."

Without another word, he throws the car in drive, and we take off.

CHAPTER 8

"A LIE WOULD HAVE NO SENSE UNLESS THE TRUTH WERE FELT
DANGEROUS."

- Alfred Adler



MASON

Last night, Vivian got me to open up, and it felt good to sit down and talk to someone about something other than work. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't sitting there pouring my heart out, but it felt like old times, when all we had were dreams. We didn't have the weight of jobs and relationships weighing us down. When you're young, it's all about the next party, who's driving and who's buying. What's absurd is, even then, you thought life was hard, not realizing just how much fucking harder it could and would get.

Fuck, to be young was to be reckless and stupid. You feel so many new emotions, and they hit you hard. It's difficult not to let them consume all of your rational thought, because a feeling isn't who you are. It's what you have. But you see, that's how a young heart makes a bad choice. It's not wise. It hasn't been hardened by experience. They say a person is supposed to learn and grow from their mistakes, but for me, one bad choice only made it harder for me to make a good one. Because here's the thing, I didn't just love the sin. I loved the sinner.

By the end of the night, Vivian had shared with me all of her sordid affairs, from married couples, to step-siblings, and her latest, a father-son duo. Those stories only solidified her earlier statement that her type of kink is not for me. She likes it all, sharing, watching, and playing. If it involves more than two people, she's down. Vivian's right; I could never be her man. All I could think about while she spoke was how I couldn't stand the thought of another man's hands on Lennox. The only reason I didn't jump over the bar and knock Ellis out the other night was because I wasn't convinced I wanted more than a hookup. I wasn't ready to share my ugly, but as the minutes spent away from her dragged into hours, I felt it in the depths of my soul. She's my girl. The one who turned it black.

So, you can imagine how fucking livid I was when I saw Lennox climb out of a car across the street from the bistro I was eating lunch at with another man wrapped around her. But not just any man; Ellis Lykos, the man she claims isn't her fiancé. She's the last person I expected to see, but the only one who's been on my mind since the moment I laid eyes on her. When I flew out of my seat in rage from the sight before me, Vivian calmed me down. She reminded me that I'd given her no reason to think I wanted anything more

than a quick fuck. But Ellis's hands on her wasn't even the worst part. The more infuriating part was feeling like she wanted them on her.

That's the thing with Lennox. She'll look at me like I'm her whole world, only to taunt me the next. More than once, she's been caught hanging all over that man, rubbing whatever they are in my face. I was knuckles deep in her pussy when she told me he wasn't her fiancé. *So, what the hell are they?*

Vivian tried to talk me out of texting her, but I couldn't leave it. The woman has crawled under my skin and infected my soul. As much as I don't want it to be true, it is. From the moment I laid eyes on her, I felt her in my bones, and I was done pretending she means nothing. This is precisely why after confronting her, I decided to follow her. She's mine.

"Are you going to tell me how you got to the location I sent you so quickly?"

We have yet to share any words since I picked her up thirty minutes ago. Were it not for the music playing in the background the silence would be suffocating. My nerves are borderline shot, and I'm at the end of my rope. I've been biting my tongue since I picked her up, but if she's ready to talk, it will be on my terms. "If we're going to talk, I'll be the one asking the questions, and I'd like to start with the most glaring, which is why the hell were you at Nico Serra's house?"

By the time I had made up my mind to follow them, they were already twenty minutes ahead of me, but once she texted me her location, every thought and confession I planned to give her vanished the second I saw she was at the Serra Estate. The theories I had let my mind run away with regarding her true identity were suddenly insignificant compared to the treachery I now felt.

Lennox and I may have only started hooking up three weeks ago, but she began working for me a month prior. She is insanely intelligent, which only further frustrates me because the woman I know behind the screen is not the one sitting next to me. She wouldn't have put herself in a situation like this. I risk a glance over and catch her thinning her lips before she looks out the window, further pissing me off. "Lennox, you're going to have to give me something here. I know you are aware Nico Serra is one of my biggest competitors, and I just picked up my new EA from his estate. I'm sure I don't need to elaborate on how that looks."

That earns me her full attention. "Mason, it's not what you think. I swear it. I just..." She trails off before returning her gaze out the window. I can't tell

if I truly feel the sincerity in her voice or if I just want to believe it exists, and it's killing me. This is yet another reason I don't let people get too close. You lose your ability to stay neutral when feelings get involved. As much as I want to press her for more, I don't. I'm battling my own demons. Right now, I want to push her away as much as I want to keep her.

Jessie Murph's "Always Been You" starts playing, and I've had about all the tension I can stand without the added weight from the lyrics of this damn song. With every strained second we spend without words, my mind screams it's her. It has to be. She has been the bane of my existence and my reason all at once. It could never be anyone else because it's always been her, and the thought that I finally have her back, that I've finally found her is more than I can take. I'd been looking for her for so long that I hadn't prepared myself for what would happen once I got her back. I notice there's a vista point at the next exit, so I pull in.

"What are you doing?" She skeptically queries as if she doesn't trust my motives.

"Really, Princess. I was just your getaway driver, and now you think I'm going to drop you off in the middle of the woods?"

When she got in my car, I could tell she was rattled. It's the only reason I haven't pushed her. Something happened back there, and I fucking hate that I don't know what it was. Regardless of whether or not it had anything to do with me, I hate seeing her like this. I pull over next to the lake and shut the engine off, drenching us in silence. The sun has started to set, and the park is empty. "Get out."

My tone is terser than I meant it to be, but I don't correct myself. I have every right to be pissed off right now. She's given me no reason not to be. First, Ellis had his hands all over her, then she calls me for a ride, and when I showed up, she was literally running to my car from the estate of my biggest competitor.

She doesn't make a move to get out, and I don't apologize for my clipped tone. Instead, I get out of the car as I planned for both of us to do. We could both benefit from the fresh air. She's tense from whatever happened at the Serra Estate, and I'm on edge just from being in her orbit. Exiting the car, I walk to the front and take in the vista before me while resting against my hood. She'll either figure out that this is what I meant when I said, 'get out,' or she won't. Either way, I needed out. This woman will be my undoing. I want to yell at her, fuck her, and love her all at once. Minutes later, she joins me on

the hood.

"Ellis took me to the Serra Estate to meet Nico. Before we arrived, I had no idea that 'the Nico,' who he looks up to as a father figure was in fact Nico *fucking* Serra."

She seems just as pissed about being there as I am. I want to question her, but I don't. I dig deep and stay quiet, and wait for her to give me more. Finally, her lungs deflate with a breath of frustration and she adds, "I was blindsided by someone I trusted."

But, of course, I'm not following her train of thought. Clearly, Ellis is the person she trusts. What I'm not connecting is her perceived deception. *Who is Nico Serra to her?* "Thank you for picking me up. I was going to call an Uber, but I didn't want to drive back two hours with a stranger when I felt vulnerable."

Her choice of words says so many things without truly saying anything at all. She's thankful for my help but doesn't elaborate on why I was her choice driver or what caused her vulnerability. I can't be the only man she has on deck. This has been the ongoing conundrum with her that drives me crazy. *Who is Lennox MacNeil?*

"Can I ask you a question now?"

Crossing my arms, I say, "You can ask. It doesn't mean I'll answer it." I already know what she's going to ask. That's the one thing about her I get right. If it's not personal, she's predictable. She only shuts down and leaves you with more questions than answers when you ask her about herself.

"Why were you so close?" *Fucking knew it.*

She's wearing a sexy little strappy red sundress with a v-neckline that makes her tits look exquisite, and when she nervously crosses her arms from the chill in the air and my lack of response, I pounce. In one step, I go from her side to her front, essentially caging her in on the hood of my car.

"I could tell you, but I'd rather show you." Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pull her into me so she can feel my arousal. Her eyes widen.

"Mason—" she starts, but her protests die when my lips find the soft, sensitive skin on her neck. I suck hard and bite down, making sure I leave a mark. I want her to see it and remember who gave it to her, but mostly, I want Ellis to see it and know she's mine. Her hands are gripping my hips hard, and I know she's only touching me to hold herself upright, but I can't help but hate my rules. I want to feel her hands on my skin. Leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses up her neck and across her jaw, I stop when I reach her

mouth and say, "Touch me."

"What?" she breathlessly questions before pinning her eyes to mine.

My eyes don't leave hers as I run my finger down her chest and over the swell of her breast. Leaning my forehead to hers, I say, "I want you to touch me."

She doesn't immediately act on my request, and I hate that I've made this anything but natural for her. My eyes drop from hers down to her breast, where I've lazily been playing with the hem. Dipping my finger under the fabric, I discover she's not wearing a bra. I tease her nipple until it's taut, but no sooner than her bare hands slide under my button-down, she licks her lips, and I can't help but pull back. Her hands I need. Her mouth is another story.

Immediately, she reads it wrong and asks, "What did I do?"

"As much as I want to take that pretty mouth. I don't care to taste your lies." Her lips part in protest, but I don't want to talk. I just want her without all the noise of our drama, so I distract her and leisurely begin running my hands up the sides of her arms, making the tiny hairs stand on end. When I reach the straps of her dress resting atop her shoulders, I hook my fingers underneath and slowly bring them down, taking her dress with me until her perfect tits are out.

Grabbing one in each hand, I push them together before sucking one of her erect nipples into my mouth. She throws her head back on a throaty moan that has my cock dripping with need. I want to worship her body. I want my hands everywhere, but right now, I need to be inside her. Abandoning her nipple, I kiss my way up her chest until I reach her throat. "Princess, I need this pussy wrapped around my dick. Tell me you want that."

She doesn't give me her words. Instead, her hands move to my pants, where she makes quick work of unbuckling my belt and freeing my cock. Wrapping her hand around me, she strokes it from root to tip before taking her thumb and rubbing the cum around my slit. I'm so fucking turned on. Bending down, I grab her ass hard, making her whimper before I lay her down on the hood of my car. When I move to pull her dress down, she stops my hand, and for a brief moment, panic floods her eyes before she says, "I want to leave the dress on. What if someone comes?"

Fuck. This woman has me walking a fine line between sanity and insanity. Her words knock me back to last night and the scar I found on her leg, and the potential of what that means for us. But I'll be damned if I don't want to let her play this game. To keep up this ruse so that I don't have to let

her go. Settling between her spread thighs, I say, "I'll give this to you for now, but later I want you naked." At some point, we have to talk about this, because I'm taking her the way I want her. Bare.

"Later?" she questions as I come down on her.

Our mouths are a hairsbreadth apart when I say, "Yeah, later in my bed."

The expression on her face wasn't the one I thought I'd see when I said those words. I thought she'd want that too, but her face now makes me feel like this is just a fuck to her. I'm about to pull back and flip her over when she wraps her legs around my waist, and she says, "How about you make me come before we talk about later?"

And there it is, that smart mouth and attitude. Reaching between us, I pull her panties to the side and run my fingers through her soaked lips before tearing her thong off in one go. She bites her plump bottom lip as I bring my throbbing cock to her entrance. Running it through her swollen lips, I murmur against her neck, "Are you going to take me like this?"

"Mace, please."

Pulling my head away from her neck, I find her eyes, ensuring they're on mine when I say, "If I take you like this, that's it; no more fucking games. No more lies." I rub my tip through her folds as I wait for her confirmation.

"Are you sure you can handle that?" she asks before locking her legs around my hips and pulling me in. The move causes the tip of my dick to slip in, and I bite my lip turned on by her vigor, but pissed by yet another ambiguous answer.

Pushing in hard, I make her gasp. "Princess." My tone is clipped, and I know she understands what I'm asking. I see it when her eyes soften, and she gives me something real.

"I can only give you what you're ready to take."

Pulling back slowly, I come down on top of her, teasing her with my unhurried pace as I ask, "What if that's everything?"

Her eyes narrow slightly, and I can tell it's because she doesn't buy my words, and I have no one to blame but myself for that. Wiggling her hips and pressing her heels into my ass, spurring me to move, all she gives me is a questioning, "Yeah?"

With my eyes pinned on hers, I say, "Yeah," as I push in hard and deep, hitting her g-spot and making her pussy spasm. "Fuuuck." I draw out. She's tight as a vise and so damn warm and soft. I've only gone bare once, and it was because I was an inexperienced virgin, young and dumb. When her

hands run under my shirt and she drags her nails up my back, my cock twitches as every nerve ending in my body tingles from her touch. Lifting up onto my elbows, I position myself to go hard. I want her to feel me for days. I want to mark her body and stain her mind so that she's forced to think about me the same way I've been cursed with obsessing over her.

My first pump is slow and unhurried and meant to tease while I find that spot that had her choking my cock when I hit it from behind. Pushing in hard, she whimpers, and I feel it. "Is that the spot, baby? Is this where you need me?" I move in slow and deep, dragging my tip over her g-spot, edging her toward the orgasm I know she wants, but first, I need to make sure she doesn't forget. I work her over a few more times, slowly nipping and sucking my way down her neck with my tongue. Palming one of her perfect tits, I push it up and bring my mouth down over her nipple, making her pussy contract before pulling out.

Her moan of displeasure is more like a cry. Meeting her gaze, I say, "Don't worry, Princess, you're going to come." I pull her down the hood of my car and spread her legs wide before shoving in hard. I begin pounding into her at a piston's pace when her pussy starts to squeeze me tight. "Fuck, choke my cock, baby. My god, you're so damn beautiful." I don't let up on my pace as her gorgeous tits bounce. Pulling her legs up, I bring her calves to my shoulders and place my hand on her stomach to keep her in place as I go hard.

"Don't stop. Oh, god, please don't stop."

"I'm not going to stop, Princess. I'm going to come in this pussy, and that's it. You're mine. Do you understand?" I'm still rapidly thrusting into her when I feel her start to clench hard, but I need her words. She's really good at making you see the things you want without giving you anything at all. But that doesn't work for me, not with what I'm giving her now. "Answer me."

"Yes, fuck, Mace, it's yours. I want you to have it." She pants, the last few words barely audible as her orgasm hits, and I follow her over the edge, coming harder than I've ever come in my life. I fall on top of her, chest heaving as I wrap my head around her words. It could be purely a coincidence, but my heart tells me it's not. She chose those damn words.

Her hands slide up my back, reminding me of what I asked for moments ago. I wanted them on my skin, but now they burn. I hate that I know she's keeping secrets, but because I believe I know what they are, I'll play her game. As my breathing steadies and the blood begins to flow back into my

legs, I begin to move. But before I pull away, she asks, "Did you mean everything you said?"

"Yes," I answer honestly as I slowly push off the car and off her.

"But you still won't kiss me?"

"Are you ready to tell me all of your secrets?" Crossing her arms, she looks away, only further solidifying why I'm holding my ground with her. I might be willing to play her little game, but I'm not giving her everything until she can give me the same.

"That's what I thought. Get in the car."

CHAPTER 9

"I NEVER LIE...AT LEAST NOT TO THOSE I DON'T LOVE."

-Anne Rice



LENNOX

The drive back to San Jose after our pit stop to fuck has been cloaked in more silence. It's like every time we have a breakthrough, we somehow take two steps back. I know this time it's my fault. He said he was done with the games. He fucked me bare and told me he wants everything. Those words cut deep. It's the reason I haven't spoken since we left. I want nothing more than to give him my truth, but I'm also not ready to lose him because of it.

We've just reached the city limits when he makes a left turn down the Bayshore Fairway instead of a right. "I live in Palo Alto."

His hand on the steering wheel tightens as the other rubs his chin before turning his deep blue gaze on mine. "I thought I made it clear where you'd be sleeping tonight."

He did say he wanted me naked in his bed, but the man says a lot of things when we're in the heat of the moment. When we're fucking, he's all in. It's in the seconds after that his actions contradict his words. I can't tell if he's fighting himself or me, and it's infuriating.

"Mason, what is this? What are we doing?"

Of course, I ask more questions only to receive no answers. Turning into a gated community, the sign reads Silver Creek. His living here makes absolutely zero fucking sense. While it's one of the wealthiest communities in San Jose, it's a family area. Huge mansions with actual yards, exclusive country clubs, and the best schools money can buy, but Mason is a bachelor.

When he pulls into the driveway, he says, "You're staying with me. I don't want you to stay with him. I don't like it."

"Mason, I live with Ellis—"

Holding his hand up, he cuts me off and pins me with a no-nonsense glare. "Are you fucking?"

My head snaps back in shock, and I don't hold back the irritation in my voice when I say, "Are you serious right now? You don't get to ask me that. You're fucking Hailey."

"Did you see me fuck her?"

I can't help but roll my eyes, "Really? Semantics, that's what you're going with?"

He holds my vexed scowl with annoyance before saying, "Get out of the

car, Princess."

Without another word, he climbs out. When I don't immediately do as he commands, his palm comes down on the hood startling me and making me jump. "Now," he barks.

Pushing the door open, I get out and meet him around the front. Standing in front of him, he drops his pinched gaze to the ground and blows out a breath, and that's when I see it. Whatever this is that we are doing is stressing him out. His reaction just now was filled with relief that I did as he asked. Extending his hand, he gestures toward the front of the house, and I wordlessly start walking.

The home is a modern twist on the Mediterranean style with a white stucco exterior and a terracotta roof. On the second story, double-door wrought iron Romeo balconies add an old-world flare to the aesthetic, making the home feel like it's always been here. When he pushes open the doors, the house is pitch dark.

Closing the door, he steps over to the smart hub on the wall, and the house lights up. I pull in an audible breath at the beauty. The inside feels like it's been here forever. Every doorway is arched, the ceilings are accented with dark walnut beams, and ornate iron chandeliers adorn the main living areas. "Do you like it?"

I hadn't even realized he had joined me in the center of the foyer because I was swept away by the home's design. "It's alright."

He smacks my ass hard, and I yelp in surprise. "Don't lie to me."

Rolling my eyes, I say, "My opinion doesn't matter. You have money, and it shows."

Then, spinning me around, he pulls me into him and says, "Can we stop? Can we just be?"

I swallow hard as his ocean eyes plead with mine. While I may not understand the brash, overbearing man standing before me, his ask just now tells me he's trying, and all I can do is nod. He must see what he wanted because he releases me and asks, "Would you like something to drink?"

"Yeah, a drink sounds good." I nervously run my hands down my dress as I follow him toward the kitchen. The deeper we get into the house, the more beautiful it gets, if that's even possible. I've never been in a home with actual brick flooring, and I'm in awe, but I can't help but feel like something is off. The place is almost too immaculate, so I ask, "Do you actually live here, as in, come home every day after work to this residence?"

"No," he answers as we enter the kitchen. "But I have house guests at my Penthouse in Palo Alto." That's right, Vivian is still in town. I spent one summer with Mason before William and I moved away. Vivian lived across the street from him. I met her on one occasion briefly when I was leaving his house. While I don't think she'd remember me as I look now, I'm equal parts grateful and bitter that I don't have to find out. *Shouldn't he want to take me home to meet someone whom I know is close to him? Isn't that something someone who wants everything would do?*

It doesn't settle right with me, and I can't help but feel like his dirty secret. Just like before. In an attempt to stay present and not let my mind wander to a past it can't change, I ask, "When is she leaving?"

He turns and holds up a bottle of whiskey. "Whiskey or..." he waves his hand toward the cellar entrance at the far end of the kitchen.

"Holy hell, that's a lot of wine."

He shrugs, "It came with the house."

"I'll have what you're having." While I may not be a whiskey girl, I want to focus on the flow of what feels like the start of an actual conversation between us.

"She is supposed to fly out tomorrow." Opening a drawer, he pulls out two ice balls and places one in each glass before pouring our drinks. He then slides mine across the counter before taking a long pull-off of his own and topping it off again, letting me know I'm not the only one with nerves.

I'm just taking a sip when my phone starts ringing in my bag. Without even looking at him, I know Mason's eyes are on me, and because I only have a whole five numbers in my phone, I already know who it is. By the time I pull it out, I missed the call I had never planned on answering. Silencing my phone, a text comes through.

Ellis: Where are you? You should be home by now. I just want to talk.

I can't help but close my eyes and swallow down the hurt. When I left the Serra Estate, I didn't have a plan. I just needed to get out of there. I needed space to breathe and think. Ellis and I live together, and I can't avoid him forever, but he's also the last person I care to talk to right now. He is the first person I let into my life since I ran away from home years ago, and he took my trust and betrayed me in the worst of ways. While I haven't worked out exactly the how or the why, I know it's somehow true. There was no mistake,

no mincing of words when Nico said, 'You've turned into a beautiful young woman.' He knew the old me, the real me. I have no doubt.

Mason sets his glass on the granite counter, loudly snapping me out of my thoughts. When I bring my eyes to him, he quirks a brow and says, "I don't want you talking to him anymore."

"Mason, you can't just demand that of me—"

He cuts me off. "No, that's where you are wrong. I can and I will. It's my cum in your pussy right now, not his. You are mine."

As infuriating as those words are, I can't help but clench my thighs together from their vulgarity. "Look, if this is your way of asking for monogamy, that's fine, but that's where I live, and therefore, talking will happen."

Coming around the counter, he steps into me and takes the glass I'm holding out of my hand, finishing its contents before setting it down and pulling me flat against his body. "You can stay here."

My breath catches from his proximity and the unexpected softness, but I still manage to say, "That's a little fast, don't you think?"

"I didn't say I would be here." And there it is, the indifference and attitude that runs hot and cold, making it impossible to determine where we stand. Whenever I think he wants more than just a quick fuck, he flips the script, and I don't want to be his side chick, secret, or anything else that doesn't involve me having all of him. I did that once, and this time it's all or nothing.

"So that's all this is? Fucking?"

"No," he closes his eyes and rolls his lips before releasing me and walking back to the whiskey bottle to pour another glass. After taking another long pull, he places his hands on the island and leans in, meeting my perplexed gaze. "You said this was moving too fast. I offered a solution. I prefer you in bed with me. Which bed and where doesn't matter, but if you can't be in mine, I'll sleep better knowing you're not in his." He holds my eyes a second longer before reclaiming his glass. There was a lot of honesty in his words, and I can tell none of what he said came easy.

"Okay." That is all I give him.

"Okay?" He questions, and it's then I know he expected me to argue. The thing is, all I needed was his truth. He wants more and doesn't want me sleeping under the same roof as another man. If the roles were reversed and he had a hot live-in female best friend, I can't say I wouldn't be jealous.

"But I do have one condition." Crossing his arms, he leans against the

counter and waits for my terms. "I want to pay you rent." I currently don't pay Ellis anything, and I don't like it. He won't accept my money. I even asked him not to pay me a salary at the club, and I would just take tips, but he refused.

"You'll be riding my cock daily as payment." My cheeks immediately heat as images of me doing just that flick across my mind. *Damn it.*

I bite my lip and shake my head. "Mason, I'm serious."

He smirks, "So am I."

Uncrossing his arms, his face turns serious again before he adds, "While we're on the topic of conditions, I have a few of my own." My eyes widen at his use of the word 'few'. "You'll have access to my cars—I don't want you walking, taking public transportation, or an Uber—and you'll need to quit working at the club." The last line gets me fired up.

"Wait, why do I have to quit working at the club?"

"We aren't allowed to do this otherwise." That is when I remember the rules. Club members get fined for dating the girls and risk losing membership, but I don't have to be the one to leave the club.

"Or you could cancel your membership."

I don't miss the way his jaw ticks at my snap back. He's not used to being questioned on the calls he makes. Where I thought he'd argue with me, he doesn't. Instead, he refills his glass yet again and silently exits the room. *What the actual fuck?* I swear he is testing my own limits. While I haven't been in a romantic relationship myself, I'm confident that people talk things through when they disagree. Unsure of what kind of reaction he's expecting to gain from me, I give him none. I'm not going to chase him down and beg for explanations or ask questions. It's not like he'd answer them anyway.

If he wants me to live here, I may as well give myself a tour. Hell, even if I don't live here, I want a damn tour. This place is incredible. After walking the entirety of the first floor and still no sign of Mason, I make my way upstairs. He's made it clear that I won't be leaving tonight, and while I'm okay with that, I'd like to freshen up.

The upstairs is every bit as extravagant as the first level. Oak-planked floors run the length of every room while dimly lit wall sconces and red decorative rugs soften the energy. The vibe is very relaxed and romantic. Making my way down the hall, I pause in front of an open room that has to be the master. I can't help but step inside. The ceiling is vaulted and accented with dark walnut beams that mirror the lower level, but the chandelier is an

antique candelabra, rather than the iron ones below. A white-washed stone fireplace sits at the end of a giant fluffy white king bed.

As I let myself in farther, I come across another arched doorway that leads into a master bath I could spend hours in. Again, the floors are stone, the same stone that lines the stall of an open-air shower big enough to fit a soccer team in. But the showstopper is the deep, round clay tub in the corner of the bathroom. I run my hand along its edge, envisioning how amazing it would be to stretch out in. It's deep enough to almost be considered a hot tub rather than a bathtub. I'm sure the clay holds the heat for hours longer without the need to top it off. It's any bath lover's dream tub, and it's begging to be filled.

Coming up here, I had no plans of actually bathing, but there is no way I'm passing this up. Closing the door, I lock it before turning on the tub and filling it with the delicious soaps and oils set out next to it. It smells heavenly. I would love nothing more than for Mason to come up and join me, but that can't happen. Not yet. I can't risk him seeing my birthmark that sits high on my pubic bone. It's a mark I know he'd remember.

The first time we met was the summer I turned fifteen. William moved us all to St. Louis from the East Coast. Our parents were inseparable for those few short summer months. One of us was at the other's house every weekend while our parents drank the night away. Neither of us had siblings. We spent those first few months talking for hours, laughing, and listening to music, but as the end of summer neared, there was a shift. The playful touches increased, and we sat closer on the couch until finally, even that wasn't enough. At dinner, he would reach out his pinky on the table just to touch mine. When we watched movies, he'd pull my feet onto his lap. I still remember it like it was yesterday.

We were in his living room watching Batman when his hands slowly moved from my feet to my calves, where he started kneading and stroking them with a sensual tenderness that was more than anything we'd shared. I didn't stop him when his hand began to trail higher above my knee and up my thigh, but it did make my breath hitch, and when our eyes locked, I saw his desire. He wanted me the same way I wanted him.

For weeks, I had been stuffing down my feelings, knowing they were wrong and misplaced, but when he looked at me, all my resolve was gone. Nothing else mattered. Our first shared moment of more was cut short when our moms walked into the living room, wine in hand, laughing. But the

interruption didn't deter either of us. He straightened quickly before squeezing my foot hard and nodding toward the hall for me to follow.

I waited a few minutes after he left the room before I went in search of him, and as I rounded the corner, he pulled me by the hand out to the garage and into his mom's minivan. My heart was racing, and my palms were beyond sweaty when he asked, 'Have you ever kissed a boy?' I swear my mouth went dry on the spot from nerves, and I knew he could tell because he reached his hand out and caressed my cheek before saying, 'Don't be nervous. It's me.'

Somehow, his words settled my racing heart, but my butterflies were still on full alert. When I answered no, his blue eyes sparkled brighter than any star in the night sky. It was clearly the answer he was hoping for so that his next line would land its mark. 'Want me to teach you?' To this day, my heart still flutters at the memory.

It was the last thing I should have said yes to from him, but I did it anyway. My thought was one time and never again. In response, all I could do was nod. It's all my nerves would allow for. Then, leaning in, he whispered, 'relax,' against my mouth before slowly covering my lips with his own. I could tell it was his first kiss as much as it was mine, because neither of us knew how to move our lips. Yet, the energy coursing between us was electric. It didn't matter that it wasn't perfect. It was everything because we both wanted it. My hands were balled so tightly into my fists that my nails were seconds away from drawing blood to keep my body from shaking. And just when I thought I couldn't take anymore, he teased my lips with his tongue and the promise of more before asking, 'Can I kiss you somewhere else?'

If I thought the kiss was too much, what he was asking was definitely way too much, but he knew the consequences just as much as I did. His name was a breathless plea off my lips, a pathetic plea, for what I couldn't tell you, because I didn't want him to stop, but... His lips returned to mine before he said, 'Just this once?' Searching my eyes for approval, he found what he was looking for, which was no resistance.

Soft lips started trailing down my jaw and to my ear, where he sucked the sensitive skin on my neck, leaving the faintest of hickies before continuing his descent. I was wearing a spaghetti strap tank top with a jean skirt that day. It was the middle of summer in St. Louis, and I was finally to the age where my parents let me wear little clothes. Leaving open-mouthed kisses across my collarbone and down my chest, he stopped when he reached the hem of my tank. His eyes found mine, asking for permission one more time before he

slowly lowered my top and took my breast into his mouth. It was the best fucking feeling in the world. We both groaned in unison. Then, releasing my breast, he said, 'You're so fucking beautiful,' before making his way to my other breast.

Turning off the water in the tub, I let my dress fall to the floor and step in. The water is absolutely divine. Letting myself sink in deep, I rest my head on the ledge and close my eyes to return to the memories of the boy I used to know.

With both my breasts on display and sufficiently stimulated, he said, 'I want to taste you.' While it wasn't a question, the look in his eyes was. He stopped asking the questions he didn't want answers to. We knew we were crossing a line that would forever change us, but we did it anyway. When I gave him no reply, he brought his mouth back to my breast and slowly trailed his hand up my thigh. My body literally trembled beneath his touch with panic and lust. Reaching the apex of my thighs, he ran his finger down the center of the thong and groaned when he felt how wet it was. 'Fuck, you want this just as much as I do.'

Slowly he pulled my thong to the side and slid his fingers through my soaked lips. I gasped at the feel of his hand touching me where no one ever had. It felt too good. He cursed before abandoning my breast and settling between my thighs. Pulling me forward on the bench seat, he pushed up my skirt and pulled my thong off. His heated eyes locked onto my pussy, 'So fucking pretty.' Leaning down, he kissed my birthmark and said, 'I'll never forget my first taste of heaven.'

"Princess, your hand better not be what's causing those noises to escape that mouth. My mouth, my hand, or my cock, those are your options."

I sit up straight and open my eyes to find Mason standing over the tub, eyes glued to mine. It takes me a second to snap back to the here and now. Looking around, I ask, "How did you get in? I locked the door."

"You thought a locked door would keep me from getting to you in my own home while you pleasure yourself in my bathtub?" I wasn't touching myself, but I don't get the chance to correct him before he starts unbuttoning his shirt.

"What are you—" My breath catches, and my words die when he opens his shirt, revealing his chest. It's covered in tattoos. As he slowly slips it off, I find his arms are covered, too. There are complete scenes woven together with intricate details that I'm sure hold deep meaning to this new unfeeling

version of the man I once knew.

Mason is clean-cut, freshly shaved, suit and tie at work. His outward appearance screams power and money, but in a rich preppy boy way. The inked-up man in front of me is the polar opposite of the one he shows the world. The version I have shirtless in front of me is hardened, but where I thought he was calloused, cold, and unfeeling, my eyes are finding depth, empathy, and complexity.

There's so much detail to take in I don't know where to focus first. But the unbuckling of his belt snaps my priorities back into place. He can't see my mark. Not yet. I don't want him to stop us before he even gets a chance to know me.

But when he drops his boxers, and his erect cock springs free, jutting toward his belly button, all rational thought is lost. *Fuck, I want him again.* As long as we stay in this deep tub, he shouldn't see it. It's the getting out that could be problematic. Lowering himself into the tub, his eyes never leave mine, and for the first time, it feels like he's saying a million things without saying anything at all. The man he presents to the world in his office, even at the club, is not the same man sitting in the tub with me now.

"Does this mean you're ready to talk?"

Cupping water in his hands, he splashes his face before running his hands through his dark blonde hair and leaning back on the clay ledge. "We do talk. You just don't like my answers."

"That's because you don't give me any answers." He doesn't make a move to acknowledge my response as expected. That's when I get an idea. Taking my foot, I slowly run it up his calf and along his thigh, but it doesn't faze him. Leaning forward, I run my hands up his thighs, dragging my nails as I do.

"Mmm," he moans, spurring me on. Straddling him, I run my hands up his defined chest. Not only is his skin marked with beautiful ink; he clearly goes to the gym. I knew he worked out. There was no way he wasn't completely chiseled under the suits he wears that stretch over every damn muscle on his arms and chest. But while we've fucked, I've never had him naked. He's never let me see him until now.

Earlier, he asked me to touch him, and he's letting me touch him now, so I take a risk and bring my mouth to his chest. Slowly, I begin to leave open-mouthed kisses up his chest, but when I reach the base of his neck, he pulls my hair and stops me with one word. "No."

When I move to get off his lap, he grabs my hips. "Stay. You want to talk.

Let's talk."

My heart is beating wildly in my chest from the rush of mixed emotions coursing through my body. I'm turned on, pissed, and confused all at once. I don't even know what I wanted to talk about anymore. I'm too flustered, so I start with the nickname he's been calling me. It hasn't gone unnoticed that he stopped using me by my actual name. "Why do you call me Princess?"

His lips slightly quirk to one corner in what looks like the beginnings of a full-fledged smirk before he thins them and rights himself, erasing any resemblance of a smile. "Next question."

I can't help but huff out my frustration with his response. Any arousal I had is instantly gone. This man is beyond infuriating. "I don't know how you can say you want everything and literally give me nothing. You act like I just asked you your deepest darkest secret."

I try again to get off of his lap, but he pulls me in tighter and says, "Now, if you had asked me that, I would have answered."

My eyes narrow on his as I try to figure out his game. "There's no way you'd answer something that personal." Dropping his gaze, I trail off with, "At least not for me anyway."

He pulls my chin back to him so that my eyes are on his when he says, "I didn't want to answer the question because I didn't want to fight with you."

"That bad, huh?" I tease.

He shrugs his shoulders before lightly skimming his hand up my hip until he reaches the curve of my breast. His thumb lazily grazes the side before he says, "In the beginning, it was meant to be derisive, but it's grown on me, kind of like the girl."

I let his words sink in as I reflect on the first night we shared together at Covet. I judged him for being at that club. It didn't matter that I worked there. Going into that room to dance for him, I was nervous, angry, and spiteful. But I wanted him to see me. I needed him to want me the way I had so foolishly craved him for years. I hated that out of all the places to find a man I never thought I'd see again; it was in a sex club.

The Mason I knew was a giver. He was attentive and kind and wore his heart on his sleeve. It's why everyone loved him. The man who sat before me was a far cry from the carefree jock I remembered and dreamt about keeping for my own. It's exactly why I can't fault him now for calling me a Princess when I was every bit the scorned bitch. He called it as he saw it, just like I had.

When I don't immediately respond, he wraps his arms around my waist and says, "Tell me... tell me what you're thinking."

Closing my eyes, I pull in a deep breath. I have so many things I want to say, but so few words I can give him. His hand brushes my hair behind my ear, and he says, "Princess, don't do that. Open your eyes, don't shut me out."

And that's just it. I don't want to shut him out, but looking back on the past few weeks; I can't help but feel like that's exactly what I've done. By boxing him into the boy I once knew all those summers ago, I've missed seeing the man beneath me now, and they are not one and the same. Just like I am no longer the girl that can't have the boy. When I open my eyes, I don't want to rehash all our miscommunications. I want to start anew so that I can finally give him my truth.

When I finally open my eyes, they're downcast on the art covering his skin. Dragging my fingers over his chest, I ask, "Why the broken clock face?"

"A day I'll never forget." His hands drop down to my ass, and he squeezes before pulling me squarely up against his erection. A hiss leaves his mouth when my lips kiss his length. Staying the course, I ask about the next one.

"And this girl? I'm sure women aren't thrilled when they see you have another woman tattooed on your skin?"

He presses me into him and asks, "Does she bother you?"

I bite my lip hard to keep my focus when all I want to do is fully seat myself on his cock. "I'm not sure. I don't know her," I answer.

His hands slide up my back, and his response catches me off guard. "Neither do I. She disappeared."

My heart skips a beat as I bring my eyes back to the portrait, wondering if she could be me, but before I can truly work out any more details, he sucks my breast into his mouth. "God, yes," I groan out, and his cock twitches. Then, bringing my hands to his shoulders, I slowly push up before reaching between us to grab his cock and sink down.

"Fuck," he rasps out. "You feel so damn good, Princess. But we're not doing this."

"What?" I ask breathlessly. He feels so fucking good. His dick stretches me in the best of ways. I rock against him, and he halts my hips.

"Tell me." He reaches around and slides his finger between my cheeks. "Has anyone had you here?"

My heart skips a beat from what he's asking, but I want everything from him. I swallow hard and shake my head before saying, "Don't I kind of need

to be prepped for that?"

He reaches into the basket of oil beside the tub and says, "I have lube, we'll take it slow. I gave you something you wanted. Now it's your turn." His index finger rims my tight hole, and when I subtly nod my agreement, he slowly pushes in. I can't help but tense from the sensation, but when his lips find my collarbone, and he whispers, "Relax," against my skin, my body melts. It's the same word he murmured the first time he ever had me intimately. This soft, gentle side is the side I remember. The side I crave.

"Ride me slow." I do as he says, and with each rock, his finger slides in further until it's fully seated. Having him in both my holes has me feeling deliciously full.

"Mmm," I draw out as I move to slide back down his thick cock while he slowly works my ass.

But just as I'm really loosening up, he says, "Up, turn around, and put that ass in the air for me." My body immediately feels the loss of him, and I can't help but groan. Turning around, I grab the ledge of the tub and stick my ass up just as instructed, and he slaps it. "Fuck, you have a perfect ass."

My cheek barely has a moment to adjust to the sting of the hit before both of his hands are spreading me wide, and his tongue runs up my center. "Oh, fuck." I moan. I've never had a man put his mouth on me there, and it's beyond words. His tongue drags down to my pussy where he spears my hole. I'm on the precipice of coming just from all the new sensations of being touched and licked in the most intimate of places when I feel him groan against my lips. His hands adjust slightly as he spreads me wider, diving deeper as if he can't get enough. The new depth, coupled with the sounds of his desire, has me coming. I push back on his face for more, but he pulls away.

The next thing I know, I feel the tip of his dick pressing into my entrance, but not enough to penetrate, just enough to tease. I want him to push in so badly so I can ride out the aftershocks of my orgasm, but when I feel oil drip between my cheeks, I know why he's not. He wants me wanton and needy. His tip is still at my entrance when I feel his finger tease my tight hole. "This ass is mine, Princess." When I don't respond, he adds, "Say it. Say I can take it."

When I hesitate, he withdraws his tip and slaps my pussy, and fuck if I don't need more. I push my nerves down and say, "It's yours."

"Fuck yeah, it is." As his finger slowly slides into my ass, I tense up out

of instinct, and he says, "Play with that pretty pussy."

Reaching down between my thighs, I start rubbing slow circles over my bundle of nerves, and as I do, I feel myself start to relax. His finger works my hole, and what felt like an intrusion starts to feel pleasantly full. I feel him tease my entrance again with his thick cock, and it makes me desperate for more. "Mace, please," I beg.

"Fuck, do you know how hot it is to hear you beg for my cock." He doesn't let up, running his length through my lips and dipping the tip into my pussy, all the while slowly pumping his finger into my ass. I start to feel myself getting close again. That's when he withdraws his finger and presses his tip into the entrance.

"That's it, Princess. You're doing good—" He trails off on a groan before adding, "Fuck, so damn good." I feel him ease out a little before trying to push back in, but when one of his hands runs up my spine, and he says, "You're fucking mine." My body instantly melts, and he pushes all the way in. He holds himself steady and says, "Don't move. Fuck, don't move." I feel him drape himself over my body and kiss my shoulder before his hand comes around to grab my tit. "So, damn perfect." His short, ragged breaths against my neck make my skin pebble with gooseflesh, and my nipples tighten with need. The hand he has on my breast notices, and he tweaks the peak before saying, "I love these tits." Placing a kiss behind my ear, he slowly retreats, running his hands down my waist before bracing himself on my hips.

"My god, I wish you could see this. My dick disappearing inside this perfect ass." He slowly starts to pump me as his words loosen me up. The fact that I'm making him feel this way, that I'm giving him this pleasure more than excite me. But it's his grunts and low moans of ecstasy that turn me on. The intrusive ache that existed slowly ebbs, and with each groan and gentle squeeze of my hip, I'm assured that he's more than liking it.

I move my fingers from my clit to my entrance and insert two. "Oh god, that's good."

My words spur him on, and he picks up the pace. "That's it. Pump that pretty pussy." His words have me pushing back on him. I love how I'm making him feel. How unhinged he is. "You want more?"

That hand trails up my spine again, sending delicious tendrils of heat throughout my core and making my heart clench from its tenderness. "Yes, Mace. I want everything." I hear him let out a groan.

"My god, what are you doing to me? Fuck, baby, I'm going to come."

Slowing his thrusts, he reaches around and removes my hand to replace it with his own before saying, "Come with me, Princess." His groans and pants already had me on edge, but his words send me over. He feels the second my orgasm hits and holds in deep, finding his own release before falling on top of me.

We're both panting and catching our breath when his hands roam up my back with a gentleness that's new. "Let's go to bed." He murmurs against my shoulder before placing a kiss there. I nod, fully sated and ready for bed, but when he moves to pull me with him, I remember my mark. I quickly shift, and his eyes widen in surprise.

"Can you just give me a minute? I'll meet you out there."

He moves a loose strand of hair off my shoulder before saying, "Yeah, do you want a shirt?" I nod nervously and watch as he climbs out of the tub. His back is covered in even more designs. I would have never suspected that my blonde hair, blue-eyed, suit and jacket man had all this underneath. He pulls a towel around his waist before exiting the room, and I anxiously hop out, wrapping a towel around my torso before he comes back in.

Looking in the mirror, I see that my eye makeup is smudged, so I grab a towel and wipe my face clean just as Mason strolls back in, wearing a pair of skin-tight black boxer briefs with a tee in hand.

"That's what you're sleeping in?" I ask, and he smirks.

"Since you're being modest and wearing a shirt instead of sleeping nude as I would prefer, I thought I would throw these on for you. I like to sleep naked."

I don't bother adding, 'I prefer that too,' because I can't. Not yet. "Of course you do."

This time he laughs, and it's beautiful. It feels so real. This moment between us feels like it could be us. "Put that shirt on and get in my bed."

Walking into the bedroom, the room is dark, which I am thankful for. Not because I'm shy, but because this t-shirt barely covers my ass, and I know he is well aware. I pull back the soft covers when I reach the bed and slide in. "Okay, now I understand why you sleep naked. These sheets are incredible."

Before I can settle in, he puts an arm around my waist and pulls me into a spooning position against his front. His nose nestles into my hair, and he inhales deeply. "Are you tired?"

I yawn big. "Very, but I want to know about the angel?"

He's quiet, and for a minute, I think it's yet another question that will go

unanswered until he says, "Have you ever done something so ugly, depraved, and sinful that it obscured your soul and made you question your belief in morality?" I'm not sure what I expected when I asked the question, but it wasn't that. Now, I can't help but wonder again if it's about us. When I stay quiet, he adds, "The angel represents my fall from grace."

"Would you do it again?"

"Without question. Sometimes being wicked feels too good to be wrong."

And suddenly, I can't help but hope that I'm the ugly, depraved, and sinful thing that obscured his soul. I let out another yawn, fighting the sleep that threatens to take me away from the man I feel like I'm meeting for the first time before saying, "Can I ask you one more thing?"

I feel his chest inflate before he groans into my neck. "Depends on what that something is."

"You said everything. If I give you everything, will you kiss me?"

His arm slips under my shirt, and he cups my breast before giving it a light squeeze and saying, "Yes."

"What if it's too much?"

He's quiet, and for a second, I think he's nodded off, but then he adds, "Not possible." Then, placing a light kiss on my shoulder, he murmurs, "Sleep."

CHAPTER 10

"I CAN HANDLE THE TRUTH. IT'S THE LIES THAT KILL ME."

- *Anonymous*



MASON

I had another sleepless night. It didn't matter that Lennox was asleep in my bed. Even though I had her exactly where I wanted her, I couldn't help but feel as though I was somehow sleeping with the enemy. Watching her nod off and hearing the change in her breath as she fell into a deep sleep wrapped in my arms was euphoric. All I wanted to do was wake her up in the morning with my cock buried deep inside her, but where I'd thought sleep would take me, it didn't—but for once, it wasn't because of my own demons. It was hers.

We made progress yesterday. In typical Lennox form, she admitted to having secrets without words. She wants my mouth and fuck me if it's not getting harder to resist giving her exactly what she wants. Lennox wants everything just as much as I do. I can feel it. But I won't give it to her, not until she stops hiding. What's fucked up is, I know her secret, because it's mine too. If anyone could understand the pain and torment, it's me.

In the bath, I told her I'd give her my darkest secrets, hoping she'd ask so she'd give me her truth and we could figure things out. Hell, I told her she couldn't make me leave, but it ended there. I realize my track record over the last few weeks gives her no reason to have faith in my words, but I'm trying. When you shut off your emotions for so long, it's not easy to just snap them back on. Last night, I tried showing her with my body when words failed me.

Yesterday, I gave her parts of me I don't share. Yes, I fuck, but I don't let women touch me. Hell, I don't let them see me. My shirt typically stays on, and when it's not, the room is dark. Touching is a form of communication. It can convey affection and recognize emotions, all things that are components of relationships. And if the power of touch wasn't enough to keep feelings out of the mix, the tattoos covering my body say more than any amount of words I'd ever care to speak.

Before I started using the club, I let my last partner see me with my shirt off, and she immediately started asking all the same questions Lennox did. Some are obvious, while others are deep. My clock isn't telling time. It's memorializing a date. The girl on my arm is one a wiser man would forget, and the fallen angel represents more than just one sin. That's the thing about sin; we repent and ask for forgiveness. We say it will just be that once—and then the next one happens. Somewhere along the line, I became the guy that

tried it before he condemned it, because some sins were too good to be truly wicked. *How do you repent when the sin feels too right?*

That's why I started using the club. It takes all the emotion out of connecting with women. I use the furniture and positions that give me control and keep touching to a minimum. I choose the room and the girl so that I maintain complete control. I'm not your traditional Dom, but I'm not vicious. The women I am with know what they are signing up for. They can refuse if they choose, but that hasn't happened yet. While I might be emotionally detached, they all get thoroughly fucked.

But it's different with Lennox. I want more. Something deep inside my soul knew that before my brain was ever ready to accept it. I let her choose the room from day one, I didn't tie her up or use furniture, and I didn't dim the lights. I've always let her see, but because she wasn't looking for a masochist, all she saw was a sadist.

In what feels like a different life, the ink on my skin reminded me of all the stains on my soul and the things I don't deserve, but at some point, I have to put away the past and let it rest. Anxiety may not kill you, but it can cripple you, and that's precisely what I've allowed it to do with me.

That's why I had to get out and clear my head with an early morning jog. The woman has me in a chokehold. I feel like I'm missing something. I'm 98% sure she is the girl from my past, but she's been gone for ten years. A fucking ghost. Gone without a trace. Because I never expected to find her working as my Executive Assistant, when I ran her background check through Ghost, I immediately discarded the idea sitting right in front of me. That someone on the inside erased her. But you see, she didn't just disappear. She was taken. And because she won't let me in. I don't know if she still has a reason to hide. That thought alone has me jogging back to my house with extra vigor. We need to talk. I can't let this play out any longer. Whatever it is, I'm in, but I need answers. No more hiding.

Reaching my driveway, my heart rate immediately spikes, and all the endorphins one typically gets from working out are replaced with rage. My Ferrari is gone. It's not the car that has me pissed; it's the fact that she left. I made it clear I wanted her here with me, and she still chose to leave. Making my way into the house, I head to the kitchen, where I left a letter for her on the island. It stated I went for a run, and because it's no longer in the spot I left it, I know she got it. Looking around, I ensure I'm not missing anything from her before heading upstairs to the master.

The bed is made, the shirt she wore is folded up on the edge, and there is no note to be found. Making my way over to the nightstand, I retrieve my phone and check for a message I know isn't there. I would have received the alert on my watch if there was, but I do it anyway, hoping maybe I was too caught up in my thoughts to notice. As expected, nothing. Pulling up the app on my phone with my car's GPS tracking, I'll know exactly where she is, but what makes me sick to my stomach is, without the app, I already know. Just as expected, she's a block away from Ellis's. Throwing my phone across the room, I run my hands through my hair and try to calm the rage inside of me.

My attention has been severely misplaced. It shouldn't be focused on the fact that she is back. It should be concerned with the why.



It's 6:00 am Monday morning. I just got to the office, and I haven't seen Lennox or my car since Saturday. After leaving my Silver Creek house, I returned to my condo to see Vivian off to the airport. She told me I was being absurd and unfair. Even after I explained everything about Ellis and the Serra Estate. It took every ounce of my self control not to tell her my secret just to bring her to my side. But she doesn't know my history with Lennox or what she means to me. And at the end of the day, my secret isn't just mine alone. It's hers, too.

Lennox returned to my house on Sunday, but I wasn't there. I pulled up the feed and watched her walk around the place. It was clear she knew she had messed up. In my master, she sat on the edge of the bed and cried before curling up in its center and falling asleep. It took every ounce of strength I had not to drive back before she got up, but I had to stand my ground on this. She left that morning with no note, not even a text, and I know she left intentionally before I got back. If she wants to hide and keep secrets, that's fine, but all she'll ever be is a club girl.

I wanted to make sure I was in before her today. While I don't plan on firing her, I'm still determining how I want to proceed. I can't keep playing this game. I need someone in the position she currently occupies at work, but it can't continue to be her. Pulling out my phone, I call Christopher. He answers on the first ring. "Good Morning, Mason. What can I do for you today?"

I swear he's always borderline condescending, and it pisses me off, but he's good at his job, so I let it slide. "I need you in my office as soon as you get in. We need to discuss relocating Lennox."

I hear him sigh on the other end, and I can't help but clench my jaw in annoyance. I know I've filtered through too many EAs, but at least I'm not firing her like the others. "Okay, I'll be there in twenty minutes."

As soon as I hang up the phone, Lennox enters her office. My door is closed and locked, and I don't miss how she takes a second to notice before making her way to her desk. The door to my office is typically closed and locked, but Lennox has yet to experience that since she's worked here. I've intentionally left it open because of her, and now it's closed because of her.

She looks fucking edible. I would expect nothing less. She's dressed to kill, and I hate it because she knew I'd play this card. It's the back-and-forth we've played since day one. Walking this fine line between all-in and fuck off. I hate feeling like she's bested me in that regard.

Her black, tight-fitted pencil dress has a slit up the back that is borderline inappropriate, with seamed stockings that run up the back of her delicious legs. Fuck, I want to call her in here and bend her over my desk. My dick starts to strain against my pants just as Christopher walks in to greet her. She's just sat in her chair when he leans in to say something, and her solemn expression tells me he just told her what I asked. But what pisses me off is when he reaches across her desk and squeezes her hand to comfort her. *Fuck.*

I hit the buzzer on my door that unlocks the bolt, and he straightens before heading over to enter. Entering the office, he closes the door and meets my irritated gaze with annoyance. "You know you're not going to find another person to fill her shoes, right?"

I want to say, 'yeah, you're right; I don't plan on fucking my new Executive Assistant,' but I don't.

"Back to the drawing board. Please stick to my original rules. No women, and if you can't do that, then you'll be next to be replaced. Regarding Lennox —" Movement on the screen that monitors her desk catches my eye, and I watch as she sends a text, and I hate that it's probably to Ellis. That he's her go-to when just two days ago, it was me. "She stays with me until you find her replacement, which must be by the end of the week."

He releases a frustrated breath as he scrolls through his phone. "I can have someone here tomorrow through the temp service."

I rub my jaw in irritation as I set my glasses down on the desk. I just need

to rip the band-aid off and let her go. The only thing holding me back is that I haven't been able to piece together why she went back to my house on Sunday or why she is here now. She chose to leave, knowing how much I didn't like it—and right after I told her I'd give her everything.

"I don't want a temp. There is a waitlist of people who want to work here. Start there." I watch as Lennox again reaches for her phone, and that's when it dawns on me that she's talking to Christopher. He pinches his brow as he looks at his phone. "Tell me, Christopher. What does Lennox think we should do?" His brows shoot up in surprise as I call him out, and he hastily sticks his phone into his suit jacket.

Reaching out my hand, I say, "Let me see." He fidgets uncomfortably, probably debating on arguing, before handing me his phone. "Password?"

He begrudgingly supplies, "090909." I roll my eyes, clearly perturbed on multiple fronts now. Not only is he talking terms with Lennox behind my back, but he also has a weak password on his company-issued phone. That type of negligence puts proprietary intellect in the hands of anyone smart enough to hack a phone, should he leave it somewhere unattended. Competitors are savage, constantly hiring spies to get into paid positions or even close to employees to earn their trust and steal data over lunch simply by placing their phone next to one of ours.

This reminds me of Nico Serra, further adding fuel to the fire. Nico is one of my biggest competitors, and Lennox is well aware, which is another reason her going behind my back and specifically doing something she knows I didn't like leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I asked her one question about Nico and no more. I gave her space, and she had to know I wanted more. She knew how bad it looked that I found her there, of all the places, and her recent hit only makes me question her motives more. Scrolling through his phone, I find their most recent exchange.

Christopher: He wants you out of this position by the end of the week.

Lennox: That's fine. Don't risk your job for me. I can go back to working full-time at the club.

Fuck. I don't even care to read anymore. Going back to the club is the last thing I want Lennox to do. Tossing him his phone back, I say, "Out, now."

His eyes widen, and as he stands, he asks, "So, are we still replacing her?"

I stand from my chair and head to my window to think before saying, "Same terms. Out by Friday." Without another word, he leaves my office, and I'm left with my thoughts.

I've just returned to my desk when a gentle rap on the door rings out before Lennox lets herself in. I don't move a single muscle as she walks up to the front of my desk. I have so many mixed emotions coursing through my body right now that if I move, I might react in a way that I'll later regret. Not that that has stopped me before, but I am trying to be different. Even now, I still want to be different for her when I'm beyond hurt.

Clearing her throat, she says, "I just thought you might want your keys back. The car is parked in the garage." When I don't acknowledge her. She places the keys on my desk before adding, "Mason, I never meant to hurt you. You don't understand—"

I slam my hands down on my desk, cutting her off before grinding out, "That's because you refuse to let me in."

My outburst clearly rattled her and got her attention. Her hand is crossed over her heaving chest, and when my eyes meet hers, I wait to see if she'll speak. If she'll give something, anything, and when she doesn't, I say, "Don't worry about it. You didn't hurt me. For that, I would have needed to care."

Her brows slightly lift, and she straightens her spine before saying, "Sorry; my mistake."

Without another word, she turns on her heel and exits my office. As soon as she closes the door, I let out a barrage of curse words as regret floods my body. *Damn it.*

CHAPTER II

"THE TRUTH DOESN'T COST ANYTHING, BUT A LIE COULD COST YOU EVERYTHING."

-Anonymous



LENNOX

This hurts so fucking bad. I knew making the choice to leave Sunday after I woke in bed alone would be one that would move the needle back on all the progress we had made. Mason finally started opening up to me, and I betrayed him, but I needed to talk to Ellis, and I couldn't do it with Mason around. I knew if I waited until he returned from his run, he'd offer to either go with me or have my things picked up, which I didn't want.

When I got to Ellis's, he was on the couch with an empty whisky bottle passed out, something I'd never seen. Ellis doesn't ever drink like that. It's just not part of who he is. He watched his parents make terrible decisions with drugs and alcohol, and I know this behavior isn't anything he wants any part of. I fucking hate that I brought it on. I ignored his calls and texts and shut him out all because I let my fear get the best of me. My ghosts are my own, but I never knew what William's were, and those are what scare me. What possessed him to go into hiding and take me with him?

There was never any big event or falling out between my parents that I could recall that would justify how we left or, better yet, how my mother never looked for me. We lived your typical suburban life. I don't even remember ever overhearing a fight. When we moved to California, we rarely left his 7,000 square-foot mansion on Sea Cliff. It butted up to Lincoln Park and had the most breathtaking ocean views. I was fifteen when we moved there. It was a teenage girl's dream house. Beachfront property, pools, and endless tanning options were great, considering I didn't realize hiding meant never leaving. William hired a homeschool teacher for me. The only times I was allowed out was when a trainer accompanied me to the beach during the day to get my physical ed requirements in, and even then, I had to leave my hat on at all times. I lucked out with the trainer, though; he was fine as hell. He was my one friend. William knew I had bonded with him, but all he ever said was, 'He can never know. Choose wisely.'

I remember those words sticking with me for the longest time. For weeks I contemplated what he would do if I slipped. Were his words a threat to my trainer or for me? Ultimately, I assumed he meant he would send me back to live with my mother, because William was not a man to be feared. He was my dad, he loved me, but he had a darkness he was hiding, and because I was

too, I never questioned him.

Honestly, though, it never bothered me being isolated. I was never a social butterfly before we left home. I've always gravitated toward being alone. Growing up, I had my head stuck in a book. I loved fantasy books, and as I got older, I fell in love with contemporary romance. Maybe that's why I never truly felt alone. I was swept away in the worlds authors created and the fictional characters I longed to be. Don't get me wrong; I did sneak out. Almost every night, I would go down to the water's edge and let my feet sink into the sand. Something about the sand between my toes with the water lapping at my calves grounded me. Any heaviness I carried was instantly washed away.

In my last year of school, William encouraged me to move out and live on campus. That was the beginning of the end. I wasn't going to live with him forever, but I hadn't thought much about what life would be like after hiding. I was caught up in my day-to-day routine. William made sure I had a full schedule between school and extracurriculars. I took dance lessons in our gym three nights a week, cooking class every Friday night, and music the other two free weeknights. All of my teachers signed NDAs, and William was happy to have them there. It was the extent of my social life.

He and I filled in the weekends playing cards, chess, reading, and eventually drinking wine. So his suggestion that I live on campus surprised me. I figured since I had one more year of school, I had one more year to put off reality. In hindsight, I know why. He was sick.

Yesterday, I let my uncertainty win, and I hurt someone I care about because I was mad. I was angry that William left me with more questions than answers. I was upset with myself for never asking for more details, for never trying to uncover his truth. Ellis may have undoubtedly betrayed me, but I don't think everything was fake. But I needed time to process, and I still feel justified in my pain. I trusted him.

On the drive over, I thought I knew everything I would say, but I didn't expect to find him in his inebriated state, and it threw me off. It made me care about his perspective when all I wanted was to be right in my anger. I was in my closet packing a bag for Mason's, trying to decide whether I should wake Ellis to talk. After all, it's why I was selfish and went there alone, but the longer I sat there, the more I didn't want to wake him. Ellis is a proud man, and I'm sure the last thing he wanted was for me to see him like that. Not to mention there would be no quality in whatever discussion was had, given his

state. Instead, I took my things before he knew I was there.

Now, as I sit alone pushing rice around my burrito bowl, I suddenly feel the weight of that word. There is a difference between being alone and being lonely. I had two people, and right now, I have none. I have money. I can take off and leave all of this behind. Nothing is tying me here, and after Mason's harsh words this morning, it's probably what I should do. At face value, his words this morning would say he doesn't care, but it's his actions I held on to when I chose to close the door and take my leave rather than outright quit.

Mason didn't come after me Sunday. He didn't call or try to get his car back, and when he brought Christopher in, it wasn't to outright fire me. It was to move me. Those are not the actions a man who doesn't care would take. The problem is, I don't know that the truth is something he can forgive, and I can't hide forever. I don't want to. I may have spent my youth running, but that's not what I want now. I don't want to be the girl who runs every time shit gets hard. If it's not Mason, it would just be the next guy, and running from Ellis means running from answers.

After pushing food around my bowl for the past twenty minutes, I give up. Eating is just not in the cards. I'm too upset. Just as I start to pick up my napkins and food, a shadow steps into my light. Throwing my hand over my eyes, I look up and find Nico *fuckin*g Serra. "You have got to be shitting me. Are you following me now?"

He smirks as if what I've said amuses him. "Lennox, I've been following you for six months."

At this point, that doesn't surprise me. Over the weekend, I did a lot of digging between crying, but like myself, Nico's background is a vault. Not a number out of place on his fifty-year digital footprint, which has led me to believe, at one point, he was close to the Crofts. The Ghost software that Mason's father developed is the only one of its kind out there able to wipe a background so clean that it's undetectable.

There are tells when someone's past has been scrubbed. For the most part, it's intentional and serves as a marker of sorts to notify someone who knows what they're looking for that an identity has been scrubbed. The average person running a background check would never know the difference. But those markers are undetected by programs that check credit, work applications, and even sex offender lists. Anyone on the latter wouldn't have their identity wiped by Lark. That's one thing I know for certain about

Mason. He would never use his technology in a way that helps or aids any type of criminal activity. It's part of why he has his hands in everything.

"Are you going to sit, or is this meant to be a quick chat?" His steel blue eyes study mine momentarily. It's clear he's not sure I mean for him to actually sit, but he pulls out a chair and takes a seat anyway. If we're going to sit in silence, I may as well take a bite of my food. After I've taken another two bites, I say, "I don't believe you came here to watch me eat, so why don't you get on with whatever it is you came here to say." He chuckles, and it grates my nerves. "Seriously Nico—"

He holds his hands up in defense before saying, "I'm sorry, bella. I honestly don't know where to start. I saw this going a lot differently in my head, but now that I'm here it feels like a conversation for another time."

I nearly choke on my diet coke when he says another time like we are suddenly going to be seeing each other regularly. He pulls a pocket square out of his coat jacket and hands it to me to wipe my face. "Thanks," I cough out as I catch my breath. "Nico, I'm not sure what gave you the impression I'd like to hangout regularly, but you are mistaken. I suggest you say what you came here to say."

Bringing his hand to his mouth, he rubs his lips to cover the amusement he can't keep off his face. When I start to collect my things to stand, clearly annoyed by his merriment at my expense, he begins, "Ellis doesn't know anything. Don't hold the sins of his father against him. I asked him to watch you, and he did it without question because he loves me. Whatever happened between the two of you in that time is not by my hand. I think we both know how faithful he is when he lets someone in. He doesn't trust easily. You know more than most what loyalty and trust mean. He didn't betray you."

I can't help but balk at that. "Didn't he, though? Being loyal to you burned me. I gave him things I've given no one, and then I turn around only to hear your words days after. I know you knew me as Charlie."

His eyes narrow on me as he rubs his jaw in thought. My judge of character hasn't been spectacular lately, so while I don't fear Nico Serra, I probably should be leery. "What else have you pieced together?"

I let out an exasperated sigh before asking, "Does it matter?" I wish he'd just come out with it already. I'm tired of the guessing game, and I want to stand to leave, but I also want answers.

"It matters very much, bella."

Taking a sip of my diet coke, I drum my fingers on the table, trying to

determine what my next move should be. Telling him what I believe or know feels like playing into his hand, and I'm not going to just give information away freely. I'm just about to throw the ball back in his court when he asks, "Why are you still hiding?"

His question catches me off guard, and my palms begin to sweat even though I'm well aware he knows my true identity. I've worn this mask for so long, when someone asks me to remove it, I can't help but feel insecure and exposed. "What if I said I don't know?"

"What if I said I don't believe you?"

"Then you must not have been watching me at all. If you were, you'd know someone doesn't just come out of hiding and suddenly become the person they used to be. I'm not sure how you knew the Crofts, or what you think you know about me, but I'm sure you have it all wrong. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to work."

Reaching across the table, he grabs my hand. "You can no longer work at Lark. You may come work for me at Serra Tech or continue at Covet, but Lark is out of the question."

Inside, I want to laugh, but his tone and grip tell me he's deadly serious. "What makes you think you can demand that of me?"

"One Croft stole you from me before; I will not sit back and watch another do the same." My heart starts galloping at a record pace as every pore on my body feels like it's on fire with the heat of a thousand suns.

Just as his grip loosens, a voice calls out behind me, "Lennox, get in my car."

His grip on my arm loosens further, but before he releases me, Nico adds, "I know your secret. Don't make me use it, bella."

"Now!" Mason barks again, making me jolt in alarm from his proximity and timbre. But Nico's words have me rooted in place, unable to move as I process their meaning.

When Mason grabs my arm to make me move, I don't miss how Nico's fists clench briefly before he stands to slip his hands into his pockets. "Oggi," he says as he holds my eyes, which I know to mean 'today'.

"Stay the hell away from my employees, Serra. I fucking mean it. Don't make me come for you."

"My truce was with your father, Mason, not you." He starts to walk off in the opposite direction but not before adding, "He's gone, and I've found what I need." His eyes land on mine briefly before he turns on his heel to walk

away.

"Please tell me you forgot to bring your work phone with you?" Mason grinds out.

I'm still staring after Serra when he places his hand on my back to move toward the car. "No, Mason, I didn't forget it. I suppose that means you tracked me here using some other device." But, of course, he neither confirms nor denies it.

"Damn it, Lennox. I'm not in the mood for this. You left the building and took a cab, and I'm almost positive Serra just copied your phone." Reaching his Ferrari, he opens my door, and I climb in. Once he's in, he asks, "I didn't ask you, I gave you space, but I'm asking now. What does Nico Serra want with you? Why were you at his house? Are you feeding him information? Is that what this is? It's all a damn game for you." His hand hits the steering wheel as he tears out of the parking lot.

"Mason, I swear you have it all wrong. It's not what you think."

Tongue in cheek, he laughs, "Oh, it's not what I think. Tell me, Lennox, what the hell am I supposed to think? A woman I met at a sex club turns up as my Executive Assistant and acts like she doesn't know me, lies to me about being engaged, lies to me about wanting my cock, and has a background I know has been wiped clean using my software. Now, she shows up eating lunch not once but twice with my biggest rival. You know what, I'll give it to you—you're a really good fuck. I actually thought you liked it."

"Why did you even come and get me if that's what you believe?" Because he doesn't immediately snap back, I know why: he doesn't want to believe it. He wants my truth.



We get back to the office in record time, but before we get out of the car, I say, "I was never out to hurt you, Mason, but I have deceived you. I more than deserve your doubt, but it's not at all what you think."

His jaw clenches as he grabs the door. "Get out," he commands, and as I do, I pull my ID and company-issued phone out of my purse.

"Here, I won't be needing this anymore."

I hold my hand out, but he shakes his head no. "You're not getting off that easy. Let's go." He pulls me by my elbow leading me through the garage. As

we enter the elevator, he asks, "Who are you, Lennox MacNeil?"

Squeezing my eyes shut, I fight the words on the tip of my tongue, "I'm the time on your clock." When I open my eyes, the elevator doors open, and Mason furrows his brow, clearly not understanding. But when and if he does, it will no longer matter because standing before us is Gianna Moretti, the woman who has held his heart for the past decade, and the one who gave me a reason to run.

"Gigi..." Her name breathlessly falls from his lips, and just like that, whatever I thought there might be between us floats away. It's still her. It will always be her. But because it's her, I no longer have a reason to hide. Gianna's long blonde hair cascades down her back in waves that are too perfect, but all-natural, and her emerald green eyes are enough to bring any man to his knees. She's painfully pretty. Always has been. Stepping out of the elevator, he reaches out to put his hand on her back, but pulls away last minute and instead extends it toward his office, "Go in my office. I'll be there in a second." She rolls her lips and nods before making her way through the double glass doors.

Turning to me, he says, "You're not leaving." His eyes search mine looking for confirmation, before he adds, "I have to take care of this." I nod in agreement knowing full well the second he walks through that door, I'm out of here.

I'm done hiding. He wants the truth, and he's going to get it.

CHAPTER 12

"ONLY ENEMIES SPEAK THE TRUTH; FRIENDS AND LOVERS LIE ENDLESSLY,
CAUGHT IN A WEB OF DUTY."

- *Stephen King*



MASON

You have got to be fucking kidding me right now. She was finally going to give me her truth and not just a bullshit half-truth—the big one—when Gianna Moretti shows up in the fucking flesh. I knew this was coming. It's my own damn fault. I've been avoiding her since I left home four years ago, and my little incident six months ago only incited this visit. Taking a seat at my desk, I look at anything but her. As much as I want to, I can't. It still fucking hurts, just not for all the same reasons it once did.

Pulling out my phone, I shoot a text to Ethan Grand. He's Gianna's brother and the face of Grand Media. Gianna is a silent partner, choosing to stay out of the limelight and raise their younger brother Elio after her parents were killed.

My sordid past with this woman is one of the many reasons for the fallen angel tattooed on my chest. I doubt Ethan knows Gianna is here. There was no bodyguard in sight when I stepped off the elevator. The drug dealer that set up her father was never found, which is one of the reasons she has security detail with her at all times.

Mason: Why is Gianna in my office?

I wasn't lying when I told Vivian I still keep tabs on Gianna, but it's from a distance and mainly through Ethan. We don't discuss her. He knows what I expect. There's a mutual understanding that we'd talk if either of us sees anything out of the norm. Hence the reason I sent the text. The junkie who set up her dad with a lethal bag of fentanyl was never found. While we believe he was a rando addict paid off with drugs, we don't know what kind of vendetta Edward Haas holds against her. What started out as an inheritance scam quickly turned into murder for hire. I used every piece of technology at my fingertips to help find and put him away after he ran.

Ethan: Shit. Make sure she doesn't leave. August is an hour out.

"How long are you going to act like I'm not sitting right in front of you, Mason?" I drum my fingers on the desktop as I try to find my words. "You know, if you didn't want to see me ever again, you could have just picked up

the phone when I called, or sent me a text, hell even an email would have worked."

Drawing air into my lungs, I force myself to meet the eyes of the last woman I loved and say, "What would be the point, Gianna?" I hold her emerald green eyes, eyes that I used to stare into for hours, eyes that I wanted to be my future. They still make me weak, and to my surprise, mine apparently still have the same effect on her, because she nervously drops her gaze to her lap. In the past, she would lace and unlace our fingers together when she got nervous. Now I watch as she does it on her own, but my heart stumbles when I see her ring missing from a significant finger. But where I thought I'd feel desire, I feel anger. She made her choice, and it wasn't me. She is supposed to be very married. "Where's your ring, Gigi?"

Her eyes flit back up to mine, and I can see she's assessing my reaction. I quirk a brow before she says, "Fine, I had to take it off to leave."

Pinching the bridge of my nose in annoyance, I ask, "And why is that?"

"Because August wouldn't let me come." I'd be lying if I said that didn't piss me off. While I don't care for her to be here, I don't like knowing that her fiancé wouldn't let her see me if she wanted to. "Why doesn't he want you here?"

Her eyes soften when she says, "I think we both know the answer to that question." I can't help but snort out a laugh. "You expect me to believe that August is jealous of me? You're going to have to do better than that." Then I remember my accident. "Wait, did you tell him about the POA?"

She crosses her legs, "So you're acknowledging that as of six months ago, the woman you refuse to communicate with was your power of attorney and one hundred percent beneficiary of all your assets. Mace..." Trailing off, she drops her head, and I can tell all of this is hard for her. I'll always know how she feels. I spent hours studying everything about her. She still loves me, but now that we've had space, I see what she meant all those years ago when she said, 'maybe it's just not the right type of love,' because the pain I have in my chest isn't the same type of pain that I have for the woman outside my door.

"Why haven't you married him yet, Gigi?"

Standing from her chair, she walks over to the window that overlooks the bay before saying, "Why do you always do that?"

Turning in my swivel chair, I get up and join her at the window. Pushing her hair behind her ear, I ask, "Always do what?"

Her bottom lip quivers as her eyes get glassy, and she turns her head

before saying, "You ask questions you already know the answers to. Making me say the things you already know to be true in your heart doesn't change anything, Mace. What I wanted never mattered, not really. I want the truth you could never give me then, and you're going to give it to me, Mason Croft, because I deserve it, but so do you."

I pull her into my chest and hold her tight as everything I've needed and missed floods back in. Gianna never shut me out. She didn't push me away. I ran because I couldn't stand to watch her be with another man, one that I basically handed her to because I never gave her what she wanted. Me. I didn't try to make a move until another man wanted everything. But what she doesn't know is that it's not because I didn't want her. It's not all the bullshit excuses I gave her about being young and having time. It's because I didn't want to ruin her. I didn't want to stain her pure heart.

Gianna had a shit life, and as much as I was the good in it for her, my soul was black and tainted before she was ever an option. I was running from myself, doing shit to numb the pain. I partied hard and fucked my way through them to try to erase the darkness that was slowly taking over my heart. By the time I told her I wanted everything, it was because I had convinced myself I could give it. To this day, if she had chosen me, I would tirelessly strive to be her world, because she deserves it, and I want to be the good she sees in me so badly.

"You know I couldn't do something this big without you, Mace. We messed things up at the end, but you mean so much to me. Yes, I have Ethan and Elio, but it's not the same. I want you there, Mace. I need you back. I risked a lot coming here. Taking off my ring was a mistake. I've been making a lot of bad decisions lately. But I had to get away. I needed to see you on my own. August doesn't understand the imprint you left on my heart. Or how you can love someone without being in love with them. I know I've hurt the man I love considerably to come here, but you're worth it, Mace. I didn't think you would stay gone. I knew you needed space, but this—this I didn't see coming. Help me understand."

Gianna hasn't married him because we are not settled. Inhaling her coconut scent—it was always damn coconuts—I commit this moment to memory and let in all the good that was forced out, and as the air leaves my lungs, I release her. I'm ready to give her my truth. It was never really her I was mad at. It was me.

Walking over to my wet bar, I begin to pour our drinks. "The POA wasn't

a mistake. You know I don't have a relationship with my mother. I wouldn't put it past her to pull the plug out of greed. I'm sure, after everything, you're aware my dad died in the crash—"

"Mace..." She comes up behind me and rubs my shoulders, but for the first time, it doesn't feel the way it used to. In the past, it was sensual. It was our connection, and it's not that those elements aren't still there or can't exist, but her heart moved on, and I now know so has mine. "I wanted to be there. I was there—"

Turning, I place my finger on her mouth and a drink in her hand before bringing my glass to my lips. Taking a long pull from my drink, I push the hand holding her glass up to her mouth for her to do the same. "I'm sorry I had you thrown out."

Six months ago, my dad and I had a business meeting outside Modesto, close to Yosemite National Park. Modesto is not far from San Jose, only about an hour's drive, but that day our meeting was scheduled for the afternoon, and if we had driven, we never would have made it on time during peak traffic hours, so he commissioned a helicopter. The flight there went smoothly, but a few minutes after we were in the air to head home, our helicopter started having mechanical problems. The next thing we knew, we were literally falling from the sky. We crashed into a thick copse of Redwoods, and I was thrown out of a window on impact. Seconds later, the helicopter blew up.

I fractured four ribs, which led to both my lungs collapsing, and the hit I took to my brain caused it to swell for several days without improvement. That's why Gianna was called. The doctors believed that I would have no quality of life if I did wake up. Unfortunately, when it comes to the brain, there are too many variables at play to know how an impact of the magnitude I sustained would play out. She's the one who stayed my course of treatment. Rather than thank her, I had her removed. Gianna has been listed as my power of attorney since I was eighteen, and even after the crash, I have yet to change it.

"Can we not talk about it?" I ask. I don't like reliving that day. It's just a reminder of how alone I've allowed myself to become. Friendships are important, but somewhere along the line, I convinced myself that even without them I wasn't truly alone. Any night of the week, I could have whomever I wanted in my bed, and for a long time, I did just that. The crash showed me how genuinely wrong I had been. Sometimes growth can only

come from fucking up.

"No, Mason. I came here to talk. You have no fucking idea what that did to me. I'm all you have, so much so that I'm the one making decisions on whether you live or die, but you can't have a conversation with me. Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Stop, just stop. Gigi, I wanted you there so fucking bad. I wanted to hold you just like the old days, but we're not kids anymore. We don't have that same relationship. You're engaged to another man for christ's sake. I knew exactly what would happen if I let you back in like that. You'll have to excuse me for not wanting to get my heart shredded by the same girl more than once."

The last thing I needed while lying on a hospital bed, broken and bruised, was a reminder of my loneliness. I couldn't let her stay while I was that weak. Did I want my best friend? Yes, but I wasn't ready. I'm not sure my growth could have happened until now, until this moment. I didn't realize then what I do now. It was never Gigi. I just wanted it to be her.

"Don't give me that crap, Mace. Did you forget who you're talking to? We already went over this four years ago. I've never held your heart, not in the way that matters, anyway. So how about you start giving me something real."

Taking a seat on the leather couch that flanks my tech shelf, I say, "You're wrong about my heart, by the way. You know I loved you then and now. But you always did like to tell a guy how he should feel. I see nothing has changed on that front." Her eyes narrow, and I know she feels my truth. It's the same as hers. We share love, but it doesn't mean we were meant to be lovers.

"Gianna, I never lied to you back then, and to this day, if you had chosen differently and I was your man, I'd spend every day trying to be the man worthy of that pretty heart. But you're right; I couldn't give you my heart in the way that mattered because I gave it away before there ever was a you and me."

Taking a seat next to me on the couch, she touches my knee. "I'm not following, Mace."

I look at her petite hand resting atop my knee, and I can't help but pick it up and interlace our fingers just like old times. If there is anyone in this world I could share this ugly truth with, it's her. She loved me then, and she loves me now. "Do you remember the first time you kissed me?"

Her cheeks flush, and I can't help but smirk. "You're asking me if I

remember my first kiss? Yes, Mason, I very much remember that day."

"You weren't my first kiss, Gigi." I watch as her brow furrows, and I squeeze her hand. "I know I told you that, but I lied, Gigi. I lied to you because I wanted you to be my first kiss because the real one shouldn't have happened. It was wrong, and sordid, and has haunted me every day since—"

An alarm on my phone chimes, stealing my focus. But before I release Gigi's hand to grab it, I know exactly what it is. It's the alarm I set up over the weekend while Lennox drove my car, letting me know my Ferrari is in use. *Damn it.* I was so distracted when we pulled up, I didn't take the fob out of the console. Opening the GPS app on my phone, I see that the car hasn't moved. It's still parked downstairs.

"Mace, what's wrong?" I stand up and head over to the door that leads into the anterior chamber thinking maybe the alarm was set off by someone else, but when I open the door, the office is empty, and there's a note on the desk. I reach the desk in two steps and read the four little words she left for me to find.

"Our time is up."

What the hell is she talking about our time is up? Before I even get a chance to decipher the meaning of her note my app pings again, and when I pull it up, I see that my Ferrari is now in transit and headed north on Bayshore toward Palo Alto. She wouldn't take my car to go home. She wants me to follow her, and I know exactly where she's going. *Covet.*

"Mason, talk to me. What's going on?"

"Come on. I have somewhere I need to be."

Popping her hip out, she says, "Fine, but you're spilling in the car."



"**Y**ou brought me to a sex club?" Gianna questions as I park the car.

I can't help but raise a brow in response, "How do you know this is a sex club?" Her cheeks heat, and I have my answer. "You've either googled it or been. Which is it?"

She shrugs. "Alright, alright. I may or may not have been googling them. I just—I don't know, lately I've been feeling a lot of emotions, and I thought

maybe a sex club would keep August's interest."

Fuck. I don't have time for this. I need to find Lennox, but Gigi took a big risk coming here for me, and for as much as I fucking hated it, I'm glad she did. It opened my eyes. Grabbing her hand, I ensure her eyes are on mine when I ask, "What the hell are you talking about, Gianna? August is obsessed with you and has been since day one. What made you think you needed this to keep him happy?"

Her eyes are suddenly glassy, and a tear slides down her cheek when she blinks. "That's just it, Mace I messed up. I shouldn't have taken my ring off to visit you, but security has always been tight, and then your incident threw a wrench in things. August never said he was jealous, but I could tell it bothered him. You and I haven't talked in years, and then I show up listed as your POA and beneficiary of all your assets. Mace, I haven't married the man yet. He never said it, but I felt it. Deep down, it hurt him. I think some part of him believes I'm waiting for you to come back. I've fucked him countless times a day trying to show—"

Holding up my hand, I stop her there. "Gianna, I'm not in a place where I want to hear about your sex life."

She nods and rights herself in her seat before exhaling slowly and saying, "Mace, the sex was supposed to fix it, and now I'm going to be fat and unmarried. I've ruined everything."

I pinch the bridge of my nose in annoyance. Her dramatics are off the charts today, and then her words about all the sex and being fat sink in. "Wait, are you telling me you're pregnant?" Her lip quivers like it does when she gets too worked up, and she nods. "Fuck, why did you take the drink earlier."

She shakes her head before adding, "I didn't. I spit it back in the glass when you went to take a seat."

Pressing my head into the seat back, I ask, "And August doesn't know?" Without even looking, I know the answer. Hell no, he doesn't know, and now she's here with me because I couldn't just answer the phone, but I'm glad I never did. I wouldn't have been ready then, and I didn't know how much I needed her here now. How much I needed this wound to heal. "How far along are you?"

Wiping her eyes, she regains her composure. "I'm twelve weeks and so damn scared." Where I used to know Gigi like the back of my hand, her comment throws me for a loop. She's already a mom and she's great at it.

Gigi was practically a mom to her younger brother since before her parents died, and I know she postponed doing her own thing to take care of Elio full-time after her father's estate was settled.

"Explain it to me, Gianna, because I'm not understanding."

"I'm pregnant and unmarried. How do you not see the issue here?"

I turn my head so that she doesn't see the stupid look I have on my face at her absurdity. "You can't be serious, Gigi. People have children out of wedlock every damn day, not to mention you are engaged."

"Yes, but marrying August first was supposed to be the thing I did right. His family pretends with me. They've never truly accepted me. To them, I'll always be nouveau riche and a stain on their family name. They put up with me; they don't like me."

"Babe—" I stop myself as the word leaves my mouth, but Gigi doesn't miss it. She crawls over the center console and into my lap.

"Mace, I missed you so damn much." We were at a party the night Gianna kissed me for the first time. I knew she had a crush on me because she and Vivian went out of their way to run into me or hang out at every opportunity. It wasn't hard since Vivian and I were neighbors, but the night of the party, Gianna didn't just kiss me because she wanted it. She kissed me out of necessity.

It was one of the last house parties before school started back up, and this kid named Justin was hitting on her hardcore. I remember watching it all night. It was fucking hilarious, and when she caught me smirking at his latest failed attempt to try and pick her up, she made her move. I'll never forget it. He had her cornered against a wall, leaning in to whisper in her ear when she bit her cute-as-hell plump lip before pointing directly at me. His eyes shot to mine, and the next thing I knew, Gigi was jumping into my arms, planting her mouth on mine. I kissed her back with just as much enthusiasm. What high school guy wouldn't? She's a fucking knockout. Her plump ass was in my hands, and there was no reason we couldn't be together. When she finally broke our kiss, she looked at me and said, "You just earned yourself a girlfriend for the night." That fucking sass was irresistible. Setting her down, I said, "Whatever you say, babe." While we didn't actually become a couple, the 'babe' stuck.

"I'm so damn sorry, Gianna. I know I messed up back then and now."

She nods against my chest before asking, "Are we here to get the girl that's going to replace me as your power of attorney?"

Before I can even answer, the door of my Ferrari is thrown open wide. "Are you fucking serious, Gianna? How long has this been going on?" *Shit.* This doesn't look good at all.

"August, look, it's not what you think, man." I nudge Gianna to get off my lap, but she doesn't move. Her pregnancy hormones are getting the best of her. They're making her feel way too many emotions.

"Don't you dare fucking talk to me! You knew we were engaged, but you couldn't fucking stay away. It killed you that she was happy. Who the fuck keeps their ex-whatever the hell you two were as a POA when they don't even talk? That was your move. I fucking knew it."

Gianna is literally trembling in my lap, but I know it's not out of fear. August took a bullet for her literally. He would never lay a finger on her. I'd kill him with my bare hands if he did. "Gigi." I run my hand up her arm in comfort as he stomps back and forth in disbelief, losing his damn mind. "Tell him." She nods before unfolding herself and climbing off my lap.

Standing outside my car, I watch as August's anger slightly subsides just from the sight of her being off my lap. His whole world stops and starts with her, and I can't help but feel envious of that type of love and devotion. She twists her hands at her front nervously before choking out, "I'm so sorry," between sobs.

He takes a step toward her but stops himself from reaching for her, instead choosing to throw his hands into his hair. "At least I now know why you wouldn't marry me. For five years, that ring was on your finger, and for that long, you loved someone else."

Shaking my head, I exit my car and slam the door. "We're not having a fucking affair, asshole."

"I'm pregnant." Gianna cries out, snapping August's attention back to her.

"What?" falls out of his mouth on bated breath.

Trembling with nerves, she answers again, "We're having a baby."

He steps forward and falls to his knees. "You're having my baby? I put a baby in you?" His hands slide up her stomach as his eyes search her face.

"Yes, August. You're going to be a dad."

He pulls her in tight and kisses her stomach before standing up and saying, "I don't understand. Why did you come here? Why are you leaving me?"

"Can you hold me?" she asks.

Pulling her into his chest, his eyes find mine looking for answers. Putting

my hands in my pockets, I shrug and say, "Hormones."

"Shut up, Mason," Gianna calls out, only confirming my comment. Pulling out of his embrace, the sobs and tears have miraculously dried, and now she's ready to talk. "I don't want to leave you, but I've never hidden my feelings about Mason from you. You knew it hurt my soul losing him, and not because I want him over you. I've never known how to express it because another man holding a place in my heart is no words a boyfriend, fiance, or husband wants to hear. But I needed this August. I needed this peace." Then, looking at me, she adds, "And he did too. My pregnancy hormones..." I don't miss her slight pause as she lets the statement hang for a moment before saying, "had me handling this all wrong. I needed to see him, and I know how much it destroyed you when I came to him after the accident. Mason will be part of my life. He was always meant to be, just not romantically."

Bringing his hands to her face, he says, "Gianna, I've always known how you felt about Mason. I understand it more than you think, but when you went behind my back, it made me believe I had it all wrong. Honestly, Gianna, it's the last thing I care to talk about right now. Why didn't you tell me about the baby?"

"Because I messed up and got knocked up before the wedding, only confirming what your parents already think: that I'm beneath them and not worthy of taking the Branson name."

I study his face as her words sink in. Of course, he thinks her thoughts are just as misplaced as I do, but that's his problem to figure out. He's the one with old-school parents who believe arranged marriages are the only way to ensure a legacy and reputation are maintained.

Clearing my throat, I gain their attention. "I have somewhere I need to be."

Gianna drops her gaze in understanding, but I know it's not because she's upset I'm off to get another girl. On the contrary, she's not ready to let me go. It's our first time speaking or seeing each other in almost five years.

Unwrapping herself from August, she comes over to hug me, and as she does, I say, "I promise I won't ignore you." I feel her nod against my chest before she squeezes me tight. She doesn't give me any words before she returns to August.

Making my way to the elevators, I didn't realize how much I needed to see Gigi. I needed to close that chapter. I let it remain open for far too long because she represented all the things I was supposed to want, the future I

should have taken. She was the one I could have. But I'm done living a lie.

I enter the club through the main level instead of the VIP section. Lennox wanted me to follow her. Otherwise, she wouldn't have taken my car, but I haven't figured out her game yet. When I don't see her behind the bar, I head toward the elevators and up to VIP. She wants to play, and fuck me if I don't want to give it to her.

Taking my seat at the bar, I order a whiskey neat just as Hailey comes over to greet me. I'm not sure when she started this. Hailey knows my rules. I never changed them for her. I don't care to be approached at the club. If I'm in my booth and need a waitress, that says approach me. Me sitting at the bar in front of a competent bartender does not. But I'm not blind. I know why she's here. I haven't had her since Lennox came into the picture.

"Would you like me to book a room?"

The bartender puts my drink in front of me, and I throw it back in one go before answering. "Hailey, I no longer require your services." Where I thought I'd see jealousy or hurt, I find neither, and because it's Hailey, I know there's more. She's baiting me. Unlike Lennox, she is a true redhead, fiery as hell, so I ask, "Where's Knox?"

She gives a snide smile that has 'checkmate' written all over it, and it's then that I know she never intended on getting a room. She's here to spite me. "Room seven."

I clench my jaw in irritation as I rise from the stool. Room seven is the voyeur room. Before I'm more than an earshot away, she adds, "Hope you enjoy watching. She already found a partner."

My blood immediately starts to boil as the rage building inside pounds at my ears. This is not fucking happening. Not again. She's mine. My feet can't carry me to the hall of rooms fast enough. This is my fault. I was a dick this morning. But this is us. She pushes me, and I push back. It's how I know she can take me as I am. But the fact that she's in the voyeur room with someone else throws me for a loop. She knew I would come, so what the hell is she doing?

When I reach the viewing area for room seven, I freeze. Lennox is tied up to a Saint Andrew's cross, wearing the fucking lingerie I know she had on this morning. The garter belt she's wearing is snapped to the same backseam tights she was flaunting all morning, and her perfect tits are practically spilling from the black sheer lacey bra and panty set that should be for my eyes only. Ellis crossing the room snaps me back to the task at hand: getting

my girl.

Marching toward the door to enter the room, I have every intention of immediately fogging the glass to the viewing area, but when I turn the knob, it's locked. "Fuck." Looking down the hall, I see one of the bouncers heading my way. "I need this door unlocked," I demand.

He looks me up and down before saying, "Sorry, I can't do that. That's the owner in there."

It takes every ounce of composure I have left not to fucking swing on him. I know he's just doing his job, but I need to get in that room. The speakers in the viewing area are turned on, and her voice rings out, "Make it hurt," followed by the snap of a whip and her cry. The sounds distract the security guard, and I quickly steal his badge to open the RFID reader on the door.

I get the door opened with the bouncer hot on my heels. I'm two feet into the room when he attempts to tackle me to the floor. I shoulder-throw him to the ground like he weighs nothing and say, "Ellis, call your man off!" With the amount of adrenaline coursing through my veins, I feel like I could take on ten guards. There is no mistaking the fury and rage in my voice.

Ellis is every bit as pissed. He clenches his fists, ready to fight, and says, "You came into my club, broke my rules, and now you want my girl."

Those last two words were the wrong ones, and I charge.

CHAPTER 13

"I LOVE YOU, AND BECAUSE I LOVE YOU, I WOULD SOONER HAVE YOU
HATE ME FOR TELLING YOU THE TRUTH THAN ADORE ME FOR TELLING
YOU LIES."

- *Pietro Arentino*



LENNOX

It felt surreal when Gianna showed up just as I was about to tell him everything. For me, time had suddenly slowed down, and history was repeating itself. She shows up, and immediately, I'm nothing again. He asked me to wait, but I'm done waiting. Time is running out, and if I'm destined to lose him again, I'm going out with a bang. Riding the elevator to the lobby, I remember Mason leaving his key fob on the center console in his car as we got out. Stealing his Ferrari wasn't in my plans, but I'm not going to chance him not following me. Not when I need to ensure it.

He told me if I gave him my truth, he'd give me everything, and it's time to see if that's true. When I give him this truth, I hope I'll have a more solid gauge of how he feels and where we stand, but life is filled with uncertainties and risks. I need to take this risk now because losing this chance with him would hurt more than walking away ever did. It doesn't matter what the fallout might be. He can take it or leave it, love it or hate it, but I'm sharing this now because I need it to heal, grow, and be the secure, confident woman I am with nothing to hide. I want to be seen, and I know exactly how I'm going to do it.

Pulling into the club parking lot, I head straight to the elevator that leads to the VIP floor. Ellis and I haven't talked since everything went down at Nico's, and he owes me. When the elevator doors open, I head back to his office, determined to get some answers. Lunch with Nico was a bunch of masterfully constructed innuendos by yet another man demanding something from me. The only reason any of these men are able to hold any power over me is because I let them. I'm holding onto this side of me that I've kept locked away, and because of that, I allowed myself to make choices out of fear, but no more. I'm done. That ends here and now.

When I reach his office, I don't bother knocking; instead, I turn the knob and throw open the door to find Ellis and Sebastian holding a meeting. Sebastian half smiles as if amused by the antics unfolding before him while Ellis cuts me with a glare that's equal parts pissed and relieved. He and Sebastian share a look before he stands and meets me at the door. Ellis leads me out of the office and ensures the door is closed before he says, "Knox, what are you doing here?"

Immediately, his question strikes a chord with me because I feel he's hiding something. I work here. Given my new job at Lark, I'm well aware that my presence in the middle of the afternoon isn't normal. But his tone is telling. It's borderline accusatory, as if I've somehow done something wrong by showing up. I've known Ellis for six months, and while that's not too long, his brother never comes to town for meetings. And then, add in the fact that I saw Nico at lunch today, something is up.

"What's going on, Ellis? Why is Sebastian here?" His brow furrows, and he rubs his jaw. I can tell he's hiding something. "And don't lie to me. I know Nico is in town as well. What is all this? Why would you hurt me like this?" My voice practically cracks at the end. I'm so tired of feeling like I'm walking around with my eyes closed. For the first time in years, I thought I was living my life as I wanted. I was putting my past behind me only to find out it was there stalking me all along.

He tries to pull me into his chest, but I push out. "No, I'm done falling for your lies. I thought you cared about me, but I was a pawn. Something that got you closer to Nico."

Pushing me up against the wall and pinning my arms, he says, "Listen to me, Lennox. You have no idea what you are talking about. I would never lay a finger on you without your permission, nor would I let anyone hurt you, Nico or otherwise. I was asked to watch you, that was it. Period. Meeting you was orchestrated. Falling for you was not."

His mouth is inches from mine. We're both clearly agitated, and I'm hoping what I need, he might need too. "Take me to room seven." His eyes leave my mouth and snap to mine. When he shakes his head I fight against his hold. "You'll take me there because you owe me, and I need it. I'm done hiding Ellis. No one is going to hold my past over my head. If people insist on watching, I'll give them a fucking show."

"Do you have any idea who you're going up against?" His eyes search mine, and I see his uncertainty.

At lunch, Nico told me not to hold the sins of his father against Ellis. Nico may not have shared details about who I am or why he wanted to find me, but I'm sure Ellis has made it his purpose to do just that. That's why he moved me in with him. If I was important to Nico, I was important to him, but I'm not giving away what I do or don't believe. Assumptions are not truth, so I ask, "Do you?"

Releasing me, he clenches his fists and looks away, and it is then that I

know he has no proof. Like me, he has pieces that he still needs to work out. "I'll meet you in five minutes." I don't waste another second standing in front of him. Ellis is doing this for me to prove a point: that our time wasn't faked, that it was real, and I mean something to him. But what I'm asking him for isn't about us, Mason, or even Nico. It's about me.

Walking down the hallway, I stand in front of the door leading to the women's locker room, prepared to get ready for my performance, but then I think better of it. If I'm doing this, I'm all in. No halfway, and because Ellis only gave me five minutes, that's time I have alone in the room to reveal myself with no distractions. To shed my layers and own my truth. All eyes on me.

I want to feel the weight of their judgment. There is power in vulnerability when you come out on the other side of it stronger because of it. I'm ready to find the strength that's always been buried deep. When you're young, you run, and I ran for damn good reasons, but the ties that bound us then no longer apply. I needed Mason to want me as I am now, without the weight of who I was, because I am no longer the girl he can't have. But what I don't know is if our truth will matter. Will it change how he sees me? Either way I'm done feeding my insecurities with my secrets. The one I had is no longer ugly, and the truth can only set me free.

Flipping on the lights in room thirteen, I find the panel on the wall that unfrosts the glass between the room and the viewing area. Then I flip on the 'active use' switch that sends members an alert letting them know the room is in use. This room is unique because there are people who will only ever want to be on one side of the glass. Either in the room on display or behind the glass watching. That is why it has an alert button.

I never thought I'd find myself in any of the rooms on this floor, let alone this one. However, I learned something about myself the first time I danced topless for Mason. I had so many mixed emotions coursing through my body. It started with disgust before slowly morphing into lust, desire, and need. I quickly judged him for using that room, but not just him, any man. However, once I was exposed and saw the desire in his eyes, I felt wicked, beautiful, and liberated all at once. That last feeling, that's what I'm going for now.

It's time to free myself. While I've seen this room, I have never been in it. There is something truly intoxicating about it. There are misconceptions about exhibitionism and why people do it. It's actually classified as a disorder, and I suppose in the wrong place it is, but done in an environment

like this, it's the farthest thing from wrong. Here, it's empowering. It's a way of embracing your body, your sexuality, and ultimately yourself. I want to be the truest form of me, stripped down and bared to the world. I am, however, fully aware that my draw to this moment lies in the fact that I've been hidden away, and I'm ready to be seen, but more than that, I'm ready to take back my power.

I wasn't expecting to find Sebastian in Ellis's office, but because I did, I'm willing to bet Nico isn't far, and I want this scene to make its way back to him. No more secret, no more power. Stripping out of my skirt and blouse, I leave my heels on. I picked the right day to wear a matching set. Catching a glimpse of myself in the glass, I look sexy, but there's one problem. The girl staring back at me isn't me. Wetting my forefinger in my mouth, I quickly remove my contacts and throw them to the floor, ensuring there's no chance of backing out. This moment is happening for better or worse.

"Fuck!" A voice rasps out from behind me. I was so consumed in my thoughts and appearance I didn't even hear the door open. Ellis stands before me shirtless, raking his eyes down my body from head to toe. Yes, he's seen me in our next-to-nothing uniform but never in a black lacey bra and panty set, complete with a garter belt and seamed pantyhose. "Knox, what is this, babe?"

Walking over to the Saint Andrew's cross, I ignore his question the same way he did mine and instead ask him one of my own. "Is he here?"

I'm just about to turn around and demand an answer when his hands wrap around my waist from behind as he nuzzles his face into my neck. "Yes," he kisses my neck and keeps his voice low. The room has microphones so the people on the other side of the glass can get the entire experience. "But this, me and you, is playing into his hand." His right hand slides up my stomach before it cups my breast and his mouth finds my ear. My body breaks out in goosebumps from his touch as need coils low in my belly, but I have to stay on course.

Turning in his embrace, I place a kiss on his clavicle and glide my hand down his front until it meets his erect cock. I stroke him over his pants, making him hiss my name. Then, with my lips on his neck, I say, "What makes you think I don't have a plan of my own?" I pull back and slap his cheek. "Tie me up." Shaking his head, he bites his lip, clearly disconcerted and holding back words I'm sure he wants to speak but can't because everyone would hear them.

Backing up, I spread my arms and legs so that he can shackle me in. His chest is heaving, and I can tell he's fighting his emotions, but I don't feel bad for him. He had six months to confess his truth to me, and he didn't. Ellis put Nico first, not me.

He approaches the cross and starts at my feet, shackling my ankles before slowly trailing his mouth up my body. His fingertips lightly graze up my sides, making my skin pebble in their wake as his hot, open-mouthed kisses leave a damp trail of wetness, cooling my heated skin. When he reaches my chest, he licks his way to my ear before asking, "What do you want from me?"

"Did you know?"

His mouth leaves my skin, and his eyes briefly search mine before he moves on to my right arm, shackling it into place. Ellis knows precisely what I'm asking. Once my hand is in, he kisses my palm. As he makes his way to my other arm, he holds my glare with his steel gray gaze that's almost ethereal. After fully strapping me in, he stands at my front and grabs my chin. "I know nothing except what these eyes have shown me."

I jerk my chin out of his grip and close my eyes, and he's immediately in my ear. "Use me. Whatever you want, however you want, it's yours." Those words that shocked me the first time he said them now rock me to my core. This is his guilt. He needs to be freed as much as I do.

"Make it hurt," I say as his lips leave my neck.

"Lennox," he all but growls out in warning before clenching his jaw.

"I want the pain, I need it, and you're going to give it to me." This is what my secrets have brought me. Pain is inevitable, but from it comes growth. We all have the power to harness that hurt and turn it into power. The pain I feel now will be my strength.

When he doesn't move, I say, "Grab a whip." Heading across the room, he opens the cabinet that houses the toys. In it hangs leather crops, floggers, and whips of different sizes and materials. I watch his hand hover over the floggers before choosing the leather riding crop. My adrenaline starts pumping from the thought of him getting ready to hit me with that. I've never been whipped, but I need it. I need to feel the rawness of this moment, its realness.

Walking back, his eyes roam over my body, drinking me in. His desire is evident as he reaches me and runs the soft, buttery leather over my skin. Then, when his eyes meet mine, he says, "Give me a word."

Oh, right, a safe word. "Red."

Before I even have a chance to process the fact I might need one, he lands the first slap to my thigh. I can't help but cry out from the sensation. It fucking hurt, but damn if it didn't feel good. The sting makes me feel alive. "Open your eyes, Knox." When I do, I see his breathing has picked up, but the uncertainty I saw before is gone. Pulling air through his nose, he takes a deep breath before raising his arm and landing another blow to my other thigh. Just then, the door to the room flies open, and Mason comes barreling in with security right behind him.

"Ellis, call your man off." He demands right before he throws Michael to the ground. Shit, I didn't think this part through, but that's because half of me believed he may not show. That maybe I wasn't enough. His eyes find mine, and he clenches his jaw. The distance between us is too great, and the lighting is too dim for him to see my eyes, but I don't miss the fury in his.

Taking a step toward Mason, Ellis says, "You came into my club, broke my rules, and now you want my girl?"

Mason doesn't even hesitate. He takes off, charging toward Ellis, and they both fall to the ground in a heap of muscle. They're both swinging and landing punches while I yell for them to stop. Neither is gaining ground. They're too evenly matched. Michael, the bouncer that Mason threw to the floor, comes over and attempts to pull Mason off, but he throws an elbow in his face. "You don't even know who she is." Ellis spits.

"I know exactly who she is, and I'm all in." He looks at me and says, "She's mine, always has been."

My heart all but explodes in my chest because I've wanted to hear those words for so long. Fuck, I'm regretting my desire to be tied to this damn cross right now, because all I want to do is throw my arms around Mason, but he has to see. He hasn't seen me yet. The lights are too dim. The girl he sees is still Lennox.

Ellis pushes him off, and Mason stands before saying, "You wanted me here. You stole my car, ensuring I would follow. Don't tell me it was to watch you let another man put his hands on you." Ellis quirks a brow and rolls his lips. He now knows Mason was my card. He's the hand I'm serving Nico.

I don't even get a chance to answer Mason before Ellis says, "I hope you know what you're doing, Knox." Without another word, he nods for Michael to follow, and they exit the room, shutting the door behind them.

Once the door is closed, Mason's eyes rake up my body from head to toe,

but it's not all lust on his face. There's anger and hurt as well. "Why did you run?"

"You wanted my truth."

He throws his arms wide before saying, "Voyeurism is your truth?"

I can't help but smile, but it fades before it ever has the power to take over my face. Dropping my head, I say, "No, Mason. I needed you to see. I didn't know when or how that looked, or if you'd come. I just hoped you would, and when you did, you'd have my truth. But this, right now, this is for me. You say you're all in, but—"

My words are cut off when I feel his hand grip my chin. I close my eyes as he tilts my head up and says, "I'm all in. I already told you there was nothing you could do that would make me leave. Now, open your eyes, Princess."

That hypnotic ocean-blue gaze is pinned on mine when I open my eyes. His breath visibly catches, and his breathing becomes labored as my own heart threatens to beat out of my chest. Watching realization settle over him is equal parts nauseating and cathartic. I need this raw, unfiltered moment to know if I'm worth it. Bringing his hand to the side of my face, he lightly caresses my cheek before clenching his jaw and closing his eyes, clearly upset. I want to rush ahead of his thoughts, *sure now he doesn't know*, and blurt out, 'let me explain, it's not what you think,' but when I start, "Mace—"

He shakes his head. "No, you're not. Don't pretend with me. Your soul is just as ugly as mine." When his eyes open and return to mine, he raises his hand to my mouth and squeezes my lips hard before smearing my lipstick. "Is this what you want? To show the world how disgusting you are, how perverted and depraved the thoughts that consume your every waking moment are?" His hand slides down the front of my chest, tearing my bra down in its wake. My breasts fall out, and when the cool air hits my nipples, they're instantly erect.

Words that should make me recoil from their sting and hate only make me feel better. I spent the better part of ten years believing all of them. "Your morals are corroded, and you deserve nothing less than condemnation." His hand reaches the hem of my panties, and he toys with them briefly before ripping them from my body. My flesh burns from the tear, but any pain instantly disappears when Mason falls to his knees and kisses my mark. When his mouth leaves my skin, a whimper escapes my lips because while his words tear me down, that kiss tells me they're not just mine. They're his

cross to bear as well.

"The darkness that lives inside of you, lives inside of me, and Princess, it's wicked beautiful." In the next breath, his mouth is on mine in an all-consuming, searing kiss meant to brand me as his. His tongue plunges deep as he pins his body to mine. Reaching around, he grabs my ass hard, pulling a moan of ecstasy from my soul. He has my truth, and he didn't run. He's still here, and what's more, he doesn't even know all of it yet. A deep groan of appreciation leaves his chest before he pulls back and says, "I've been looking for you, Charlie Croft. There's nowhere you can run that I won't find you."

CHAPTER 14

"JUST GONNA STAND THERE AND HEAR ME CRY. WELL, THAT'S ALRIGHT
BECAUSE I LOVE THE WAY YOU LIE."

- Eminem



MASON

There was the tiniest sliver of doubt that my sleep insomnia had gotten the best of me, and I was wishing for her identity to be something it wasn't. After all, what were the chances that the woman who changed the entire trajectory of my life, the exact same one I spent the past ten years searching for, has been under my nose for the past two months? My dad's brother William lived on the East Coast, and he and my father had an estranged relationship for my entire life. The summer I turned fifteen, however, he moved back to St. Louis and brought with him a wife and daughter.

Charlie wasn't the prettiest girl I'd ever seen by any means. She wore braces, her chest was flat, and she was skinny as a rail, but something about her shy, reserved demeanor called to me. Maybe it was because I didn't have siblings and I was looking to raise a little hell; I couldn't tell you. But that summer, I made it my mission to break her out of the box her parents seemed intent on keeping her in. What started out as teasing, harmless banter, typical sibling rivalry doing anything and everything to provoke and incite a reaction morphed into something neither of us saw coming. We fell into a rhythm of sneaking out just to hang out until hanging out became making out.

That first kiss was only supposed to be a one-time thing, but it had been building for so long. For weeks, the sexual tension between us was off the charts. I remember sitting on the couch, massaging her calves as we watched a movie. I couldn't tell you what it was because I only thought of her and how I wished we could be so much more. As my hand made its way farther up her leg and met no resistance, I was done. My mind was made. I didn't care how wrong it was; I had to kiss her, even if it was just once. Just to know what it was like. I told myself friends practice on each other all the time. There's no harm if there are no feelings involved. It's just a first kiss to ensure the actual first kiss is a good one. That's how I'd pitch it.

When I finally got her alone and out to the van, I could tell she was nervous. Hell, so was I. I was about to ask my fucking cousin if I could kiss her. Somehow, I swallowed my nerves down and pushed aside the voices that told me I was mentally disturbed for wanting it and asked her. Charlie didn't stop me. She wanted it too. I could feel it. We didn't say much to each other that day in the van. We were too scared to voice anything that might stop

what we both wanted to happen. We knew it was wrong, but it was just a kiss until it wasn't.

That day was perfection. For a solid hour, we locked ourselves in that van; nothing else existed. She was just a girl, and I was just a boy. Nothing was holding us back. It was the best hour of my life until I experienced heaven later that night. I knew I'd never forget that day or the girl, and I haven't. She's lived inside of me ever since. Ruining me for all others. I've been looking for her since the day she left. Charlie is the reason I moved my company to Silicon Valley in the first place. It's the last known place we could track Uncle William to. I convinced myself that if I lived here, I could somehow find her, but they were too good and covering their tracks. The trail went cold the second their flight landed.

I knew there was something too familiar about Lennox from day one, but she looks nothing like the girl I knew. Where Charlie was stick thin, Lennox is nothing but curves with an ass for days, and don't even get me started on her breasts. She has some of the softest tits I've ever put in my mouth, no doubt, because they are all-natural. But it's not just her body. Charlie had short platinum blonde hair that barely brushed her shoulders, and Knox's dark brown locks run down her back. Charlie had lips stretched thin from her braces and was timid and reserved. Knox has full lips. Lips that I've imagined wrapped around my cock countless times. But when I saw that scar on her thigh, I was taken back to the first and only night I had her.

That afternoon spent in the van wasn't nearly enough. We had already crossed the line, and damn if we didn't want more. That summer, we had already been sneaking out at night to hang out and talk, but we both left that van knowing our next hangout would be so much more. That night, she jumped out of her bedroom to meet me and fell into a rose bush. Her leg was dripping with blood when she met me at the treehouse. I remember wanting to call everything off, as if we needed another sign that we shouldn't be sneaking out to hook up. But she insisted it was no big deal.

That scar angers me because it reminds me that she lied then and now. But it's also how I discovered her, how I knew she was mine. However, I wasn't prepared for what the sight of those pale blue eyes would do to me. As I held her chin in my hands, I told her to open her eyes, and when she did, my heart stumbled, but my hate flared.

The pale blue eyes that have haunted my dreams now stare back at me, and damn it, if I don't love and hate her in equal measure. But I won't let her

go. It doesn't matter that I can't have a future with her. I'd rather live with her in the dark than live without her in the light.

"I've been looking for you, Charlie Croft. There's nowhere that you can run that I won't find you. You are mine."

Her pale blue eyes latch onto mine, and she says, "Prove it."

I am not into exhibitionism, and I don't care to have eyes looking at what's mine, but if this is what she needs, I'll give it to her. Bringing my mouth to her neck, I bite the sensitive skin under her ear before saying, "You want the world to see the wicked things you crave behind closed doors." My hand cups her bare breast, and I pinch her nipple. "Mmm," she moans, and I can't help but press my throbbing cock into her stomach. I lick my way up her neck until I reach her jaw, where I grab her chin and bring her mouth to mine. "Answer me, Charlie."

With her eyes pinned on mine, she says, "Yes, because the doors I open determine how I'm going to live my life. I won't be your secret, not when I deserve to be so much more. Mace, we aren't—"

My mouth covers hers before the last words finish leaving her beautiful mouth. She's always been my everything. Her tongue battles with mine, and somehow the room disappears. She's all that matters to me. My hands leave her body only to unbutton my shirt. She played her part. She gave me her truth; now it's time to show her mine.

Charlie ran away from me today because she didn't believe I would choose her, even after I told her there was nothing that could make me leave. I bared my truth to her, but like me, she didn't see what was always there right in front of her. In the bath we shared, my big tattoos caught her attention. She noticed the clock and the girl, both of which represented her. However, the most telling details aren't in the pieces but in the thorns connecting everything. They cover my heart and wrap around my body, and they are my biggest tribute to her. They represent all that she is.

Her eyes immediately start roving down my torso as I move to unlatch her left arm. Bringing her hand to my chest, I place it over my heart before saying, "It's always been you, Charlie, every day since the first time. These thorns represent the purest love and adulation I've ever felt. I loved the fragrance of the rose; I enjoyed its sweetness, and for that, I was a slave to all its thorns. But Princess, to enjoy the beauty of the rose, we must water the thorns. Their sting reminds me of the beauty that awaits." Taking her hand, I trace the petals of the rose underneath that curl into her initials, CC. "It's

always been you, Charlie."

I watch her eyes soften as realization sets in. "Mason, there's so much more we—"

Cutting her off, I cover her mouth with my own before saying, "You're not my secret Charlie. You're my everything." There will be time for talking later. Right now, I need my girl. I kiss her hard one more time before making my way down her chest to her full tits, where I take my time sucking, nipping, and squeezing before dropping to my knees and kissing her birthmark just like I did the first time I ever tasted her. Then, looking up, I find her eyes before saying, "Mine." Her legs are strapped in and spread wide, and because I ripped her panties from her body, nothing keeps me from tasting her.

My tongue meets her wet pussy, and I let an audible groan of satisfaction in the awareness that she was my first and she will be my last. I can't get enough of her taste, her scent, the feel of her writhing from the pleasure I'm extracting from her perfect body. I spear my tongue into her tight hole, and her free hand finds my hair. As her fingers drag over my scalp, my body tingles with need. Every nerve ending is alight with the awareness of her touch and what it does to me. She's my drug, my vice. The part of me that's been missing. My hands grip her thighs hard, and I squeeze, digging my nails into her soft flesh.

"Mace..." My name is a desperate cry off her lips as her body starts to shake.

"Let go, Charlie. Give it to me, Princess." I move my mouth to her clit and suck hard. Her pussy spasms, and her juices coat my lips. I lick her through the aftershocks before I hear her cries of pleasure turn to sobs.

Unlatching her ankles from the cross, I quickly stand and unlatch her wrists. No sooner have I've released her than she's in my arms and wrapped around me. I hold her tight and breathe her in as I let this moment sink in. It's a powerful thing when you bare your soul to the world, and there's nothing left to hide. Charlie is my stain, the secret that tormented my every waking moment and haunted my dreams. However, kneeling before her, I realized I no longer cared if the world saw me. I didn't need them to understand. The only person that mattered was the one I was worshiping. If she saw me, nothing else mattered.

Pulling her chin up so that her pretty pale blue eyes are on mine, I say, "We'll figure this out. I need you, Charlie." She nods, and I kiss her lips

softly before bending down to grab her ass and lift. Her legs immediately wrap around me as I walk toward the bed. I lay her down and kiss her neck before bringing my eyes to hers. "The world has seen all that they are going to get. The rest is for my eyes only. You are mine."

I leave her to hit the button next to the bed that fogs the glass and mutes the mics. Pulling out my wallet, I grab a condom and unbuckle my pants. "What are you doing?" she asks.

I furrow my brow, not understanding how it isn't obvious, before saying, "I'm getting ready to fuck my girl."

When I fucked her bare the other night, I couldn't help myself, but I knew it was reckless. It's why I took her ass later and not her pussy. I'm keeping her, regardless that we can't have children or get married, but I don't need those things as long as I have her. Coming down on top of her, I cage her in and kiss her forehead. "Charlie, I'm all in, but we can't get pregnant. We can adopt if you want kids—"

She starts shaking her head. "Mason, we're not related."

My chest tightens as all the air feels like it has just been knocked out of me. I roll off her, so I don't crush her with my weight as I wrestle with her words. "How is that possible, Charlie? You are William's daughter. William is my father's brother. Therefore, we are first cousins."

Propping herself up on her arm, she's at my side. "William wasn't my father. I didn't find out until he died a few months back. He got really sick and needed a blood transfusion. While he was asleep, I spoke with the doctor about making a direct blood donation, but when they drew my blood, they said I wasn't a match. I asked how that was possible, and they told me my blood type was incredibly rare. I'm AB- and he was O+. I would have had to inherit an A or B gene from him. I had a genetic test done shortly after that confirmed we had zero shared genetics."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, shocked, irritated, and elated all at once. I can have my girl in every way I want, but why all the secrecy? "Charlie, I don't understand. Why did you hide this from me? I repeatedly asked you not to lie to me." Pulling away, she sits up and slides to the edge of the bed, but before she can stand, I pull her back by her garter belt and to my side. "No more running. Tell me."

"Gianna showed up. It was her back then, and I thought it might still be her now."

I sit up fast and pull her chin toward me, forcing her to meet my face.

"What do you mean, 'it was her then'? You disappeared before there was ever her and me."

Her eyes search mine, and she shakes her head. "The weekend after we hooked up, I went to your house. I was going to tell you that William asked my mom for a divorce, and he was leaving. Your mom said you were up the street at a friend's house." She pauses, pulling air into her lungs like the next part is hard to say. I gently caress her face and she continues.

"When I found the house, I walked around looking for you, but you were very much occupied when I found you. Gianna was wrapped around you and your hands were gripping her ass. The two of you looked the epitome of the perfect couple, and because it couldn't be us anyway, I left without a word."

Fuck. I had no idea she was there that night. "Wait, is that why you left with William?"

She shrugs before saying, "In the beginning, yes, I was hurt. I had just given you everything, and even though I knew it couldn't be more, it didn't stop my heart from falling. But looking back I think there was more—"

I can't help but cut her off. With my hands on either side of her face, I repeat, "You couldn't help but fall?" Her breath catches when she realizes her slip. "Tell me, Charlie. Tell me you fell and never stopped, because I'm all yours, Princess."

Her lips are pressed to mine, her tongue seeking entrance before I can pull air into my lungs. Climbing onto my lap, she wraps her body around me, and the completeness I feel in that moment is the emotional equivalent of finding a home. She is my home. Her hands slide into my hair as she pulls me closer while her tongue seeks to explore every inch of territory that is all hers. Her erect nipples are pressed against my chest when she grinds her bare pussy against my cock. "Mace, I—"

I flip her onto her back and pull down my pants in one go. She needs me as much as I need her. I run my swollen head through her wet lips before pushing in deep. My cock twitches once it's fully seated, and we both let out deep guttural moans of pleasure. Sure, we've fucked, but this is different. There are no more secrets between us, nothing threatening to keep us apart. I pump her slow and let my tip drag over her g-spot. Burying my face into the crook of her neck I get drunk off how her breathing quickens with every pass. "Oh fuck, Mace, don't stop."

Her words spur me on, and I pick up my pace before saying, "I'm not going to stop, baby. But you're going to want me to. I'll never have my fill of

you."

My lips find her neck, and I can't help but suck her soft skin into my mouth. I need her body pressed against mine, and her taste on my tongue as my cock is sheathed in her warmth. This woman will be the death of me. The sounds of our combined arousal as my balls slap against her soaked pussy have me on edge, but I have to see. I want to see my bare cock disappear inside the only woman I ever wanted. I lift onto my arms and slow my pace watching as her lips stretch around my length. Her juices coat my dick, and my mouth goes slack. Fuck that's hot. "My god, you have a pretty pussy, baby. It's fucking mine."

I can't help but slam in hard. Her tits bounce from the force as she lets out a heady moan. My eyes dart up to find hers lidded with desire, and I bring my mouth down to hers. I can't help but moan when our tongues meet, and I have her exactly how I want her. My tongue invades her mouth greedily as I take what's mine, and she gives it. When her mouth starts to go slack, and her pussy grips me tight, I know she's almost there. I break our kiss and press my forehead to hers as I keep my pace and watch my girl come undone around my cock. "That's it, baby. Milk me. It's yours."

As our shared breaths mingle and her pants shorten, I try to hold back my need to let go. I don't want this moment to end, but I know I will follow her over the edge the second she comes. I want everything with her. I've waited for this moment for far too long. My anger and loneliness became all that I was until, eventually, my emptiness occupied all the space I had left. Her hand grips the hair at the base of my neck, and her pussy clenches hard, "Fuck Princess, give it to me. Come for me, baby."

I feel the moment she lets go, and I bring my mouth to hers, swallowing down all her delicious moans as I follow her over the edge, pumping her through the waves of bliss that have her shaking beneath me. Kissing her cheeks and forehead, I say, "Let's go home."

Her smile starts out timid and unsure before it slowly takes over her face. "Mason Croft, are you asking me to move in?"

I'm still buried deep when I push in and say, "Move in, take my last name, have my babies, everything."

She bites her deliciously plump bottom lip before saying, "Take me home, Mace."



Thank fuck, Charlie took her clothes off in the Voyeur room and not in the girls' locker room. I wouldn't have let her leave the room in a bra and garter belt—she would have worn my clothes—but I'm grateful I have them as I wait for her to come out of the bathroom. Going into this, I didn't give a fuck what I had to do to show her I was all in and that she was mine. I ripped her panties from her body just to find her mark, the one thing that would confirm this was real, and she was indeed my girl. I cut the speakers and viewing off before we fucked. In hindsight, I understand why she wanted the room and how that experience freed her. It did the same for me, but I don't need a repeat.

With that thought, I knock on the door. "Charlie, baby. Let's go." I'm done with this club and so is my girl. I'm still not even sure how she ended up here. William was a rich man. I can't imagine he would go through all this trouble to take her and hide her away from the world, only to die and leave her with nothing. I have so many questions. While the blood test may have proven we are not related, it doesn't explain why they ran in the first place. Charlie said she chose to leave, but I don't believe she really had a choice. Not with everything that happened after she left.

My thoughts on the matter are broken when the alarm on my phone sounds, and because this alarm is tied to only one thing, my rage, hate, and wrath automatically consume me as realization sets in. Holding onto the last bit of my sanity, I slam open the door to the women's locker room and grab the first girl I see, "Where's Knox?"

I loosen my grip slightly when I see the fear in the girl's eyes. "I don't know...." She stumbles before adding, "She left," and points to the door on the opposite side of the locker room. *Fuck.*

She played me.

CHAPTER 15

“WHEN TRUTH IS REPLACED BY SILENCE, THE SILENCE IS A LIE.”

-Georgiy Yevushenko



CHARLIE

My heart is beyond full. The man that's held a piece of my soul since the day we met confessed to having all the same feelings for me. His fucking body is a shrine to his adulation for me. I feel like such a self-absorbed ass for not realizing his cold, cruel, apathetic personality was a shield for his pain. The same fucking pain that tore me apart and made me run. *How is it possible not to see your same pain reflected in someone else?*

Mason said, 'Let's go home,' and as much as I desperately wanted to do just that, I also needed to pee and clean up. I have no fucking underwear again because he tore them off. I will need to remind him that he now owes me two pairs. If this is going to become a habit, he's going to pay up. I hear a knock on the stall door as soon as I finish, and butterflies instantly emerge. *He couldn't wait.*

Opening the door, my eyes shoot up in surprise when Sebastian Lykos stands before me, not Mason. "What—"

My question is cut off as he throws his hand over my mouth and pulls me close. "I wouldn't fight me if I were you. We can do this the easy way or the hard way." With his hand gripped tightly around my face, I feel him push the barrel of a gun into my hip. "It won't be for you."

My chest tightens as his words sink in. He won't hurt me, but if I call out for Mason, he'll use it on him. "I'm going to release this pretty little mouth, and we're going to walk out of here. Do you understand?" I nod in agreement as my heart races. The man behind my back didn't strike me as someone that would ever hurt me. Fucking story of my life.

Releasing me, he puts his hand on my lower back and pushes me toward the entrance opposite the one I entered through. It's the entrance that leads out to the VIP lounge. "You better put on a show for the cameras." He chides as he opens the door and escorts me across the floor toward the elevators. Once we enter the elevator, he says, "Hope you enjoyed the ride. It was your last one."

Inside, I'm fuming. I want to act out and fight back, but I'm missing something. Ellis was helping me, or I thought he was; I could feel it. The elevator doors to the parking garage open, and I ask, "What is this, Sebastian? Is Ellis part of this?"

I hear him laugh at my back and turn to face him, anger clearly written all over my expression. "Relax, sis. I'm not going to hurt you."

My eyes narrow before I answer, "We are not blood. Don't get it twisted. Nico might be my father, but we both know you are not my brother."

He brushes his thumb over his bottom lip, perturbed by my comment, before saying, "Shame, seeing as how you like to keep it in the family. First your cousin, then your brother. I thought maybe I had a chance." Then, grabbing my shoulders, he spins me around and slaps my ass before commanding, "Walk."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I ask as he guides me through the garage.

"Oh, Lennox, or is it Charlie now? If you'd open those pretty eyes, things would be much easier. It could have saved you all the pain I'm about to rain down on you." We stop at a Range Rover before he opens the door. "I wasn't referring to Ellis, sweetheart. Mason Croft may not be your cousin, but he is your brother." I close my eyes as his words wash over me in the worst of ways. My body heats, and my skin gets clammy as the extra saliva in my mouth becomes too much to bear, and I lose the contents of my stomach all over the floor. He jumps back before it has a chance to hit his shoes. "Fuck, I'm glad I told you that before I put you in my car."

With one hand on the SUV for support, I cut him a glare that says, 'don't fuck with me,' but if I thought he'd care, I was mistaken. "Get in. We're leaving now."



My head is a literal mess. I'm beyond sick. I'm mortified, repulsed, and deplorable. *What the fuck is wrong with me?* Why didn't I ask more questions? The first thing I did when I found out William wasn't my father was a DNA test, but it stopped there. *Who discovers the guy they thought was their dad isn't and doesn't dig?*

I know why I didn't look at first, anyway. I was mad. The years of secrets started to play out in my head differently. What I once thought was starting over was suddenly running, and the reflection on those years, the lies, and the weight of treachery were too heavy to bear. So, I ignored it. I acted as if it wasn't there. I had a mother who didn't care that I had left, and somewhere

out there, I had a father who never looked for me. Two parents that could give a shit less about me. At least William wanted me. His reasons may not have been forthright, but our time together never felt anything less than genuine.

Pulling into the circle drive at the Serra Estate, Sebastian gives me his first words since we entered the car two hours ago. "Welcome, home." I don't move to get out of the car or take my head off the car window it's been propped up against since we started driving. I just want to disappear. This place that I once found tranquil no longer holds the same appeal. Coming to my side of the car, Sebastian throws open the door and catches me before I hit the ground.

"Really, Charlie. Come on. Pull yourself together. We all mess around and fuck up. You just happened to do it literally." I give him nothing in response. His words can't hurt me. Nothing can hurt worse than the excruciating pain that has dug its claws into my chest and torn a hole where my heart used to be. You would think finding out the man you've loved for the past decade is your brother would kill all the feelings, but it doesn't. The love that we can't have hurts more than any other. It lasts the longest, reminding you that while you can have anything you want, you can't have everything you want. You'll feel it the longest because you'll always crave that which you cannot have; it's human nature, and you'll feel it the strongest because it endures.

When he starts to push me toward the staircase leading up to the house, and I make zero effort to move, he picks me up, and I don't fight him. I just don't care anymore. Lifting me, he carries me bridal style up the steps as if I weigh nothing, and I rest my head on his shoulder. "Charlie, listen—" His voice sounds borderline sympathetic, but whatever he was about to say is cut off by Nico, and where I thought he'd set me down, he doesn't. Instead, he keeps walking.

"Cosa le hai fatto?" The concern in his tone lets me know he asked a question. It's not hard to guess that Nico isn't happy about my current state, but I could care less.

"Non-preoccuparti." Sebastian dismisses him and keeps walking.

No more words are exchanged as I listen to Nico's steps fall away. Finally, a door is opened, and Sebastian sets me down on a bed before rummaging through my purse. I already know what he's after. My phone. Do I care? No. There is no one to call, no one to miss me. Closing my eyes, I curl

up in the center of the bed and pray for sleep to take me and never wake up. I don't want to live in this nightmare, and that's what every day for eternity will be: a nightmare.



I don't know what woke me. Maybe it was a bad dream or the fact that I'm not in my own bed, but something startled me awake. The room is pitch black, and a chill rolls down my spine as I wait for my eyes to adjust. I can't help but have that eerie feeling of being watched. Looking to my left, I spot a nightstand and sit up to switch on the light. Glancing around the room, I take in the decor, the rich colors, and the ornate Italian furnishings. It could be a great room if it wasn't meant to be a prison. When Sebastian brought me here, I didn't care. My entire heart had just been ripped from my chest. He couldn't hurt me. Not to mention fighting him would have been useless. But I didn't go through hell just to live with the devil. I'm getting my answers.

Crawling to the edge of the bed, I swing my legs over, and my bare feet meet the cool terra-cotta floor. I'm still in the work clothes I wore to the club. I feel dirty and want to wash all the memories away, but the disgust I feel is also putting the flame under my ass now to not bury my head as I did with William. Walking to the window, I open the curtains to see if I can gauge what part of the property I'm on based on the layout I remember from the weekend Ellis brought me here. Looking out the window, I see the long winding road that leads to the estate. In the distance, a car cuts its lights and parks out by the tree line. At least now I know the room I'm in is at the front of the house.

Heading toward the door, I pause when I reach it. Placing my ear against it, I listen for any sign of movement outside. I'm not under any illusions that I'm not being watched. While I may not have a guard posted up outside my door, the way I was brought here leads me to believe my choice in coming and going isn't all mine.

Turning the knob, I open the door to my room and look out to find the courtyard. My instinct is to run to the front of the house and down the driveway, but I know I won't get far. Instead, I decide to explore. It's time to get some answers.

With my mind made up. I head out the door, gently closing it behind me,

and approach the main house. Soft ambient lights in the landscape illuminate the walkways throughout the courtyard, and the closer I get to the main house, I can see that the lights are on. I'm not ready to alert anyone that I am awake if they don't already know, so rather than take the path that would lead me inside, I skirt the perimeter.

All that lines the house are small boxwood bushes that provide zero cover should someone spot me outside the window, but I'm hoping the darkness helps conceal my presence. Since I'm no longer on the lighted pathways of the courtyard, I blend. Finally, something feels like it's going my way. I hear voices up ahead flowing from an open window. Slowly, I make my way to the end of the house and peek around to ensure my hearing isn't failing me, and the voices are indeed coming from inside.

Once I notice the coast is clear, I continue around the corner and glue myself to the wall outside the window to what appears to be Nico's office. "I think you need to head back up to Crush. You've done enough damage for one weekend."

"Come on, papa. You asked me to bring her here, and I did. I didn't harm one little hair on her pretty little head." I hear something thud before Sebastian speaks again. "That's her phone. She has it locked. I'm sure that's child's play for you, but not one person, including him, has reached out to her. I think my way worked out just fine."

My stomach instantly knots at the mere mention of him. I don't need names to know who he's referencing. Nico doesn't say anything, and the room stays quiet. I must resist every urge in my body that is screaming for me to peer into the window and get a look, but if I do that, I risk being seen. I want to hear what's real, not whatever bullshit he wants to feed me.

"Sebastian, you know I love you like a son, but she is my blood. I won't have you causing problems. She will be a part of my life, and this—"

He's cut off before he can finish by a knock at the door. "Mr. Serra, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I went to bring clothes to Charlie, and she wasn't in her room."

"Cazzo!" He curses before Sebastian chimes in. "Want me to go get her?"

"Madonna, no. You've done enough. Sit. I'll pull up the cameras." *Shit.* I quickly peel myself off the wall and reach a pathway before he finds me spying. The conversation wasn't very telling. I'd hoped to learn more. Nico saying he is my blood doesn't surprise me. It was the one assumption I made this afternoon that I felt was absolute, but Mason showing up quickly stole all

of my attention. A man I never knew suddenly being my father and wanting to be in my life should be monumentally huge, but for me, it wasn't. I didn't grow up without a father, but I did live the past ten years away from the only man I ever loved.

I'm just starting down the pathway toward the house's interior when a maid comes to my side. "Charlie, Mr. Serra would like to see you in his library." Her voice sounds like the one I just heard moments ago, the one bringing me clothes. The woman's face is sweet and welcoming, and her touch is light as she reaches for my elbow to lead me through the open foyer and down the hall toward the library. "Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

I shake my head before asking, "Do you like Mr. Serra?"

She halts, and her kind eyes find mine before she says, "Si, signorina. He is the best boss I've ever had. My son and I were on the streets before Mr. Serra helped us." She brushes her hands down the front of her uniform before lightly touching my arm to encourage me to keep walking. Hearing her account of Nico's generosity reminds me of Ellis's story.

Looking back, I remember feeling so honored that Ellis shared that side of him with me, a part of him I know doesn't come easy. At the club, when I asked if he knew about Nico being my father, he said it was my eyes. Now I wonder if he didn't suspect long before then, and that's why he shared. I know I have zero room to talk when it comes to secrets and lies, but I never lied to Ellis. My identity and past shouldn't have affected him in any way. The only reason it's hurting us now is that life has dealt me one big 'fuck you' and said, 'nothing is by chance for you. It's all your predestined fate.'

The maid, whose name I didn't ask, pushes open the door, and Nico stands behind his desk while Sebastian sits on a leather couch against the wall. Extending his arm, he gestures toward one of the chairs flanking his ornate dark walnut desk with gold inlay. "Bella, please come and have a seat. We have a lot to discuss." His entire home screams money, but not in a look-at-me way; however, his office is the opposite. It's meant to intimidate. As I make my way to the leather armchair, I briefly meet Sebastian's stare, and where I thought I'd see the cocky, obtrusive prick that threatened me with a gun and pushed me through the club, I see detachment. He's clearly indifferent to whatever happens here tonight.

When I sit, Nico asks, "Would you like a drink?" I don't immediately answer, instead taking my time to trail my eyes over the man standing before

me who claims to be my father. Then, snapping his fingers toward Sebastian, he says, "Seb, vino," before taking his own seat.

Leaning to one side of his chair, he perches his head on his hand and simply meets my judging glare. I want to hate it. A part of me does, but only because I see my eyes when I look into his. "Tell me, bella. What are you thinking?"

Sebastian bringing us our drinks cuts my need to answer immediately, but I already know I will say nothing. I'm not giving him anything. He can do the talking. After setting our drinks down, Sebastian returns to his spot on the couch. I suppose he won't leave until Nico dismisses him. Nico picks up his glass, and I choose that moment to say, "I'm not here to discuss my thoughts, but I would like some answers."

He smirks before swallowing his wine and saying, "You remind me so much of myself with that short fuse." Rubbing his hand over the stubble of his jaw, he adds, "I suppose I'll start. You are mine. You are my blood. My only child." My heart can't help but hang on to only one of those words. I fight back my desire to close my eyes and show any type of reaction to his declaration. Instead, I stay quiet as he takes another sip of his wine before adding, "You were hidden from me, bella. I didn't know you existed until you were fourteen years old. I'm sure you can remember the significance that year held for you."

Again my mind only trails to Mason, but I push down those thoughts and the pain they bring me as I try to recall anything outside of running away with William that he could be referencing. That year, William moved us from the East Coast to St. Louis. I remember the move seemingly came out of nowhere. School had just let out for the year, and William and I had been working in the garage organizing boxes and moving things around to surprise my mother with a new car later that evening when I stepped on a rusty nail. The nail went straight through my flip-flop. It was deep enough that I had to go to the ER to have it removed. We were there all afternoon, first getting it removed and then running diagnostic tests. The day was wasted in the ER, and we didn't surprise mom with a new car. Instead, he announced we were moving to St. Louis.

Now that I think back to that day, knowing what I know now, that had to have been the day he found out I wasn't his. In the ER, he looked every bit the concerned father ensuring his child was well taken care of. After all, I was his only child, and I was very much a daddy's girl. But I remember the doctor

coming in to discuss the results of my tests. Nothing was out of the norm, and we would be free to leave, but as I sat in the bed watching William flip through my discharge paperwork, I saw his face morph from relief to shock. I can recall him covering his mouth to hide his expression, one that didn't fit the mood. After all, I had just been given a clean bill of health and the green light to go home. The doctor even explained how lucky I was that I missed tendons and my shots were up to date. So, the distress and melancholy that settled over us never made sense until now. My discharge papers revealed I wasn't his.

Nico must sense the moment my memories align with his words. "You getting hurt and moving to another state within a week wasn't a coincidence." I shake my head, trying to connect the dots. I don't recall ever meeting Nico Serra in my life, but he found out about me the same year William and I went into hiding, and I can't help but think he somehow discovered my true paternity at the same time as William.

"William and I were best friends, until we weren't." This time he gets up, wine in hand, and strolls to his window. I'm not sure if he's trying to get me to feel sorry for him or what, but the fact that he's my father tells me he cheated with my mother unless, of course, Natalie isn't my mom either, but in my gut, I feel like the latter is less likely.

So, I bite. "You had an affair with your best friend's wife, and he's the bad guy?"

He simply shakes his head at my assessment but doesn't give me much else. "I did not have an affair with your mother. I simply had her first. Natalie and I met at a bar in college. Your mother was an attractive woman, but I had no interest in dating at the time. I told her as much, but it didn't keep her from coming around. That night, we played darts and shot a round of pool before I offered to walk her back to her dorm. Her dorm was only two blocks over from mine. When we got there, the building was locked. She had left her keys inside, so we waited an hour, hoping someone would show up and let her in. One thing led to the next during that time, and I think you get the idea. I made my intentions clear before and after that what we had would only be a one-time thing, but I don't think she believed me. Natalie had it in her mind that she could change mine."

A phone goes off behind us, startling me and earning Sebastian a vexed glare from Nico. They exchange words with merely a look, and Sebastian excuses himself. "As I was saying, your mother believed she could win me

over. She went out of her way to be in mine, which garnered her the attention of my best friend and the man you grew up knowing as your father, William Croft. He was my dorm mate and would-be business partner. After a few weeks of realizing I wasn't going to take the bait, Natalie moved on to William. Initially, I think she believed dating him would make me jealous, but it did nothing of the sort. William fell hard for Natalie. Two months in, he gave her a promise ring which she accepted, and three months after that, they found out they were expecting. I had no reason to think you were mine. We used protection."

Walking over to the bar cart sitting beside the door at the entrance of his office, he grabs the bottle of wine that Sebastian opened and brings it back to his desk. After refilling his glass, he takes a seat, and when his eyes meet mine for the first time since he started this retelling, I see his truth.

"You mentioned that you and William were business partners, but he worked with his brother Johnathan. They formed Croft Tech."

His lips briefly curve into the semblance of a smile before he says, "Yes, Johnathan and William attended CMU with me. We developed Ghost together."

The mention of Ghost gives me pause. It makes me question the sincerity of everything he shared with me. Nico is Mason's biggest competition, and if he developed Ghost, he would know how to hack it, or better yet, how does he not own patent rights? I finally reach for my own glass of wine, not wanting to discuss Ghost. I won't help Nico take down Mason if that's what this is about. It doesn't matter how fucked up things between us are. I would never intentionally hurt him.

"If you were so close to William and Johnathan that you were best friends and business partners, how is it that I never met you? William took me to work all the time."

His brow furrows as he looks down at his wine and swirls it in its glass. "You met me once, but you were very small, and our meeting was insignificant. It was dinner at your house. You had to have only been four or five. I came back to the states briefly to be in person for licensing, permits, and contracts that we had landed. They were our first big break. But once all of it was settled, I returned home to Sicily. Mia Madre fell ill, which was why I left to begin with. I helped my family run the vineyard that had been passed down for the past five generations and worked on expanding government contracts and software in the evening."

My eyes catch the label on his desk; sure enough, it's from the Etna region. "Wait, is your family label Serra Rosa?"

This time his half smile reaches his eyes. "Si, you know it?"

Now William's familiarity with wines from the Etna region makes sense, but why would he hide me and drink the wine of his ex-friend and partner? I nod, "I do. Why are we not drinking it tonight?"

He purses his lips before shrugging and saying, "It's smart to keep an eye on the competition." Then, nodding in a so-so manner, he adds, "And I like to drink more than just my own wine from time to time."

This conversation feels like it's getting off track. While I should want to know about my heritage and roots, I'm not here to sing kumbaya; I'm here for answers. "What happened the summer William and I left Missouri?"

He rubs his jaw before asking, "Can you share something with me first?"

My spine straightens, and I pull air in through my nose, preparing for whatever he might ask. I shrug before saying, "You can ask. It doesn't mean I'll answer it."

"Did you choose to leave with him?"

His question reminds me of my mother, and it makes me uneasy. While at the time, I was a young girl nursing a broken heart, what sealed the deal for me was Natalie's reaction on the night I told William I wanted to live with him. She put up zero fight when I said I wanted to live with William. We were never particularly close. However, we weren't at odds. It was your typical mother-daughter relationship, with trips to the nail salon and the occasional shopping spree. She was present, but William was more.

He volunteered for field trips when I was young and coached my junior soccer team for two years before I decided it wasn't my thing. Hell, we were even the ones to decorate for all the major holidays. But listening to Nico's story of how my parents met, a loveless marriage fits what I saw. I just didn't realize that's what it was while I was living it. William put all his time and energy into me because he wasn't getting anything from her. She checked out. They were husband and wife co-existing under the same roof, but rather than lovers, they were roommates.

Clearing his throat, Nico attempts to bring my attention back to the now rather than the memories my mind is allowing me to run away with. "I loved William. He was my dad. I was a daddy's girl growing up, and Natalie didn't care that I was leaving. Maybe if she had put up a fight or acted like she wanted me to stay..." I pause and shrug my shoulders, "I don't know, maybe

I would have."

Nico furrows his brow ever so slightly, clearly perplexed by my response. Deep in thought, he runs his index finger over the rim of his wine glass. It's obvious my words aren't sitting right with him, but I'm sure hearing your daughter speak of her love for another man isn't an easy pill to swallow. Especially when that man took her and hid her away.

"It's that simple. There was no other reason?"

Now I feel like he's baiting me. This leads me to believe there's more to the question and more to this story.

"I answered your question. Now it's your turn." His eyes stay locked on mine. It's clear he has theories, but until I understand what I'm dealing with, that's all he gets. Picking up my glass of wine, I take another drink and relax in my leather chair, prompting him to begin.

"That summer, William announced that he was leaving the company and wanted to be bought out. The timing didn't make any sense. We were close to finalizing Ghost and sealing deals with some heavy hitters in the cybersecurity industry, but his desire to leave gave us all pause. I had been living in Italy since we started the company, dabbling in expanding security for government agencies, while Johnathan was in St. Louis, focusing on gadgets. William's baby was Ghost. When it was presented to me that he was done, Ghost was also done, and since he was leaving, we all decided to part ways amicably. We split everything. It wasn't until later that I discovered William didn't just leave Ghost dead in the water. Instead, he gave it to Johnathan."

Now, we are getting somewhere with our discussions. I knew this had to do with Mason's company. This wasn't just about me. He wants to settle a score. To right something he feels like he was wronged on. "I'm not going to help you take down Mason. I want no part in that."

Holding up his hand, he shakes his head. "No, bella. Let me finish the story. I'm not sure what happened between the time he moved you both from Pennsylvania to St. Louis. All I know is I received documents from him the week before he left with you. In it were the results of your DNA, blood type, ancestry, and records dating back to your birth. Flipping through the pages, I was stunned, to say the least. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The lengths he went to just to ensure there was no mistake. Ten years ago, DNA testing wasn't what it is today, and then back it up another fourteen years." He shakes his head and takes another drink.

Tapping his fingers on the desktop, he continues. "I flipped mindlessly through the first few pages for hours until I finally reached the last page. It read:

I hope it was worth it because it's your turn to want that which you cannot have.

Of course, my calls went unanswered, so I got on the first plane I could back to the states. When I arrived, I went straight to William's address, where I found your mother—"

Sebastian barges in with a knock, cutting him off. "Papa, we're ready."

Nico's eyes briefly flick to mine before he stands and says, "It's time to go, bella." Then, coming around the desk, he holds out a hand for me to take.

I stare at it before asking, "Are you telling me or asking me?"

Without pause, he says, "I'm asking you. You may leave if that's what you wish."

In the back of my mind, a voice is screaming at me, 'don't go, don't do it, you said you wouldn't keep putting your life in the hands of men who wished to control it,' but I don't fear Nico, and I still have questions.

I put my hand in his and say, "Let's go."

CHAPTER 16

"BETTER TO BE SLAPPED WITH THE TRUTH THAN KISSED WITH A LIE."

- *Russian Proverb*



MASON

This is the reparation I must pay for the sins I committed. I should have known there would never be any peace for my soul. I loved a girl I had no business loving. That type of beginning never ends with a happily ever after, but our story is far from over. She will pay for her treachery and helping Nico Serra gain access to my system.

Driving to my office, my thoughts were consumed with her and the web of lies she wove. All this time, I thought she was mine. Until she left me at the club, I thought her only deceit was her true identity. I played the game and bought her pretty little lies because I believed they were the ones that meant we could exist. We could be together if we kept up the ruse that I didn't know who she truly was. I didn't know all this time that we weren't related. While I've questioned a lot over the past few days, that's one declaration I believe to be true. But I've already called in a favor with a client that runs a lab to ensure it. I'll have results within the next 48hrs.

Instead of chasing her down and gifting her with all the pain she served me, I had to return to the office where I've been holed up for the past 48 hours. I had to shut down all of Lark networks, including customer-facing systems. It's the only way to ensure a slug doesn't infiltrate and slowly take down my servers. I've just started slowly running tests and troubleshooting all network hosts to make sure nothing got past our walls when the door to my office is flung open and Ethan Grand comes barging in.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" He questions in disbelief.

Christopher's eyes go wide from where he sits on the couch. He's been posted up with me since I hauled ass back to the office to start running tests and bringing systems live one by one. He's been contacting accounts after I run scans confirming their interfaces weren't jeopardized.

"Oh, goodie, one last account I have to contact." Christopher chimes in sardonically.

Ethan puts his hands on his hips and looks at him quizzically, not understanding his comment. So, I say, "Don't worry, Grand. Your accounts weren't corrupted. I just finished checking all of them. We were about to call, but here you are in the flesh."

He shakes his head, seemingly bemused by my comments, before saying,

"What are you going on about? Did you not get August's texts?"

I take off my glasses and pinch the bridge of my nose. Of course, something would happen to Gigi. "What happened? Where's Gianna?"

I instinctively shoot out of my chair, searching my desk for my wallet and phone, ready to go to her side, when he says, "Gigi is fine. It was just a little minor bleeding. Nothing serious, she's fine, the babies are fine."

My eyes feel like they practically bulge out of my head when his words sink in. "Bleeding? Babies as in plural?"

"Yeah, man, babies. They're having twins. That's why it took me longer to get here. She's my sister. I stayed until I had the results of every damn test and then came straight here. So, what's the plan? How are we going to get your girl back?"

I shake my head in annoyance before taking a seat. "Ethan, I don't know what the hell you think is going on here, but I don't have a girl, and right now, I have a fucking mess to clean up—"

My eyes flick over to Christopher, whose eyes are locked on his computer screen, but his posture is all wrong to be genuinely focused on anything. He's unnaturally tense. I've been so consumed with the cyber-attack that my mind hasn't allowed me to put an ounce of thought into my personal life, one I don't share, but Christopher has always meddled regardless, so his lack of response to Ethan's claim that I have a girl gives me pause.

While I'm allowing Charlie's treachery to steal my attention away from my work, it doesn't go unnoticed that he hasn't asked about her once in the past 72hrs, something I can't believe didn't garner my attention sooner. I might be going through hell, but everything around me is business as usual. Employees are still clocking in and out and doing their day-to-day, so why hasn't he asked where Charlie is?

My thoughts are disrupted when Ethan says, "Hold up, are you trying to tell me that my sister, the one who was borderline obsessed with you growing up, got it wrong when she said you took her to a sex club to get your girl? And when I say, 'your girl'," he uses air quotes to emphasize his point and adds, "I mean 'the one'."

"Yeah, she got it wrong."

He strolls across the office and throws himself into one of the chairs at the head of my desk. Then, crossing one leg over his knee, making himself comfortable, he asks, "Do you care to elaborate on that?"

No, I don't care to elaborate on shit however doing so might give me a

better idea of whether or not Christopher knows anything. After all, he was the one that broke my rules and hired her. Pushing out of my chair again, I walk to my wet bar and pour a drink before choosing my next words, ones meant to incite a reaction. "Bottom line, I got played. There's a reason I turn my emotions off and shut people out. They waste my time."

I throw back two fingers of whiskey before refilling my glass and returning to my desk. Ethan steepled his fingers before adding, "Well, maybe if you weren't such a prick, she wouldn't have played you." He stands and adds, "Your fucking manners suck."

Ethan helps himself to the wet bar and pours a drink as I snap back, "My manners are perfectly fine. I was hoping you'd leave." I don't miss how Christopher's demeanor has changed with Ethan's topic of conversation. Moments ago, he was quick to taunt. Now he looks like he wants to disappear. While Ethan hasn't mentioned any names, I'm not convinced that Christopher doesn't know exactly who we are talking about, and I need to see if I have a mole.

"Not happening. So, what I'm hearing is that the mission changed. I thought this would be search and rescue; now it's a seek and destroy. Both sound thoroughly entertaining. I've been fiending for some crazy. Everything has been way too monotonous. I'm down. Let's roll."

Fucking perfect. Ethan's comment seals Christopher's fate when he closes his eyes with regret. He knows something. Leaning back in my chair, I wait for him to meet my gaze, and when he does, his face goes white, and he knows I see his deceit. Drink in hand, completely unaware of the traitor among us, Ethan returns to his seat and pulls out his phone before adding, "A trip to Sicily sounds hella good. Italian women are hot as fuck."

I don't even process Ethan's words because I'm too enraged that a man I've trusted for years would have the boldness to turn on me. He knows I could destroy him. Christopher drops his eyes and starts packing his things even though I haven't dismissed him. There is no way in hell he is leaving, so I say, "How much did it take for you to betray me?"

I have no doubt someone paid him for whatever services he provided. Charlie doesn't have enough money to lure Christopher into her court. No, this treachery reeks of Nico Serra. He got to him. Ethan's eyes go wide before his head snaps to Christopher. All of this clearly giving him the entertainment he's been searching for.

Christopher rolls his lips and shakes his head before blowing out a breath

and collecting himself. Then, when his eyes open, he says, "Look, I didn't have anything to do with whatever Lennox did. I was only asked to hire her, that's it." His shoulders deflate as if a weight has been lifted off of him from his admission. But I don't buy that for one second.

I leisurely tap my fingers on the desk and say, "How much? How much did you take in exchange for throwing your future away?" His brows shoot up from my declaration, and I can see the regret on his face. His hands immediately fly up in defense.

"Mason wait a minute, you don't understand. I didn't betray you the way you think I did. I swear it. Let me explain."

Ethan takes a drink of his whiskey and looks at me, trying to gauge my headspace. He knows precisely what lengths I'll go to in the name of vengeance. The last time I sought out retribution, people fucking died. With my patience waning, I say, "Enlighten me before you lose more than just your damn job."

"A few months back, I was drinking at Lawry's on the Bay when a man saddled up beside me. At first, no words were exchanged. He ordered a drink and scrolled through his phone for twenty minutes before asking if I was expecting someone. My immediate thought was he was hitting on me—"

I cut him off, "I don't need a replay of your entire dinner. Get to the part where you thought stabbing me in the back would be a good idea." It takes every ounce of control not to say more and put the fear of god in him. If he feels backed into a corner, he'll start trying to lie his way out.

"He offered me a million dollars to get Lennox a job at Lark, specifically one with access to you. But I didn't immediately take the deal. He gave me his card and told me to think about it. I spent a month looking into Lennox, researching her, and trying to find any links that would give me a reason not to take the deal, and I couldn't find any. I even started going to the bar at Covet to get to know her—"

Slamming my glass down, he stops his defensive maundering. I don't need to hear anymore. It doesn't matter why he made the choices he made. At the end of the day, he betrayed me.

"Give me a name?"

He nervously runs his hands through his hair before shaking his head and saying, "Seb, that's all I have."

I shoot out of my chair and throw my glass against the wall. *Is this guy fucking kidding me? All he has is Seb?*

Ethan springs up out of his chair, throwing his arms out. "Hey, calm down. Did the fucker betray you? Yes, but because I'm not emotionally invested like you, I see this for what it is. He doesn't know anything. He's a damn pawn." I start pacing the space behind my desk, weighing my options with this new information. When Ethan adds, "Let's take a trip. Will bring him with us. Get some real answers."

That's when his earlier comment about Sicily comes back into play. Figures she'd leave the country. She's always been good at running. "Wait, how the hell do you know Charlie is in Sicily?"

Christopher stands up and says, "Hold on, I thought we were talking about Lennox. Who the hell is Charlie?"

With my hands on my hips I drop my head in annoyance. I owe him zero explanations and give him none. "Ethan, you were saying..."

Ethan shakes his head and clears his throat drawing my focus off the floor and back to the room, but I can't help but glare at Christopher with a look that's a borderline challenge. I almost want him to step out of line so that I have a reason to swing on him. He sits down, and Ethan starts.

"August and Gigi followed her when she left the club. He's been blowing up your phone, but seeing how this all seems like news to you, I assume you still have him blocked." He shakes his head like I'm a dumbass.

"Fuck off. Gigi and I literally just spoke two days ago, and I've been a little preoccupied. Making sure August Branson can communicate with me was not on my priorities list."

He stares at me blankly before saying, "Well, how about you do that while I fill you in?"

When I reach for my phone, he starts. "August and Gigi were in their car in the parking garage when they saw a couple walking through it. The guy pushed her along somewhat forcefully, which upset Gigi, but August didn't want to intervene with Gigi in the car. However, when they reached his car, only two spots down from theirs, they heard him say, 'Mason Croft may not be your cousin, but he is your brother.' Gigi all but had a panic attack and tried to exit the car to find you, but August wouldn't allow it. He compromised and got her to agree to tail them instead."

My head is literally spinning as I go over Ethan's words in my head. I know for a fact that Charlie is not my sister. While her father's paternity may be in question, mine is not. I was so focused on all her lies that I missed her truths. I saw what I wanted to see. Because I knew she was hiding her

identity, I chose to believe there was more. But all this time, she was looking for answers just like me.

Setting his glass on my desk, he continues. "They ended up trailing them to an estate just outside of Napa Valley, but as they were sitting outside the place trying to get a hold of you, a helicopter took off from the backyard. August put a guy on it. He owed you for all you did with Gigi back in the day. But I also know Gigi would have had him by the balls if he didn't. His guy was able to track the helicopter to a private airport where Nico kept his plane. The flight logs showed they went to Sicily."

I'm trying to piece everything together. Christopher's information that he was paid to hire Charlie, her lies and truths, and Nico's role in all this. But, when it comes to Charlie, I have a blind spot. I feel everything all at once, and I can't think straight. At lunch, my rage consumed me when I caught her with Nico. I let it erase all of her confessions. The day I picked her up from the Serra Estate, she told me she felt betrayed by someone she trusted. She had no idea she was meeting Nico Serra. Then at lunch the other day, after I laid into her, she told me I had it all wrong, and I heard the conviction in her voice when she gave me those words. But I threw them all away as if they were nothing hours later, the second shit got hard.

"Damn it."

I shove all the paperwork on my desk to the floor, and Ethan clasps his hands together, thoroughly entertained, before saying, "My plane is on standby. Just say the word."

"Let's go."

CHAPTER 17

"NOTHING BETTER THAN LISTENING TO A LIE WHEN YOU ALREADY
KNOW THE TRUTH."

- *Anonymous*



MASON

We're an hour outside of landing in Catania, Sicily, and I feel like I can't get to my girl fast enough. I've already lost four days to Nico's game, and I'm beyond pissed. When we left my office, I brought Christopher along for the ride. There was no way I was letting him go, not when I still had too much to figure out. I've been trying to piece together what the fuck Nico has up his sleeve for Charlie while simultaneously trying to secure my networks. It looks like he sent me on a wild goose chase. The attack was enough to set off my alarms, but that's it. He didn't take a real shot at me. Nico wanted me distracted, and I played right into his hand.

Nico Serra isn't just a rival because he's my biggest competition. He's a threat because he's a founding member of Penn Tech. That was the company's name before Nico and William cut ties, and my dad renamed it Croft Tech. My dad told me he and Nico became frenemies when William left the company. To my understanding, William and Nico bowed out, and my dad bought their shares.

Everyone got their money. There were no hard feelings. My dad explained that Uncle William was done living his work, and Nico moved to Sicily and started working on other projects that he felt would be a huge payoff. Nico and my dad didn't see eye to eye on those projects, so they parted ways. Turns out Nico's ideas were brilliant. He invented some cloud technology that is unmatched in the market and has working contracts with the US and British governments. Nico by no means ended up with less than, but because they had been collectively helping William launch Ghost, I believe he felt deceived when William bowed out and then gave all his work to my father.

I remember when my dad told me this story, shortly after we moved our headquarters to San Jose, I was blown away. My dad and William had an estranged relationship my entire life. I didn't even meet William until I was fifteen years old. So, hearing that he just handed over technology that would make my father millions was confounding, to say the least. At the time, I put little thought into the story my father told me. Nico Serra meant nothing to me, but that exact story is where I started digging.

The year Charlie and William disappeared was the same year the trio split

ways, and now it's clear why. Nico Serra is Charlie's father. I can't believe I didn't piece that together sooner. They have the exact same fucking eyes, and he was a part of William and Johnathan's shared histories. William's disappearance and choice to disband and give my dad Ghost all made a hell of a lot more sense when I pieced that together. Taking Charlie was the ultimate payback. I've learned a lot from following old email exchanges between Nico and my father, but they have only helped provide timelines—leaving me with more assumptions than facts. There's no telling what sordid details lie between our parents.

What I haven't been able to piece together is why Sebastian Lykos told Charlie she was my sister. It turns out Christopher was good for something. When I heard that a man escorted Charlie out of the club, I assumed that man was Ellis. He was, after all, her roommate and link to Serra. However, his face was not the one on camera. I showed the footage to Christopher, who confirmed that the man in the video was Seb, the guy who paid him a million dollars to hire Charlie. It wasn't hard to put together who he was from there. Sebastian Lykos is the spitting image of his brother Ellis.

With a twenty-hour plane ride to Sicily and more questions than answers, I did end up listening to Christopher's entire dinner story. I needed to know if any parts of their shared conversation could answer why Nico would want Charlie to work at Lark, to begin with, only to take her from me months later. Christopher's retelling didn't reveal anything, but his phone records did confirm his truth. Ethan was correct in his assessment. He was nothing but a pawn. I combed through everything, deleted messages, active chats, emails, and phone numbers. You name it, and I looked it over. It was a simple transaction, a job in exchange for cash. But I also happened to stumble upon his motive, one which he has yet to come forward with.

I pay Christopher a more than decent salary. He makes a hefty six-figure salary, and while I know people love money and the power it can bring, he never struck me as a greedy man or someone who would be foolish enough to let greed influence his better judgment. Greed wasn't his motivation. Family was. His parents were buried under a mountain of medical debt, and were two notices away from losing their home. So he used the money to pay their debts and save their home. And while some would say his motive and intent excuse his betrayal, I do not.

His continued silence on the matter tells me he feels justified in his actions, regardless if they were at my detriment. I don't care to pry and

discuss his family matters. He is entitled to his pride, but I'd be a damn fool to allow him to continue to work for me. It's easy to surmise if he did it once, he'd do it again. While his intent wasn't malicious, it doesn't excuse the action. At the end of the day, bad decisions with good intentions are still bad decisions. People do not judge us by our intentions but rather by our actions.

"You've been quiet, Mace. What's going on in that brilliant mind of yours? Have you worked it all out yet?"

I can't help but clench my jaw in irritation, not at Ethan but at his remarks. It's driving me crazy. I know I'm missing something. I can feel it, but I can't place it. I shake my head and say, "No, I think he's after me. I'm not sure what his intentions are for Charlie, but I don't believe he would hurt her. She's his blood. This is a vendetta. William hid her away from the world and handed over Ghost to my father. I know my father looked for Charlie because he looked for William, and when I did some digging, I found correspondence between my father and Nico. I think he was helping him, so I don't understand what this is now. At lunch, he told me his truce was with my father, not me. I'm not sure what to think, and my gut tells me that's exactly what he wants."

Pressing my palms into my eyes, I let out a growl of frustration before adding, "It has to be personal."

"But you're sure there is no blood shared between you?"

"Yes, I know Johnathan and Chloe are my biological parents. She's not my damn sister." The plane starts its descent, and my phone pings from an email. When I open it up, my heart skips a beat and I announce, "It's confirmed. The results are in. We share zero DNA." When she said William wasn't her father, I knew it had to be true, but I wasn't going to leave anything to chance. Not when I still wanted everything even after I thought she betrayed me.

Ethan paces the plane's cabin before asking, "Are you sure he wasn't behind any of the accidents?"

Sitting up, I push my head into the leather captain seat before saying, "I've considered it, but he and my father had a truce at the time of both my car accident and the helicopter crash."

Finishing off his vodka and tonic, Ethan sits across from me and says, "Well, I guess we're going in blind. Shit's about to get real."



The flight over was spent digging into Nico Serra's past and the connections has to my family, so when we landed, we had to come up with a game plan. We couldn't just walk up to Serra's Estate. It's nestled on a vineyard on the outskirts of Catania. That's how we ended up waiting for a tour bus to take us to the Estate. Apparently, his vineyard is part of a local tasting tour. The last tour goes up at 5:00 pm.

"Okay, what's the plan after we get there again? If we go up with no car, how will we get Charlie and leave?"

Fixing my ball-cap and jacket, I try on a pair of sunglasses we picked up at a shop on our way to the hotel and check my reflection in the mirror. "We're not trying to take her right now. This is how we are going to get on the property undetected. See where the main house is, what kind of security he has, then tonight we'll go back. Besides, it's not like she will just be walking around."

"Mason, I'm not sure why I need to be here for any of this. You already have my truth. I took money in exchange for Charlie's position. I'm fired. I get it but—"

I cut off Christopher before he continues to whine. "You're coming because you were Serra's lackey, and I'm returning what's his. You see, in all our talks, you left out a few key details about your deal, like the part where you ensured I would never find out. Your fate is in his hands, not mine. While I may be empathetic to your purpose." I pause and hold his eyes, communicating without words that I know why he took the money even though he has yet to tell me himself. "It only means I don't care to destroy you, but you made your bed, and now you must lie in it."

Ethan ignores most of our exchange before saying, "Wait, do you think he has her tied up or some shit? We are in Sicily, and he seems to have men doing his dirty work."

His comment does have some merit. Nico was not born in the states. This is where his parents are from. He attended school on an F1 visa. The man could very well have mafia ties, yet another reason for the surveillance we are doing now. But as far as hurting her, I don't think so.

"No, Ethan. I don't think she's tied up, but he probably has her confined to a wing of his house or something. The Charlie I know wouldn't just let someone boss her around. Hell, the first month we spent together was nothing but her pressing every one of my buttons intentionally trying to get a rise out of me." Snatching my phone and key card off the table, I call out, "Let's go."

The tour coordinator said the bus would be downstairs at 5:00 pm."



"Hey, we should split up when we get off the bus. The guide said you could tour the vineyards or the cellars. You want to take the cellars, and I'll take the vines?" I question.

Ethan swats my shoulder as we stand to exit the bus. "I'll take the vineyards. You can take the cellars with Chris. I flew your ass out here. The least you can do is let me take in the scenery."

"Welcome to Serra Rosa. Once you step off the bus, please exit to your left if you wish to tour the vineyards. If the cellars are what you seek, head to your right."

As we exit the bus, our senses are immediately overwhelmed. There's a distinct earthy smell from the rain that came through a few hours ago, but when the wind blows, you get sweet floral notes from the vines. The property is indeed impressive. On the drive up, the guide was throwing out random facts about the neighboring wineries, their histories, and the type of grapes they grow. I learned that Serra Rosa is one of the most extensive vineyards in the Mt. Etna region at 75 acres. Most of the neighboring properties max out at 50, meaning practically everything my eyes can see is his. Apart from an iron gate and guard shack at the start of the drive up, I have yet to see any other security. The property didn't appear to be fenced off. The gate serves to more or less keep traffic from coming up during off hours rather than as protection. We will have to come up on foot when we return tonight. The Estate also sits a good ten acres back from the main road, which is something to consider upon leaving the property later.

Entering the cellars, you can feel the history of the place the second you step through the doors. I'm not sure what I was expecting, modern and flashy maybe, considering I know Nico's net worth, but the sight before me is nothing if not timelessly aged. I'm not even sure I would classify this as a cellar. It's a true cellar carved from a cave.

In California, the cellars are arched steel and concrete with accent lighting that sets a mood. You can tell these cellars were built ages ago. The lighting along the ceiling and the walls are lanterns that give off very little light. As we make our way down the first tunnel, I can see up ahead that the tunnel

opens into a room. Reaching the tasting room, there's a bar along the back wall, but your eyes are immediately drawn to the room's ceiling and its high arch lit up by gas lanterns. There's no escaping it. The age of this cellar literally seeps into your soul. You can feel the history here.

Christopher elbows my arm, gaining my attention. When I look at him, he nods toward the bar and says, "I think that's Charlie."

A woman in a white sun dress with long brown hair is sitting on a stool sampling a glass of wine. My heart rate instantly picks up when I catch a glimpse of her side profile as she tucks her hair behind her ear. That's my girl. I inhale deeply through my nose and steel my spine as I try to collect my thoughts. I wasn't prepared to find her down here, and like always, she steals my ability to focus. Christopher takes a step toward her, and I pull him back.

"Wait." I grind out. "I didn't expect her to be walking about the estate freely." I quickly look around to see if I notice anything out of place. Maybe she's being watched.

That's when Christopher says, "I'll go talk to her. If no one approaches, you have your answer." I hold his eyes briefly before nodding in agreement. I know what he's doing, attempting to right a wrong, but we both know it won't change our outcome. He and I are through.

I scan the room as he makes his way toward the bar. Everyone in here is clearly on tour. There doesn't appear to be anyone lurking. No one's eyes are glued to Charlie in the way that mine are. When Christopher reaches the bar, I watch Charlie's body language. Her head snaps back in surprise when he steps beside her but not the good kind. The expression on her face has to be reminiscent of mine when I discovered his deceit. I start to make my way over, hoping to stop any scene that might play out and draw attention to our presence.

As I approach them, I hear her say, "I knew it. I fucking knew you lied to me. Did Nico send for you?"

Before Christopher can respond, I step up behind her and ask, "Why would Nico send for him?"

She turns on her stool, and her eyes widen in shock briefly before what looks like sadness takes over her face. Her brow furrows before she asks the same question of me. "Did Nico send for you?"

"No." I answer in a somewhat clipped tone before saying, "I came to get my girl. I told you there was nowhere you could run that I wouldn't find you." I hate how the weight of those words feel on my tongue as if this is her

running rather than being taken.

But before I can give her reaction any more thought, she hops off the stool and says, "Look, if Nico didn't send for you, then you shouldn't be here." Her pale blue eyes hold mine briefly, leaving me momentarily stunned by both her beauty and dismissal before she takes off.

"Excuse me, sorry. I'm just going to squeeze by." She says as she pushes through a group talking and sampling wine right outside an entrance to yet another tunnel. There's no way I'm leaving here without her. She doesn't get to dismiss me.

I point to Christopher and say, "Leave and make sure I never see you again." I got what answers I wanted out of him. While I would have liked to have handed him over to Serra as a 'fuck you' to both of them, him for lying and Serra for thinking he'd get away with it. Ultimately, Serra wasted his money, and I got my girl back.

The tunnels are dimly lit, and exposed wire runs between each light on the ceiling and along the wall sconces. But I don't need a lot of light to spot a vision of white up ahead. She stops at one of the barrels and rubs the dust off the front before clenching her fists. Whatever is going on here has her just as upset and confused as I am. I'm sure of it. Wherever her mind has taken her must be miles away because she doesn't notice me coming until my hands are wrapped around her waist from behind, and my face is nestled into her neck, inhaling her sweet scent. She instantly startles before I say, "Shh, it's me, baby."

She pushes out of my arms and spins to look at me. "Mason, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be here. You shouldn't have come."

I look left and right down the tunnels before pulling her between the stacks of barrels. "What do you mean why am I here? You're mine, Charlie. Tell me what's going on. Why did you think Nico sent for me? Why would he do that?"

I know she wants me as much as I want her. There's no faking the connection we have. We've had it since the day we met, so I don't understand why she's still pushing me away. She shrugs before saying, "He mentioned someone would be arriving today, and I thought maybe it was you, but since it's not, you shouldn't be here."

When I reach for her hand to pull her into me, she snatches it back before saying, "Mason, I'm sorry you wasted your time coming here, but I can't go home with you."

My chest instantly tightens as her words stab my heart, and I ask, "Can't or won't?"

She shakes her head and closes her eyes. "Both. We never should have hooked up in the first place, and now—" Her hand flies over her mouth, and she says, "I need to get out of here. I think I'm going to be sick. Don't follow me."

As she moves to work her way past me, I throw my arm out and stop her. "No, you don't get to do that. You don't get to walk away from me—"

She cuts me off, "You're my fucking brother, Mason. We can't be together." *Damn it.* I should have started with that. We can never just be. There's never a moment of peace. Whenever I look at her, I just want to make her mine in every way possible. The rest of the world could burn for all I care.

Pushing her against the wine barrels, I grab her chin and make sure her eyes are focused on mine before I say, "Charlie, you are not my sister or my cousin. We share zero of the same blood. I promise you. I've already double-tripled-checked with a forensic lab back home that owed me a favor. If you still don't want me—"

I don't even get the chance to finish my sentence before her mouth is on mine. The tension that has riddled my body since losing her is instantly gone as her soft curves meld into me. Reaching down, I pick her up and hold her tight.

Her tongue dives deep as her hands knock the ball cap off my head and she runs her fingers through my hair, making my body prickle with the awareness that she is my girl. The moment we shared in the voyeur room was real, and she wants me as much as I want her. That desire ignites a fire in me to mark her and claim her here and now. Her legs tighten around my waist as she presses her heels into my ass, letting me know she feels the same way, and I can't help but let out a heady moan of appreciation as I feel her heat against my stomach. Pulling out of her kiss, I say, "You want my cock right here, baby?"

I press her into the barrels to leverage my hold, and she answers by pulling the front of her white sundress down. Her nipples immediately pebble from the cool temperature, and I dip my head to take one into my mouth. Her hand finds the back of my head, and she lets out a delicious moan that has my cock weeping with the need to be buried deep inside her. Laughter down the tunnel has her tensing in my arms, and I release her breast with a pop before

asking, "Do you want me to stop?"

She shakes her head before responding, "No," and I can't help but smile.

"That's right. My girl is a freak. She likes an audience." Reaching between us, I unbutton my jeans and free my cock, but she stops me.

"Wait, put me down." My eyebrows shoot up in surprise at her request, and when I don't immediately move, she says, "Please. I need this. Put me down."

As soon as I set her down, she pulls her loose-fitting sundress over her head and throws it onto a barrel before dropping to her knees in front of me. "Charlie, what is this?"

She grabs the base of my cock and runs her tongue up its length, sending tendrils of heat to every nerve ending in my body. "I ran, Mason. I ran then and now, but I'm done running." She swirls her tongue around my head before pulling it into her mouth, and I groan as she takes me deep. I know I need to focus on her words, but fuck her mouth feels too good. Then, releasing me, she adds, "I don't want there to be any mistake in my choice."

Her lips wrap around me again, and my hand instinctively finds the back of her head. Fuck, she looks so hot. Her head is bobbing, her juicy ass that I want to sink my teeth into looks like a fucking snack with a white thong running up her crack, only making it stand out all the more in this dimly lit room. Bringing her hand to my waist, she repositions herself to take me faster and deeper, and my balls start to tighten with my need to come. "Fuck, Charlie."

Those pale blue eyes lock on mine as she takes me down her throat. Her eyes water from my size as she all but chokes it down, and it is fucking beautiful. But when her nails dig into my ass, I'm a goner. Her head bobs down one more time, and I hold her in place as I shoot my cum down her throat. Then, wrapping my hand through her hair, I pull her off my dick. "Stand up, baby."

Bending down, I take her lips in mine and taste the saltiness of my cum on her tongue, and my cock twitches. Before Charlie I hadn't kissed a woman in years, and tasting what she does to me on her lips is intoxicating. I pinch one of her nipples between my fingers before slowly trailing my hand down her stomach. When I reach the thin material of her panties, I pull them hard and tear them off her body. She instantly pulls her mouth away from mine. "If you're going to keep tearing my panties, you better start paying for them."

I can't help but bark out a laugh as I drop my head to her neck and nip the

sensitive skin there before saying, "I'll buy you all the panties you want, but I'd rather you not wear them at all around me."

Whatever words she was about to give me are stalled when she feels my fingers run through her folds. We both let out deep euphoric moans of ecstasy as I slip a finger inside her. I pump her as I suck her lobe into my mouth. Then, when I feel her body slowly begin to slump against mine, I withdraw my fingers. Her eyes snap to mine, and I take her mouth before saying, "I'm nowhere near done with you, Princess."

Grabbing her by the hips, I hoist her up on the wine barrel, putting her pussy right where I want it. The voices from the tour ring out again as laughter filters down the tunnel. With my eyes locked on Charlie's, she subtly spreads her legs in invitation as she bites her lip. I kiss the inside of her thigh before draping her legs over my shoulders and licking her straight up her center. "So good," she draws out as her hand tangles in my hair. As I lick, nip, and suck her pussy into my mouth, her delicious moans grow louder, and there's no way they can't be heard by the people down the tunnel. But I don't relent. She's mine, and I don't give a fuck who knows it. Let them hear. "Mace, fuck, right there. I'm going to come."

I flick my tongue over her bundle of nerves before sucking it into my mouth and setting her off. She's rocking against my face and pulling my hair, and I don't want it to stop, but footsteps get closer, and a voice asks, "Did you hear that?"

I instantly pull her down and behind the barrel just before a couple on tour stops at the end of our row. She snickers as she reaches for her dress draped over the barrel, quickly pulling it back on before the guy walking down the tunnel snaps his head in our direction. He doesn't see us but says to his girlfriend, "I swear I heard something."

His girlfriend bites her lip before saying, "Yeah, you heard the same thing I did." She tugs at his coat and pulls him into her. Reaching down, I watch as he grabs her ass. She's wearing a mini skirt, so he easily gets all cheek, and when he does, she says, "Fuck me." *Shit.*

We're going to have to watch these two fuck because they are literally standing in the row of barrels across from us. Before I have time to process my next move, Charlie's hand strokes my cock over my jeans. I pull her into me and nuzzle my face into her neck before murmuring, "You want to watch them fuck while I feed you my cock?"

Before she can answer, the sounds of the other girl's arousal permeate the

area as her boyfriend fingers her wet pussy. Charlie whimpers against my neck. "Fuck" I hiss, entirely turned on by what we're about to do.

"Turn around, and I'll give you what she gets." She lifts her dress, putting her ass on display, and I run my fingers down her crack until I meet her pussy, already slick with need again. I mumble against her neck, "I love how greedy this pussy is," before pushing two fingers in deep. The girl's moans start to pick up in crescendo, and Charlie pushes back on my fingers.

"Slow down, baby. You don't get to come until she comes."

The guy pulls the front of his girl's tank down, exposing her breasts, and pops one into his mouth. Charlie's pussy starts to clench my fingers hard. "You like getting these tits sucked, baby? I reach around and pinch her nipple, and she cries out, forgetting to stifle her moans. I throw my hand over her mouth and say, "Don't make me stop." She heeds my warning, nodding empathetically that she understands. I know damn well she knows I'll make good on my threat. It wouldn't be the first time I've withheld pleasure from her. I lick the shell of her ear before nipping at the skin of her neck. When I look up, the guy has already pushed into his partner. My cock is rock hard and ready when I pull my pants down and bring it to her soaked entrance. I circle my engorged crown around her entrance, dipping in and out slowly, teasing her and drawing out this hot as fuck scene before slamming in.

She bites her lip to stifle her cry as I fully seat myself and rasp out, "Good girl." My god, she feels good wrapped around my dick. The guy pumps his girl in slow, measured strokes, taking his time. You can hear the sound of her arousal sucking him in with every thrust. I have no doubt he's making every second of this tunnel count. It's not every day you get to fuck your girl in the tunnel of a winery while on tour. There's something about the risk of getting caught that heightens the entire experience. You're on the edge of wanting to stop out of fear of getting caught, but you're equally enraptured by the idea. It's a constant push and pull that is fucking intoxicating.

The other girl's moans start to pick up before she pants out, "I want it hard." Charlie's walls squeeze my dick in anticipation just as the guy smacks his girl's ass. Grabbing a handful of Charlie's cheek hard, I whisper in her ear, "You're a freak princess. I like how you choke my cock watching another guy get his but make no mistake this is the only dick this pretty pussy is ever going to have."

But when she turns her head over her shoulder and says, "It's the only one I ever want." I almost lose it. *Fuck.*

"Close your legs and grab the barrel." The guy tells his girlfriend. I tap Charlie's thigh gesturing for her to do the same, and she does so wordlessly. The new angle tightens the fit, and I watch as he pushes in slow one time, groaning out his appreciation of the new fit before firmly gripping her hips. In the next second, he's thrusting into her from behind at a piston pace.

The sounds of our joint arousal don't go unnoticed, at least by me. But, if they hear it, they don't care. They're too lost to their own pleasure. His balls are slapping against her pussy as he takes her from behind, but I stop watching when I notice my girl drop her head. Her hand reaches back to touch my hip, and thank fuck, I hear the other guy grunt out his release because her need to feel connected to me sends me spiraling over the edge, and we both come hard.

I throw my arm around her waist to keep her from falling when I feel her weight shift. As I pull her into me, she turns around in my hold and wraps her arms around my neck. With her face in the crook of my neck, she catches her breath as she comes down from the pleasure I just gave her, and it's everything. I wish we could stay in this moment forever, but then I remember where we are and why I'm here. She was taken from me again.

I pull my attention away from her and back to the other couple who have started making their way back down the tunnel and say, "Come on. Let's get out of here."

CHAPTER 18

"MY WHOLE LIFE HAS BEEN A LIE."

- *Bobby Darin*



CHARLIE

My head is spinning as I let Mason pull me out of the cellars. The last thing I expected to find when I went there to explore was him. While he's been the only thing on my mind, he shouldn't have been. As we push through the lobby of the cellars and out the front door, he pulls me toward the tour bus. "Come on, the tour doesn't end for another hour, but I'm sure if I tip the driver enough, I can get her to take us back early."

I follow him briefly before stopping in my tracks. "Mace, I can't leave."

Immediately, I realize I chose the wrong words when he clenches his jaw and asks, "Did he hurt you? I know Sebastian Lykos threatened you with a gun."

I shake my head, "No, Mace, he didn't hurt me—"

He cuts me off before I finish. "Is he forcing you to stay?" Looking around, he pulls me to the side of the cellars and out of the way of tourists. "Charlie, I came to take you home. I'm not leaving without you."

I search his eyes hidden beneath his ball cap, and that's when it hits me. He saw the video of Sebastian walking me out of the club. Mason thinks I'm being held against my will. Taking his hand in mine, I interlace our fingers, hoping it will subdue the anger I know will come from my next words. "Mace, I chose to come here."

He looks around before pushing me into the wall. "Baby, don't lie to me. Do you think I can't protect you? Tell me the truth."

Placing my hand on his chest, I fist his shirt and shake my head. "Sebastian threatened me to get me out of the club, but coming to Italy was my choice." I lick my lips and focus on anything but him to find my words. "Mace, I literally pieced together that Nico was my father at lunch, just hours before I gave you my truth at the club. When I found out I wasn't William's daughter, I only compared my DNA to his. I didn't try to find who my real father might be. All I knew is I shared zero blood with William Croft, and because he was supposed to be your Uncle, I believed that meant you and I weren't related. So, when Sebastian said you were my brother, I couldn't dispute it. I had zero certainties. But it wasn't just that, Mace; I needed this. I've been hidden for ten years and I want to know why. I'm not asking you to leave. I'm saying I can't."

He presses his weight into me and drops his head into the crook of my neck. "I'm sorry I bought his lies and not your truths. You mean everything to me."

His words give me pause. I push at his chest to get his attention before saying, "Wait, what do you mean, 'bought his lies'?"

His brow furrows, and he shakes his head, clearly agitated, before pushing off me and the wall completely. "While you were in the locker room at Covet, a DoS attack hit my walls. When I went into the locker room to get you, the girls told me you left out the opposite door with another man. Given that you hadn't been forthcoming about your run-ins with Nico Serra, I assumed you played me. He made you my enemy, and I bought it so easily."

The past 48 hours quickly flit through my mind as pieces start to come together. At lunch, Nico was baiting me. He knew I would act out. I wouldn't allow him to tell me where I could and couldn't work, and because Ellis was feeding him the information, Nico knew I had an intimate relationship with Mason. He intentionally pushed my buttons to make me move. Ellis even said as much at the club when he told me I was playing into his hand. "He played both of us."

Before Mason gets a chance to respond, a voice calls out from our side, "Look who finally decided to show up."

Mason doesn't miss a beat as he turns around and punches Sebastian square in the jaw, knocking him back before landing another punch that has him on his ass. Just as he's about to get on top of him, a man whose face I know I've seen before comes and grabs his arms, pulling him back. "You fucking piece of shit, I'll fucking strangle you with my bare hands," Mason snarls.

"Bro, calm down. What happened to keeping a low profile? What the hell are you doing?"

"He's the prick who threatened Charlie with a gun."

Sebastian gets to his feet while the guy loosens his grip on Mason, and I go to his side. "Stop, please. It's not worth it. I'm fine."

"Charlie, don't touch me." He puts his hands on his head and yells, "Fuck."

He's pissed, and I know his words aren't meant to hurt me. They're meant to protect me. He doesn't want to touch me when all he wants to do is pound into another man's face.

"You're Charlie?" The tall drink of water with a practiced playboy smile

questions. I don't even get a chance to respond before his hand is outstretched in greeting. "Ethan Grand. If this guy had a best friend, it'd be me."

Mason's hands drop from his head to his hips as he says, "Not even close," but it doesn't faze Ethan in the least, and I can't help but find that endearing.

I place my hand in his and say, "I'm Charlie."

Before any more words are said, Nico rounds the corner. "If you all are done making a spectacle on my front lawn, I'd like to take this to my office." Mason and Ethan share a look as Sebastian swipes the blood off his bottom lip with his thumb.

When Nico starts walking up the path leading to the main house, we all silently follow suit.



Nico's home office reeks of money and power. You can feel its age the second you step through the door. Beautiful Tavolato Veneto planks, known for their artistic inlays, run the length of the room in a herringbone pattern, while dark mahogany inset shelves cover every inch of the walls. The space commands your attention as much as the man behind the desk. Sitting behind his massive desk in a high-back leather chair, Nico looks every bit like the King of Deception I now know he is.

Mason pulls me toward the two leather chairs set side by side at the foot of Nico's desk. Sebastian once again makes himself at home and pours himself a drink before taking a seat on the couch at the back of the room with Ethan. Nico opens his cigar box and clips the end of one before lighting it up. I don't miss the slight squeeze Mason gives my hand. I'm aware it's taking a lot out of him to keep his mouth shut, but I get the impression, like me, he's working off assumptions rather than hard truths and needs Nico's answers.

"You'll have to excuse me. I'm not sure where to begin." Nico says after taking a drag of his cigar and setting it on an ashtray.

"How about you start with what game you're fucking playing." Mason all but grinds out.

Unfazed, Nico clasps his hands before saying, "I'm not playing any games. I simply found my daughter and decided to take her back. I'd waited long enough."

I hate how he says, 'take her back,' as if I'm some sort of toy that was stolen from him, and now it's his turn to play. "Make no mistake, Nico. I am not a possession to be owned. I came here of my own free will."

The simple rise of a singular eyebrow at my declaration has me wanting to lunge at him, because I now realize it was a play on his part. If he's learned anything over the past few months of watching me, it's that I respond poorly to being told what to do. The slightest bit of pressure gets applied, and I'm out. Ellis saw that firsthand when he asked me to move in, and I started packing to leave town before he noticed. My accompanying Nico to Sicily was always going to happen. He just let me feel like it was my choice. *The bastard.*

"You found me six months ago. How about you start there?"

He pulls air through his nose before leaning back in his chair. "Aah, yes. Six months ago. You already know I was able to find you because of the hit on your blood. But I suppose you're wondering why I didn't make a move until now." Tapping his fingers on the arm of his leather chair, he pauses before adding, "That was because of you."

I can see Mason getting restless out of the corner of my eye, so I move the conversation along. "How so?"

"You wore a mask, and you wore it well. Those contacts never came out, and that mouth never slipped. Until finally, they did. I'm sure the timeline of events hasn't gone unnoticed. You shared your secret with Ellis, and by the end of the week, you were at my home."

He's not wrong. It's one of the reasons I immediately wanted out the second he mentioned he knew me. I knew it was not a coincidence that I suddenly ran into someone who claimed to have known me just days after I took out my contacts for the first time and shared my secret. No one could have known.

"That weekend, I had every intention of trying to get to know you, but you ran, and I had my reasons for not making a move."

Before he can get another word out, Mason cuts in. "Yeah, you're going to need to elaborate on those."

Sitting forward in his chair, Nico reaches for the whiskey decanter sitting on the corner and pours himself a glass. He swirls the amber liquid in his glass before starting back up. "Because you had zero cracks, and I had not found William, I watched and kept my distance. I didn't understand why he wasn't around, yet you still wore a disguise, and what's more, you didn't have

any money. But I did learn something from your short visit that day. You revealed something to me that I didn't know: William was dead. I wasn't willing to take chances before I heard those words. I didn't know what game he might have been playing, and after what he did to your mother, it wasn't worth the risk."

"What? What do you mean, 'what did he do to my mother'?" I feel Mason tense at my side, and when I look over, I notice he's deep in thought. His eyes meet mine, and I see sadness, so I ask again, "What happened to my mother?"

"Two days after you disappeared, she was found dead." Mason shakes his head like so many things are coming together for him before saying, "My dad said it was suicide."

My body deflates as years spent with my mom suddenly flick through my head. Moments I thought were hate suddenly look different, and I feel sick for not seeing her mood swings and withdrawal from William and me for what they were: depression. Mason's hand squeezes mine tighter as realization sets in. I'd had no idea my mother was dead. "Baby—" he starts but is cut off when Nico asks, "Your mother had something she did habitually. Do you recall what that was?"

I furrow my brow, unsure where he's going with his question, but run through my memories of the woman I suddenly feel I never really knew. My mother was a creature of habit through and through. She did the same things every day as if on autopilot. Some of her obsessive-compulsive tendencies were maddening, but there was one she did every morning that I distinctly remember because it was the one thing that seemed to bring her peace. Every morning she would take time to steep fresh tea leaves and then sit at the dining room table to write in her journal.

"Every morning, she journaled with a cup of tea."

He rubs the stubble on his jaw before tapping his forefinger on his lip. "Your mother, however, did not use pre-made teas and tea bags. Instead, she formulated her own teas from various herbs she purchased at traditional markets. William knew this. High concentrations of aconite—which you may recognize by its common names, 'wolfsbane' or 'queen of poisons'—were found in her system when the autopsy report came back. Because she was known to mix her own teas and experiment with herbs that may not have been labeled clearly, it was determined that she either didn't handle the dosage properly or received a bad batch of leaves. The cause of death listed on her certificate was accidental poisoning."

My eyes are focused on Nico as I process his words, so many mixed emotions coursing through my veins. Her death brings an unexpected tightness to my chest. I spent years believing she had written me off, and now to learn my hate was misplaced because she literally couldn't reach out if she wanted to has my heart aching for that woman in ways I never believed it could.

Nico sees my blank expression and immediately reads my mind, answering my next question before it's even asked. "She found out you were mine the day you chose him. Her silence was not acceptance, bella; it was shock."

I drop my head and run my finger through the space between my eyes. It feels like my brows have been furrowed in deep thought since the moment I touched down in Sicily, and I need a second to collect myself. Mason's thumb gently runs over the top of mine in a motion meant to soothe the storm building inside me.

"Why do you think it was William?" Mason asks, not convinced Nico's retelling incriminates his Uncle. I pull my focus off the floor and back to Nico as he pulls open one of his desk drawers, and in his hand is a brown leather journal with a red ribbon around it to hold it closed. I recognize it immediately. My mother always bought the same journals.

He slides the journal across the desk for me to take, and Mason stands to grab it before placing it in my hands. "The last entry is not hers. It is his, and it reads:

You didn't want her when she was mine, but I bet you do now. Too bad you will never have her.

"I have all of them, if you wish to keep them for yourself."

I'm suddenly nauseous as I stare at the journal Mason placed in my hands. I lived under the same roof as the devil, blissfully unaware of his malevolence. Mason sees my discomfort, and I can tell these truths are taking their toll on him as much as they are on me. His jaw clenches in irritation before he directs his anger at Nico.

"Filling her head with stories about her dead mother has been thoroughly

distracting. How about we get back to the rest of your lies?"

Nico's head jolts back like he has no idea what Mason is talking about before he says, "I have told no lies."

"That's rich, asshole. Maybe you didn't lie, but you failed to correct an untruth. One you tactfully used to lure Charlie here. You and I know damn well that I am not her brother."

"Ah," he throws back the remaining whiskey in his glass before saying, "You'll have to forgive me..." Movement at my back catches my peripheral, reminding me that Sebastian and Ethan are in the room. Sebastian crosses the room and walks through a door opposite the one we entered through, but he's not who comes back through. Mason's hand painfully tightens around mine, and I have to force down my need to whimper as his hand practically crushes mine at the sight of Chloe Croft walking into the room.

Mason's mother is very striking. She has long blonde hair that trails halfway down her back, and big brown eyes with the whitest whites I've ever seen. She looks the epitome of high society, a far cry from the woman I met ten years ago. My stomach churns as she passes Mason and me on the right without so much as a glance in our direction. I watch with disgust as she moves to stand behind Nico as realization sets in. The burning question on the tip of my tongue never leaves my lips because she places her left hand on his shoulder as soon as she reaches his side, ensuring that no one misses the rock adorning a significant finger.

Nico picks up her hand and places a feather-light kiss across her fingers before saying, "Chloe and I are engaged to be married."

Mason is out of his seat instantly, pulling me up with him. "Let's go, Charlie. We're done here."

We barely make it around the chairs to exit the room before Nico says, "Charlie will be staying with me."

Mason's grip on my hand tightens before he turns and says, "Like hell, she will. The two of you can fuck off and have a nice life. Charlie and I are not blood. You were mistaken if you thought your marriage would stop us from being together."

Ethan stands at my other side just as Sebastian re-enters the room. Nico doesn't make a move, and that's how I know there's more. He is confident in his words because he already knows his next move will hit its mark. "You can't protect my daughter when your house isn't in order."

"What the hell are you talking about, Serra? You're the one who attacked

my systems. You're my threat."

"I'm not talking about cyber security. I'm talking about the direct threats to your life. On more than one occasion now, you have almost died from the actions of people who wish you harm."

This time, Ethan jumps in. "That's bullshit. You know as well as we do; that's par for the course in our line of work as public figures."

"That's not always true. You see, I've been in the game for a long time, and a direct hit has never landed. My daughter will be staying with me. It's not up for discussion."

My heart rate instantly spikes, and adrenaline rushes through my veins. There is no way I'm being held here against my fucking will. My mouth suddenly goes dry as my heartbeat begins to pound in my ears, but before I succumb to the panic threatening to consume me, I manage to say, "Nico, you can't make me stay here. I am a grown-ass woman." His eyes latch onto mine, and I see his anger. Two more men walk into the room, and I feel the full weight of why he brought me to Sicily. It was to trap me. My palms get sweaty as my body starts to shake from the nerves threatening to render me speechless. "I will hate you forever for this."

That's all I manage before my anxiety gets the best of me, and I move to sit down from fear of falling. "Fuck," Mason spits before hoisting me into his arms and demanding, "Show me to her room."

CHAPTER 19

"THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE, BUT FIRST IT WILL PISS YOU OFF."

- Gloria Steinem



MASON

A million thoughts run through my mind, and I can't focus on them. Not with Charlie passed out in the other room. After Nico's revelations about our twisted pasts and his declaration that she could not leave, she had a full-blown panic attack. I knew the signs from watching Gigi struggle with them over the years. She was obviously overstimulated and needed quiet and space to collect herself. I carried her to the room she's been staying in and placed her on the bed. After I helped her calm her breathing and find her focus, she wanted to lie down. I can only imagine all the things running through her head. She didn't want to talk—she needed to process—but there was no way I was leaving her. I curled up behind her and ran my fingers through her hair until she fell asleep.

The room Nico has her in is vast. Once she was asleep, I got up and closed the door between the sitting area and bedchamber, where I've been pacing for the past three hours. I've tried to focus my mind on Nico's endgame here. After I got her to sleep, he came up to check on her but gave me zero words. He didn't ask me to leave or tell me I couldn't be with his daughter, all things I fully expected, considering the lengths he went through to separate us just a few days ago. And then there's my mom. I haven't spoken to my mother since I left home at eighteen.

There's a knock at the door before Ethan lets himself in. "I've been told we are expected downstairs for dinner in twenty minutes."

A growl of frustration leaves my chest. I hate that I have to let Serra call the shots because there is no way in hell I am leaving here without Charlie. But there is no need for Ethan to stay. "Ethan, you don't need to stay. You have no reason to get mixed up with Nico Serra."

He laughs before plopping down on a sofa across the room. "Like fuck I'm leaving. Shit just started getting good. I'm not scared of Serra. Mafia or not. Plus, you need me. You are too close to all of this shit. That's why you can't see the bigger picture."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, aware that there is some truth to that statement but unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice when I ask, "What have you worked out that I haven't?"

"A lot, fucker. You might be a computer genius, but I'm a master when it

comes to the art of deception. I know all the tells. You forget I grew up in a different world. Everyone wears a mask where I come from. Nico and I choose the spotlight. There are the people we show the world, and the people we are behind closed doors. Downstairs in his office, he spoke in absolutes when he wasn't being vague or altogether dismissive. He never answered your question about your dad's statement that Natalie committed suicide. Instead, he told a story that enthralled the two of you enough to distract and give him control of the narrative. He's playing a game."

Before I can question him further, the door to Charlie's sleeping chambers opens, and her eyes frantically search the room before landing on me. I'm instantly at her side. "What's wrong?" I ask as she wraps her arms around me. When she lays her head against my chest, I feel her lungs inflate as her arms tighten around my waist. I can only imagine how thoroughly spine-chilling it must be to find out the man you lived with for the past ten years, the one who claimed to be your father, not only wasn't and knew the entire time, but also murdered your mother. Finally, I feel her relax, and I can't express how that simple act of her body melding into mine out of a need for comfort lights me up inside. I feel like I've been fighting for a piece of real estate in her heart for the past two months, and that simple move tells me I have it.

"I thought you left, is all."

I eliminate any space between us as I pull her impossibly closer before saying, "Charlie, I don't know how many more times I have to tell you I'm keeping you. I'm keeping you for as long as you'll have me."

Ethan clears his throat to let us know he's still in the room. "So, what's the plan?"

"What do you mean?" Charlie asks as she unwraps herself from around my waist only to tuck into my side.

"Ethan believes Nico is playing a hand, and I agree. After I found out Christopher was paid to hire you on at Lark—"

She cuts me off, "Speaking of Christopher, where did he go?"

"I let him go. There was no way I could keep him on at Lark. I can't have my head of HR taking money in exchange for jobs. He put my organization at risk."

Nodding in agreement, she says, "I liked him. He was nice to me, but after you started working in the office, I could tell something was different; he was different. It must have been his guilt getting the best of him. I believe he thought of me like a friend and truly wished me no ill will but got in over

his head.”

Charlie is not wrong. I don't believe that Christopher was a bad person simply because he made a bad choice; however, in life, there will always be many choices, and the ones we make will determine our future. He knew the risks. I squeeze her arm in reassurance that her thoughts are most likely true before getting back to the plan.

"As I was saying, Ethan thinks Nico is playing a hand, and I don't see how that's not true. That became clear to me the second I found out you were taken from Covet. What I haven't been able to figure out, is what his end game is. I've run multiple scenarios over in my head, and they don't pan out. I don't believe his goal was to split us apart because I haven't been asked to leave. I haven't ruled out that this could still all be some twisted vendetta against me because my last name is Croft. Nico could just be buying himself time to find a new angle, knowing that hurting me hurts you. But the part I get stuck on is the hurting you piece. Any way you play it, a hit against me would strain whatever relationship he hopes to form with you."

"Unless she's still playing you."

I step toward Ethan, ready to punch him for insinuating that what we have could be fake. I'm done letting people come between us. There is no way she is not mine, mind, body, and soul. Charlie tugs me back. "Ethan, fuck off. You know that's bullshit. You're baiting me."

He shrugs, "Hey, he might be pussy whipped. I am not."

Charlie moves to sit on the loveseat across from Ethan and says, "He said I can't leave, but he can't make me stay. I think those words were a knee-jerk reaction to mine—"

She doesn't get to finish her thought before Ethan cuts in. "He brought in his men in a show of force. What do you mean he can't make you stay?"

Charlie chuckles briefly before saying, "Those were his brothers."

"You don't think mafia men are related? Most major syndicates are made up of brothers, uncles, and cousins. Haven't you heard the saying, 'blood is thicker than water?' They protect their own, and it wasn't a coincidence they walked in right as Nico said you can't leave."

"Are you scared?" she mocks.

"Not at all. Just smart. I need to know what I'm dealing with if we decide to break your ass out of here tonight."

She turns to me in question, and I shrug before saying, "That's what the original plan was. Scope out the place and come back prepared to take you

home."

"Okay, and what's option number two?" she asks as her eyes move between Ethan and me in question.

"We stay and play the game," he says.

Charlie's eyes find mine, and I see her sadness, but I also see strength. I know she's conflicted. We may have received answers today, but they only left us with more questions, and because I know my girl, I know they weren't enough. "Mace, we could run. I want you to know that I would run with you. In a fucking heartbeat, I would, but I also want my life back. I'm tired of running."

"Then I guess we have a dinner to attend."



Time feels like it has literally stopped. The tension during the first ten minutes of dinner has been more than stifling. It's borderline suffocating. Zero words have been spoken, and we all know there are more than enough to say. But no one has made an attempt to speak, instead we silently drink our wine as the footmen seamlessly blend into the background filling our glasses and serving our courses. My mother made eye contact with me once since I sat at the table. Just once. I make her nervous, and I'm not sure why. While we are estranged, it's not because we had some major falling out. I simply don't trust her, and her reappearance now only gives me more reason to be leery. What mother doesn't seek out her son, one she hasn't seen in five years? Even if her cold heart doesn't care for me, I would think she would at least try to exchange simple pleasantries to keep up appearances.

"Well, has a date been set? Do we know when we'll all be one big happy family?"

I forgot how incredibly forward Ethan can be. People are quick to dismiss it as low-class manners even though he's one of the wealthiest men in the US. He's nouveau riche like Gigi. Ethan's money hasn't been in the family for generations, and because of the scandal behind his wealth, he's judged more harshly. But I know that Ethan doesn't make comments flippantly. He's setting the line, trying to get a bite.

"We're looking into a Spring wedding," Nico states.

My mother gives a tight-lipped smile but offers no words, which is new

for her. She is a gold digger through and through. I didn't miss how she sauntered into the room and rested her obscene rock on Nico's shoulder. So, her reserved behavior now is odd. Ethan sees it too. That's why he brought up the wedding. It's the elephant in the room that no one is talking about. Which means it's precisely what I'm going to talk about.

"How did the two of you meet, anyway?"

Nico shares a look with Charlie that I make a mental note to ask her about later.

"We met in college. But Chloe was with Johnathan." He reaches across the table and grabs her hand to hold it. "It was around the beginning of the year that we reconnected."

Of course, he keeps it vague and offers no further details. But I don't relent. "I didn't know you had business in St. Louis." While I may not care to talk to my mother, I keep tabs on her.

Nico swirls his wine and holds my eyes as he did Charlie's moments ago before saying, "Ran into each other at the hospital."

I scoot my chair out and throw my napkin on the table before saying, "I'll be retiring to my room for the night. I no longer have an appetite." Before I take my leave, I bend down, and place a chaste kiss on Charlie's forehead. Then turning I clasp Ethan's shoulder giving it a tight squeeze letting him know I don't want him to follow. I want him to hang back. In fact, I need him to. I believe I just figured out Nico's hand.



For years, my mom told me my father didn't care about us. It's why he threw himself into his work and was never home. I bought into her lies for a long time because, while still absent, she was more present than my father. But my mother didn't work. My father was the household's sole provider, and I knew he was working hard on a dream, or at least that's what I told myself because the alternative sucked. Hell, that's half of why I took an interest in computer science. I had hoped that I could impress him with my skills and gain his attention so that he'd want to come around.

My parents weren't always at odds. I remember a time early on in my youth when things seemed normal. Family dinners were spent together, and both parents attended my soccer games. But somewhere along the line, things

changed, and it was easy to blame my dad because he wasn't there. However, a year after I graduated high school, I crashed my father's car into a river. I spent a week in a coma from the crash, and during that time, I saw their marriage in a new light. You can learn a lot about people when they think you aren't listening. The one time my mother came to visit me, they argued at my bedside.

Chloe was a social butterfly, always going out and accepting invites to anything and everything. Growing up, my friends thought I had the cool mom because she was never around, which meant I had free reign of the house to do as I pleased more often than not. But that social calendar that I thought was spent out having drinks and dinners with friends was instead spent with other men. My dad stayed as long as he could for me, but that ended the year Nico and William signed over their shares to him. My father divorced my mother the same week Charlie disappeared.

So much happened in just a few short weeks. I fell for a girl I couldn't have. She and my uncle disappeared, her mother committed suicide, and my father served my mother with a divorce. I remember thinking it was a dick move on my father's part, but looking back, knowing what I know now, I don't believe my mother was as blindsided as she led on. In fact, I think she was fully aware that it was coming.

Nico is manipulating the narrative. He's speaking in absolutes, and while he's not directly answering questions, he is offering information. If I take my emotions out of the mix, which should be like second nature to me, considering I've shut them off for years, I can see his hand.

Earlier, when we were in his office, he said he didn't want Charlie to leave because she wasn't safe with me. However, his following words struck a chord, one I didn't piece together until dinner when he mentioned that he had reconnected with my mother at the hospital. He said I couldn't protect her when I couldn't keep my house in order. His use of the word 'house' with my mother by his side hit me.

While I was in the hospital recovering from the crash that almost took my life, my father had the car I was driving extracted from the river. It was determined that the car's braking system had been tampered with. My mother came to see me once. That was it, and when I almost died earlier this year from the helicopter crash, I checked the hospital records. My mother never came to visit. If she was there, it had to have been to see if she was listed as beneficiary or POA, and because there is no record of her being there, she

snuck in. She most definitely wasn't there to visit her dying son, and because Nico held my eye before he said where they met, I believe he knows that too.

The door to my room suddenly opens without a knock, and in strolls Ethan. "You good, man? What was that back there?"

"My mom's a snake, and Serra knows it. That has to be what this is."

Ethan sits on the edge of my bed. "I would agree that there is definitely something off regarding that arrangement. After you left, her demeanor changed. She started discussing the wedding. Your presence in the room obviously affected her, and Nico noticed. He studied her every movement like a hawk, and not in a way that a doting fiancé would. Nico is a predator stalking his prey. After dinner, he excused himself to his office, and I didn't miss the look he gave to Sebastian as he pulled Chloe in for a hug. If I had to guess, Sebastian's job is to keep eyes on her." I pace the floor a few more times before Ethan asks, "What's your next move?"

"I don't think I have a move. For the first time in years, I don't think I'm Serra's target, but I refuse to be his pawn. I'm going to try and corner him tonight. See if I can't get him to talk, but first, I'm going to check on my girl."



As I open the door to Charlie's room I can't help but clench my jaw in irritation. I don't like the fact that I can walk right in. None of her doors were locked. I understand that she trusts Serra not to hurt her, but I don't trust his game. I'm just closing the door between her sitting area and bedroom when she comes out of the en suite bath wrapped in a towel, freshly showered. She walks over to the closet, utterly unaware that I am in the room, which further pisses me off because she's not being cognizant of her surroundings.

I follow her into the walk-in closet and clear my throat, startling the crap out of her. "Fuck, Mason, you scared the shit out of me. What's wrong with you?"

"I want you to keep your doors locked while we're here. Can you do that for me?"

She meets my eye and holds it briefly before answering, "Yes, I'll lock my doors." Then, she goes back to opening drawers and pulling out clothes. "Is it safe to assume that you've figured something else out since you're

concerned about my doors? Do I need to worry?" She asks before dropping her towel. *Fuck.*

Her body is perfect. Her thick thighs and round ass are on display as she bends over to step into a thong, but I'm on her before she can pull it up. I grab a handful of cheek before saying, "I thought I told you these aren't necessary when I'm around."

Her breath hitches as she rights herself, and I snake my other hand up her front, over her soft stomach, before grabbing a heavy handful of her full tits. "Mmm," she moans as I knead her breast and bring my lips to her neck. "Mace, we should probably talk."

I ignore her requests and bring the hand that was on her ass around to her front, gliding it down her stomach and over her pubic bone before running two fingers through her lips. "There will be plenty of time to talk after you ride my cock. It might be the only chance I get to say I fucked my sister."

She laughs and says, "That's fucked up."

I plunge two fingers into her pussy, making her gasp before saying, "Just the way my girl likes it." Holding her against my front, I pump her slowly and say, "Look at us, baby." Her eyes pop open, and she catches our reflection in the full-length mirror. "You're mine, always have been. Sister..." I suck the skin on her neck hard. "Cousin..." I bite down enough to break the skin and draw blood, making her whimper from both the pleasure and pain. Then I run my tongue over my marks, savoring the tang of her blood on my tongue before spinning her in my arms and adding, "Wife."

My mouth crashes to hers, and our tongues tangle before she can give me any words. Whatever words may have existed are soon forgotten as her hands move to unbutton my shirt. She gets one undone before deciding to rip it instead. Fuck, that's hot, knowing my girl is just as hungry as I am. Her hands pull my shirt off my shoulders and down my arms before reaching for my pants. She makes quick work of my belt, her mouth never leaving mine, and I can't help but smile against her lips at her eagerness to have me. No sooner than she has my pants down, I grab her perky bare ass and lift her into my arms. Her legs immediately wrap around my waist, and her soaked pussy rubs against my hard length as I walk us to the oversized round ottoman beside the mirror in her closet.

The second I sit, my cock is in her hand. She grips my length and lines it up with her pussy before slowly sinking down. "Fuck, Princess." I take one of her breasts into my mouth as she moves up and down my length, trying to

stretch around my size. When I bite her hardened nub, I feel her walls loosen, and she lets out a delicious moan before sliding all the way down.

"That's right, you like it when these gorgeous tits are in my mouth." My hands push her full tits together as she braces herself on my shoulders to ride me slow. I swirl my tongue around her pert nipple before sucking it hard. She slams down on my dick, her walls squeezing my cock tight when I do, and I can't help but groan out my own desire. Releasing one nipple with a pop, her mouth dips down and finds mine before I can take her other breast. My cock is fully sheathed inside the only woman I've ever truly wanted as her mouth commands mine, and I'm harder than I've ever been. This woman owns me. There is nothing I wouldn't do for her.

My hands slide from her breasts down the sides of her hips until they meet her perfect globes. I squeeze them hard, and she breaks our kiss before bringing her hand to my chest and pushing me back, and I let her. I've dreamed about her bouncing on my cock since day one. I grip the sides of her thighs, not wanting to take my hands off her, not wanting to lose our connection. When she grinds her clit against my pubic bone, I can feel her juices drip down my balls. Then, just when I think she's about to chase her first orgasm, she places her hands on my chest and moves to the balls of her feet.

"Fuck..." I draw out as she rides me in a squatting position giving me an unobstructed view of my cock disappearing inside her pretty pink pussy. Her hands are on her knees as she bounces while her tits sway, and it's fucking hot as hell. But I'm not ready to come. I fall harder every time I watch my dick stretch one of her tight holes, and I want her to see what I see. "Baby, come here." Grabbing her hand, I pull her back down, bringing her back to her knees. She catches herself, bracing right above my face.

"You didn't like it?" She questions in a dispirited tone.

"What, are you kidding? What part about my dick says I didn't like it? I fucking love it." I shove up into her hard, ensuring she feels every inch. "Mmm," she moans, and I nip her plump lip before smacking her ass and saying, "Up; I want to show you something." She pouts and grinds against me, and I add, "Fuck, baby, don't worry, that pussy is going to milk my cock."

She stands, and I move to sit, which puts me at eye level with her swollen pussy. Unable to help myself, I pull her forward and kiss her lips. She lifts a leg onto the ottoman, opening herself to me, and I run my tongue through her

folds. Tasting our combined juices has a moan from deep in my chest escaping my mouth and vibrating through her core. I suck her hard little bundle of nerves into my mouth, and her hand finds the back of my head, pressing me further into her pussy; she pants, "God, yes, Mace, don't stop." I feel her start to spasm as her orgasm hits, and I lick her through it before turning her to face the mirror.

I stroke my length as I watch her observing us in the mirror. "You're so fucking beautiful, Charlie. I want you to see what I see when you ride my cock." Grabbing her hips, I guide her backward and spread my legs before saying, "Sit." I guide her hips and line up my cock with her entrance.

I watch as her eyes stay glued to where my cock disappears inside of her. She's thoroughly entranced by the scene. "Look how pretty this pussy is stretched with my dick buried inside it." I push up into her, and she clenches on a moan, never taking her eyes off my cock. "Do you see what you do to me, baby? This is what I saw when I pushed my cock into that pretty ass." I begin to bounce her on my lap, ensuring my tip strokes over her g-spot with every thrust. Her juices start to coat my dick, and the added visual of her glistening arousal, coupled with the sound of her taking me deep, has her panting.

"This pussy was made for me." I thrust into her, set on making her feel what I do every time I see her take me. Determined to pull from her lips the words that are in my heart. I don't let up on my pace, but when I look to see if her eyes are still on where we are joined, I find them on me instead. "Mace..." Her voice is soft as she turns her face toward mine. Then, brushing her lips over mine, her mouth hangs slack as she struggles to speak through the pleasure coursing through her body. But she pushes through, even bringing her hand to grasp my chin. Finally, with her hooded eyes pinned on mine, she says, "I love you, Mace."

Those words immediately set me off, and I take her lips in mine in a bruising kiss as I shoot ropes of cum deep into her womb, marking her as mine. Her walls grip me tight, milking every last drop before I pull her into my arms. "Fuck, Charlie. I love you so damn much. I always have. You're my whole world. I'm never letting you go." She nods against my forehead before kissing my lips once more. "Let's go to bed."

When she moves to stand, our combined arousal drips out of her pussy and onto my cock, and I'm only a few dirty thoughts away from taking her again, but we need to talk. Leaning over, I reach for the towel she discarded

on the floor when she walked in before grabbing her hand and pulling her back to me. Once she's at my front, I place a kiss on her stomach and say, "Don't move, baby. I want to take care of my girl."

Before I take the towel and start cleaning her up. Her hands leisurely run through my hair as I wipe my cum off her thighs and, finally, her pussy. "Charlie, I'm going to need you to put a shirt on, or there will be no talking." I can already feel my dick hardening. I've loved her for years, and I feel like I have so much lost time I want to make up for.

"Why did you leave dinner so abruptly?" She questions as she walks away to throw on a shirt. I clean myself up before pulling my pants up and standing to exit the closet.

"It was Nico's comment about the hospital," I call out from the room as I sit on the bed. "I believe it was purposeful, but I knew I didn't have enough control over my emotions to engage. Not when it comes to the accident."

Charlie exits the closet, wearing an oversized t-shirt that on her may as well be lingerie, before joining me on the bed. "Why don't you have a relationship with your mom? What happened between you two?"

I pull air through my nose, attempting to stave off any anger that will undoubtedly rise just from the mere mention of her name. As my lungs deflate with a cleansing breath, I say, "Honestly, Charlie, I don't have an answer for that. I can't tell you why my mother chose her boyfriends over me or when I became a paycheck instead of her son. All I know is that it happened."

She reaches for my hand and interlaces her fingers before saying, "I'm sorry, Mace—"

"You asked me what happened between my mother and me, and I told you, but baby, I'm not sad about it. I stopped feeling anything for her a long time ago. I need to talk to Nico.

She squeezes my hand and says, "I'll go with you."

But when she moves to get up, I say, "Charlie, this is a conversation I need to have alone. He baited me for a reason." I see the moment realization settles over her. She knows he hired Christopher to plant her at Lark. He set all this in motion months ago.

"But you'll tell me everything?"

I drop her hand and bring mine to her face before saying, "Always, no more secrets, no more lies."

"Okay." She answers before reiterating, "No more lies."



After Charlie fell asleep, I begrudgingly left the comfort of her warm bed in search of Serra. I wanted to stay in her arms all night, and I plan to be in them when she wakes up, but I can't rest until this shit is settled. It's almost midnight, but fuckers like us don't sleep. I know he's somewhere around here, and if I had to guess, he's expecting me.

The house is surprisingly quiet. I thought I'd at least run into a housekeeper or guard. Hell, a small part of me thought I might even run into my mother, but no, and I can't say that I'm mad about it either. Any words that she would have for me would be lies. As I make my way down the corridor toward Serra's office, the crackle of firewood drifts down the hall, and I continue past his office, searching for the source. Rounding the corner, I find Nico sitting in front of a roaring fire in his library with a bottle of wine at his side.

I'm not quiet as I enter. I have no reason to sneak up on him, and when I sit in the chair next to his, it's clear he was expecting me. There's a spare glass on the table between us that he pours wine into before passing it my way. Naturally, I don't immediately take his offering. "I didn't come here to drink wine with you, Serra."

"No, but you do want to marry my daughter. So the least you can do is drink with her father."

I don't give him any words. He's not wrong. I fully intend on making Charlie mine in every way possible, and because of that, I should make an effort with him. Charlie has made it clear she wants answers, and I have no doubt that part of her wants to know Nico. She fucking followed him to Sicily. I take the glass from his hand, and we sit silently until finally, I ask, "Are you going to explain things to me or..." I trail off, choosing to bite my tongue rather than continue to stoke the flames of hate between us. He knows what I want.

"If you ask the right questions." He says as his eyes stay glued to the fire in front of us.

His games are growing old quickly, but even though I don't trust him, I don't believe he would hurt Charlie, and for that, I respect him. "You said my house wasn't safe. Was that in reference to my mother?"

He taps his fingers on the arm of his chair before saying, "Ah, you were listening." His comment neither confirms nor denies my statement, but his

tone does. I'm on the right track. So, I start with what I know.

"At dinner, your comment about running into my mother at the hospital struck a chord. I don't believe it was a chance meeting. I'm one hundred percent confident it was intentional. I have no doubt that you've been keeping tabs on me and mine since Charlie was taken. You know damn well I am estranged from my mother. But you showed me your hand just by having her on your arm."

I pause to drink my wine while Nico simply settles into his oversized leather chair, making himself comfortable as he waits to hear the rest of my interpretation on the pieces at play here.

"The car accident I was in five years ago wasn't an accident at all. The brakes on the car were tampered with. That in itself wouldn't matter to you, but the date would. I'm sure it more than grabbed your attention. I crashed the same day we signed the lease to move headquarters to San Jose, the last known place we could track William and Charlie."

Movement out the corner of my eye catches my attention, and I watch as Nico traces his finger around the rim of his wine glass. His eyes are transfixed on the fire before us, and it spurs me on because the look on his face is one of remembrance, not revelation.

"William was still very much alive at that time. Which had me reflecting on your earlier dismissal of my suicide comment. Why would my parents talk about a suicide note that didn't exist?"

"Did they now?" he questions speculatively. My head snaps from the fire to Nico's face as he gives me his first words since I started talking. The question is clearly rhetorical, and rather than offer any more words, he simply holds my eyes, waiting for me to continue. But it's time for answers.

"You think she helped him? The suicide note had to have been staged by someone, as he couldn't be there to place it himself, and then there was the car accident meant to take out my dad before he could move to San Jose and get closer to tracking him down. William was hiding, so someone had to execute his demands, and you believe it's Chloe."

Nico's face is unreadable, but I know I'm on the right track. I'm sure there are more details I'm blurry on, but I have no doubt he is executing the old adage, 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer.'

"I'm right, aren't I? You're fucking her for answers."

"Son, what I do behind closed doors is none of your business." He sets his wine glass down and walks over to the fireplace. Placing his hand on the

mantel, he leans in before saying, "I was the one who found Natalie and called the authorities before notifying your father. Because he only lived a few blocks over, he arrived first. We found the note lying beneath her hand, and it read:

*There is no more them. There is no more us.
There is no more me.*

"At the time, I think your father was stunned. His entire world was shifting. William and I had just signed over our company shares, and then his brother used software that he helped develop to disappear with his niece in tow. Days later, his sister-in-law kills herself. I don't believe he suspected your mother. At first, neither did I. We didn't have a reason to. Your father didn't stick around to wait for the police. Instead, he went straight to the office, determined to find William before his trail went cold. But while I waited for the police, I picked up the journal on her bedside table and flipped through the pages. That's when I found William's note to Natalie."

Grabbing the poker rested against the front of the mantle, he stirs the embers before adding a few more logs. Once the fire is to his liking, he returns to his chair. "I pocketed the note and her journal before the police ever arrived. That's why the official cause of death was listed as accidental poisoning rather than murder. I wasn't going to hand over evidence I knew I would need in my quest to find my daughter. After comparing the writing in the journal to the note, it was clear it wasn't hers. But at the time, all I could come up with was that William must have paid someone to stage it. It wasn't until your accident four years later that she was on my radar for all the reasons you listed."

Picking up his glass, he crosses his ankle over his knee and takes a drink as I reflect on his words and what I know. My father was still helping him look for Charlie then, so I ask, "Why didn't you voice your suspicions to my father?"

His brows rise, and he releases a defeated sigh before saying, "I did. I even pointed out that she was the one who dropped his car off at the dealership to be serviced the day of your accident, but she was good. Unfortunately, there was no proof, and your dad believed the more likely explanation was that she was after him in hopes that she was still listed as the

beneficiary of his assets upon death."

He's not wrong. After the accident, my father sent his lawyer to my place to draw up a will and name beneficiaries. That's how Gigi got named. She was all I had. My mother visited me once while I was in the hospital for that week, and I couldn't help but feel hurt. Don't get me wrong; she hadn't been winning mother of the year awards prior, choosing to prioritize her boyfriends over me, but fuck, I was in a coma, and she was my mom, for christ's sake.

She had written me off months earlier when I turned nineteen, and I was no longer a paycheck for her. In the divorce, all she got was the house, and when she never returned to work, I assumed her boyfriends paid her bills. In hindsight, it had to have been William. William paid her to feed him tips and pull strings when he demanded it. That must be it.

"Did you check into her finances? Is there a money trail..." A blood-curdling scream from upstairs has my words dying on my tongue. My eyes lock with Nico's, and in the next second, we are out of our chairs and running down the hallway. *Fuck.*

CHAPTER 20

"HALF A TRUTH IS OFTEN A GREAT LIE"

-Benjamin Franklin



CHARLIE

My eyes flash open, but I don't dare move a single muscle. Something woke me out of my sleep, and I can't help but feel like that something is in the room with me. I fell asleep in Mason's arms, but the coldness surrounding me tells me he's not there now. Every hair on my body stands at attention as that sixth sense of being watched puts me on alert. My hands are clammy, and my body has already started to sweat from the fear coursing through my veins. I try hard to calm my racing heart so the loud pounding in my ears relents and I can hear.

As my eyes adjust to my dark surroundings, a figure in the shadows by my window catches my eye, and I almost scream before I realize it's Sebastian. Before I can make my next move, his eyes lock on mine, and he brings his index finger to his lips in a shushing motion, telling me to be quiet as he moves to conceal himself. He's just slipped behind the floor-to-ceiling curtains that adorn my window when I hear the subtle groan of old hinges as the door to my bedroom is slowly pushed open.

I quickly close my eyes and pretend to be asleep as the door is gently closed. Whoever has come into my room is trying to do so undetected. I tamp down my fear of impending doom by reminding myself Sebastian is in the room. My ears track the gentle swishing of fabric as it comes to my bedside and stops feet away from me. There's zero sound, as if whoever is with me has chosen to simply stare at me, watching me sleep and thinking through their next move. I work hard to control my breathing so the rise and fall of my chest appear natural, determined not to let my visitor see my fear. My ears strain as the subtle sound of movement registers at the same time there's a shallow dip on the bed. Every alarm bell in my head blares, telling me to fight and protect myself. But before I can give it another ounce of thought, a loud scream has me bolting upright in my bed.

Sebastian has Chloe Croft's arms pinned behind her back as she fights to get free. Instinctively I pull the covers to my chest, ensuring my nakedness isn't on display. The shirt I wore to bed didn't stay on for long. Mason and I can't keep our hands off each other. I'm positive he was still inside me when I fell asleep. His need to feel attached to me is equal to his desire to protect, which makes me question how they got in. If Mason had left me, he would

have locked the door. Before I can give it more thought, he bursts into the room with Nico in tow. Mason's eyes immediately rake up my form, ensuring I'm unharmed before he looks over to discover that my assailant is none other than his mother.

Nico yells, "Portala nel seminterrato."

Nico's intent is clear when Sebastian moves to push her out of the room, but Mason throws his arm out, halting them from passing. "Why? Why her? I understand your motives for hurting my father and me, but why Charlie?"

She all but snarls as she pulls her face away from his and to mine. The hate in her eyes is almost palpable, and I instantly regret sleeping naked because I want to waltz over and slap the venom right off her face. I've done nothing to deserve her ire.

"Every man in my world has been so dangerously obsessed with her that they turned into monsters. Choosing to let their sin run away with their good sense. William's envy drove him to murder. Johnathan's pride in creating something that succeeded in making her disappear turned off his self-awareness and made him spiteful. And then there's you, my son, and your stupid misplaced lust. You spent the last ten years living in your own personal hell, one you built for yourself, lusting after her." She pauses, looking around the room before adding, "My sins are no greater than yours. It was time the little bitch felt my wrath."

Mason's arm darts out quicker than I can blink, and he grabs her face hard. "The only monster here, mother, is you. Enjoy hell, knowing your greed put you there." When he releases her face, the evidence of the force with which he grabbed her is present. His fingerprints are clearly imprinted across her jaw. "Get her out of here." He grinds out, stepping aside to let Sebastian pass.

Just as Sebastian exits with Chloe, Ethan pops through the door. "What did I miss?"

Mason sighs in frustration before answering, "My mother attacked Charlie with the intent of killing her." Ethan's eyes practically bug out of his head, but it's Nico's intense gaze from the foot of my bed that steals my focus. Apart from commanding Sebastian to take Chloe away, he hasn't uttered a word, and something tells me I'm about to find out why.

"Did she hurt you, bella?" His Italian accent is so thick that it takes me a second to understand his question. His face is blank, but his eyes look like they have a million things to say—the most intense emotion coming forward

is guilt.

I shake my head before saying, "No, I'm fine. Sebastian was in here. He got to her before she ever touched me."

"She attacked you in front of him? Man, she must have really had it out for you. Not even trying to be stealthy and shit." Ethan comments as he rubs his jaw, deeply bemused by everything happening.

"No, Sebastian was hiding behind my curtain. I was startled awake just before she entered my room. That's how he was able to get to her so quickly. She made her move thinking we were alone."

The next thing I know, Mason flies across the room and punches Nico square in the jaw. "You dirty son of a bitch. I can't believe you. You put Charlie at risk to get your fucking proof. You could have found another way. I would have helped you. She's your fucking blood." He yells.

I move to stand, wrapping the covers around me as I do. "What the hell, Mace? What are you talking about?"

"William had someone helping him keep people off his trail for years, and Nico suspected it was my mother, but he couldn't prove it. All of this," he throws his arms wide, "us being here, it was all lies to incite her and get her to make a move so that he had his damn proof."

I don't need Nico's words; I can see it in his eyes. It's true. He used me as bait.

CHAPTER 21

"I SHOULD LIKE TO LIE AT YOUR FEET AND DIE IN YOUR ARMS."

- *Voltaire*



8 MONTHS LATER - CHARLIE

I'm never going to finish getting ready if Mason doesn't stop texting me. He does this every time he goes into the office. Blows up my phone as if he has separation anxiety. A part of me isn't convinced that he doesn't, honestly.

Mason: Why are you at Vivian's again?

I let out an exasperated sigh at his incessant questioning. It's like he's trying to get a different answer out of me.

Charlie: I already told you. I'm looking through her closet for something borrowed or maybe something blue. I don't know, but if you keep distracting me, I'll be here longer.

The man keeps tabs on me like a hawk. He knows where I am at all times, and I know it makes him nervous when I'm not in the house with a safe room nearby. He has it in his head that I'll somehow be taken from him again. It doesn't matter how many times I reiterate that I chose to run all those years ago or that I chose to go with Nico to Sicily. He sees it differently. To him, I was manipulated, and my argument is weak at best. He's not wrong. While I was technically manipulated both times, because I made a conscious choice to go, I see it differently.

Mason: Lose the attitude, Princess.

There it is again, that nickname I've come to love and hate. I understand why he started calling me Princess. He thought I was a judgmental snob looking down on him for his use of the club. While the name was appropriate, given what he didn't know, it no longer fits, and I've been slow to correct it. A nickname is endearing, it's an expression of affection, but it can also subconsciously shape a person's perception. Make no mistake; I am not a princess in need of rescuing.

I'm just about to text him back 'make me' when Vivian walks into the bathroom. "You almost ready to go?"

I look in the mirror and swipe on my nude gloss before rolling my lips. "Yeah, I think so. Mason wouldn't stop texting me. Which is why it took me a little longer to finish my makeup."

"Ha, you called it. He's on edge because you're here and he doesn't have cameras to watch you." She's not wrong. There's a reason I chose to get ready at her place, not mine, and it had nothing to do with something borrowed or blue. Well, maybe a little.

We are getting married next week. I still pinch myself that this is my reality, that Mason Croft gets to be my husband. I'm no longer his dirty secret, and he's not mine. After we returned from Sicily the same night everything went down with Chloe, Mason moved me in. There was never a discussion. It just was. But at the end of the day, I was okay with that. I didn't want to be without him. I love him with everything that I am. I know Vivian is just fucking around, but I always feel the need to defend Mason's over-the-top behavior when it comes to me.

"Technically, he had the cameras up before I ever moved in, but I'm sure I am a constant app that is open on his computer while he's in the office."

Vivian walks over to stand beside me in the mirror, checking her reflection and fluffing her hair. I still can't believe that she and I are friends—and not just her. I'm friends with Gianna too. In dating Mason, I scored two instant girlfriends. I never had a problem with Gianna, but she was my arch nemesis and girl crush by default simply because she had my man. Or, at least I thought she did.

Mason told me about his relationship with Gigi and how he still loves her. It was hard to hear those words, but I understood them. It's not the same love that we share. While Ellis and I don't have the years under our belt that they do, I care for him deeply. I can only imagine what ten years would look like. However, what shocked me the most was his confession that while they had an intimate relationship, they never hooked up. It was only ever fooling around, cop a-feel type shit.

Gianna Branson is one of the prettiest girls I know, so to say I was utterly dumbfounded is an understatement, but I'm not mad about it. I'm not sure I'd have her as a friend now if things were different. I know Mason hates that Ellis has not only seen but tasted my pussy. Yes, I told him about our hookup. He was fucking livid, but after he calmed down, he wanted all the details and eventually fessed up to the blowjob Hailey gave him at the club just nights before. Our relationship at that point was very tit-for-tat. Both of us were scared to feel anything for the other out of fear we'd get burned.

I understand Mason's anger, though. He still has to see Ellis. While Ellis and Sebastian aren't Nico's blood, they are like his own. But I'd be lying if I

said a small part of me doesn't get a little excited every time there's a family gathering. Whenever Ellis is around, Mason corners me, determined to ensure I only remember his mouth on my pussy. Last weekend he pulled me into the pantry at Nico's, dropped to his knees, and pushed up my dress, bringing me to orgasm twice with his tongue. I know he's hoping Ellis moves to Seattle to open the new club. But if my gut is right, Mason will probably see more of him than he already likes because I'm pretty sure he and Vivi have a thing going on. I'd put money on it. I believe it's one of the reasons she decided to move here.

"Hey, whatever you must tell yourself to not feel like you're marrying your stalker is your business. You do you, boo."

I grab my platforms off the floor and say, "Well, I'm ready. We just need to swing by Ellis's place on our way to Covet."

"Are you trying to give Mace a heart attack? Why do we need to go to Ellis's?" Her tone is steady, but her movements give her away. She starts nervously cleaning up the countertop and placing things in drawers. Vivian is not a clean freak by any means. Don't get me wrong; she's not a slob. However, her bathroom counter is always filled with products, hair accessories, and straighteners. And don't even get me started on her bedroom. Every piece of furniture has some article of clothing strewn across it from where she tried it on, decided not to wear it, and never got around to hanging it back up. But I don't call her out. Vivian is an open book, so if she's not telling me, there's a reason.

"I need to pick up my wig."

Her head snaps from her aimless sorting as she looks me up and down. "What the hell do you need a wig for? You look fucking hot. Mason is going to lose his shit."

"I need the wig because I had it on the first night we met." She quirks a brow, and I realize my mistake. "You know what I mean. I was wearing it the first night we reconnected."

"Got it. Well, let's go. Gigi texted that they just left the hotel, so if we leave now, we will probably get there at the same time as everyone else."

I collect my purse and shoes, and we head out.



as Mace texted you since we left my place?" Vivian questions as we saddle "H up to the bar in the VIP lounge at Covet.

"No, and I'm getting nervous. I thought for sure he'd send me some sort of text when he saw I went to Ellis's house. His silence is what's killing me."

The waiter places our Manhattans in front of us, and we both take a long drink before she says, "You can't say I didn't warn you. Don't get me wrong, I am one hundred percent down for this, but your face right now tells me you need at least two more of these." She tips her glass toward me.

When the idea to surprise Mason with a co-ed bachelor/bachelorette party came to me, it was after a bottle of wine. I knew there was no way Mason would ever go for a bachelorette party, and it's not like I have a bunch of girlfriends to invite anyway, but we both spent a lot of time missing out on life, and I didn't want this experience to be one more thing we didn't have.

"Fuck, Charlie, you look amazing. I hope you know what you're doing. Mason is not going to like this." Ethan shows up at my side and pulls me in for a hug. "I can't believe you worked here." Ethan is rubbing his hands together, unsure where to focus his eyes first as he looks around the club. I get the impression this is his first time in a club like this, which strikes me as odd. He's a known fucking playboy. Maybe he just always brings the party to him. I talked Ellis into allowing everyone up tonight, and I don't need Ethan making him change his mind before Mason ever shows up.

"Rein it in, Grand. You're acting as if you've never seen tits and ass. I won't have you getting us thrown out before Mason even gets here."

He throws his hands up in mock surrender before taking a seat. "Sheesh, tough crowd. Where's this 'menu' I was told about?"

Vivian cuts in sardonically, "You can't be serious?"

He flashes her his mega-watt smile before saying, "What's the saying? 'When in Rome.'"

"Well, we are not in Rome, asshat."

Geez, Vivian is in rare form tonight, and Ethan notices. "How about you put the claws away, tiger? Princess over here threw a wrench in my Roman holiday—" He's cut off as August steps up behind him, claspng him on the shoulder with Gigi in tow. You would never know the woman gave birth to twins two months ago. Apparently, she has one of those bodies that just bounces back.

Releasing August's hand, she comes around and gives me a hug. "You

look fucking hot. This place is great." Her eyes sparkle with intrigue as she looks around. Mason told me all about the day Gigi showed up in his office and what was discussed. I don't think he felt like he needed to share that story, but he wanted me to hear it. The Mason I have now is like the one I remembered all those summers ago. He shares everything with me. He's truly my best friend. But his need to share is how I know Gigi's interested in this scene.

August would never bring her to a place like this. He's way too possessive; even now, a part of him has not stopped touching her. From what I understand, he was in an open relationship of sorts before they met. He and his last girlfriend always had a third, and I think that makes Gigi insecure. You could be the hottest girl in the world, and your man could give hundreds of assurances that you are his everything and he doesn't want anything else. And while all that may be true, a seed of doubt will always linger. However, I believe it's a little more than that in Gigi's case. I think she wants to give August something kinky that she knows he used to have, but a small part of her wants to experiment herself. Just because you settle down and get married doesn't mean you can't still have fun in the bedroom. In fact, it should be your pass to be a freak. You should feel empowered to share all your darkest fantasies with your significant other. That person should be your safe space.

Gigi leans into my ear while August talks to Ethan and asks, "How would one go about signing up for a room?" I bite my lip and try to hold back the smile that wants to spread. The last thing I want is to make Gigi feel ashamed for asking me about a room at a sex club. One of the reasons I wanted to bring everyone here is because, deep down, everyone needs a little escapism every now and again to get out of their own way and just be. This place more than serves to do just that.

"Is there something in particular you think you want to try?" She thins her lips and pulls back, and I go over my question in my head, trying to determine if I offended her or if she's just thinking it over.

After sipping her cocktail, she leans in and says, "I want to tie him up and spank him." I can't help but laugh, and she pulls back, her cheeks flush at my reaction, and August turns around to see what's so funny. The man is seriously striking; you can tell he was raised with money. His mannerisms scream sophistication, class, and power in ways that Ethan, Gigi, and Mason's don't. I've never seen him slouch, dress casually, or have a single hair unkempt, and his face is always hidden behind a mask of indifference.

The few times I've caught him soften are for Gigi.

Luckily, Ethan draws his attention away from us with the iPad. Internally, I smirk. I have no doubt he's showing August all the girls and probably bragging about how he can still have anyone he wants because he's single. That's when I grab Gigi's arm and pull her into me while August is distracted. "I'm sorry; I wasn't laughing at you. I was more or less laughing at the image you painted in my head. I cannot for the life of me see that man tied up and getting spanked."

She smiles and says, "I know. That's precisely why I want to do it."

"Get room nine. It will have everything you will want and then some."

Room nine has a bondage bed and all the whips, floggers, and rope she could desire. Oh, what I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall in that room, just to see if August lets her do it. We've been here for roughly twenty minutes, and Lark is only a thirty-minute drive from here. Mason should be here any minute if I played my cards right. The fact that he isn't yet has me wondering if he didn't stop by Ellis's place to burn it down on his way here.

The last time I was at the club was when we had our tryst in the voyeur room. But his borderline tardiness has me questioning if I didn't make a major miscalculation. I thought him finding me here would be a turn-on, but now I wonder if I haven't completely pissed him off. I remember that day as the day we shared our truths, but it was also the day he found me tied up with another man.

Before I can give it any more thought, Ellis is behind the bar sliding another drink in front of me. "Don't worry, Knox. He'll show." He still calls me Knox, excusing it as old habits, but I think it's more than that. Lennox and Ellis existed together in a space where Charlie and Ellis never will. Not only is Charlie in love with another man, but she is also the daughter of a man he considers a father. Ellis and I didn't talk for a while after I returned home, and I was okay with that. I knew he needed space, and I didn't care to test Mason's limits. But I knew we needed to discuss things. He wasn't going anywhere, and neither was I.

One day while Mason was at work, I had him over to the house for lunch. I wanted to talk to him alone, and considering our history, I wanted Mason to feel comfortable. I needed to respect his boundaries, so the compromise was the house where he could have eyes on me. We talked about the day everything went down at the club, the lunch Nico surprised me with, and even Sebastian's role in everything. Basically, Nico brought Sebastian in to

do what Ellis couldn't. Lie.

"Vivian." Ellis says her name in greeting with a bitter undertone, as if her presence displeases him, but she gives it right back, "Lykos." They both hold each other's eye for a beat too long before they break and go back to acting like they hate each other. I don't know what the hell is going on between them, but it's another reason I wanted to come to the club tonight. Whatever is going on with them feels like a misunderstanding that could be cleared up by releasing a little pent-up sexual frustration. I'm not sure who started this stand-off, but I think I know exactly how to fix it.

"Vivi, I wanted to show you the voyeur room." I hop off my barstool and pull my booty shorts out of my ass just as I catch Ellis burning holes into the back of her head with a menacing glare. There is no question something is going on between these two. I know Vivian likes to share, and I wonder if that's not what this is about.

"Hey, I want to go," Gigi says as Vivian and I link arms to head back.

Before she can even step towards us, August wraps his arm around her waist and gives her one word: "No." She gives him a pouty face before relenting and Vivi and I head toward the hall of rooms.

"You know you're the only one who has never commented on the fact that we met here."

She shrugs before adding, "You know I would never judge anyone for their kink, but it honestly didn't surprise me. While Gigi and Mace never fucked, he got his dick wet, but never the same girl, so when I found out he was using this place, it didn't surprise me. No strings attached was always his style."

While I hate hearing about Mason's sexual escapades, I love knowing he's never had a relationship like ours. "Why are you bringing me back here?" she questions, as if she knows what I have up my sleeve, but before I can answer, euphoric moans assault our ears. Someone is in the room. I didn't even think to check that before we started heading this way, but seeing how Vivian's biting her lip, I don't think it's hurting my case. Once we are in the viewing area, we get a good look at the couple inside, and it's a woman with two men. I'll admit I've never seen a threesome in this room, and it's hot.

A man is on the edge of a bed with his legs spread as a woman straddles his lap. Her back is to his front, her legs spread just as wide draped over his. He's slowly pumping into her ass and pinching her nipples as a man sits between his legs and eats her pussy. Vivian leans into my ear, "Mason really

went in there with you?"

Her question gives me pause because I'm not sure what she's really asking. "Umm, yes, but it was just the two of us. It's not always three people." A moment later, I continue. "Can I ask you something—something personal?" She turns to me and furrows her brow before nodding. "Is this why you and Ellis aren't talking?"

Vivi stays quiet, and I think maybe I've overstepped. To the world, there is absolutely nothing going on between them, but because we've grown close and I know Ellis, I know differently. She lets out a sigh before giving me a subtle nod. "Because he doesn't want to share?" I question.

"No, because I don't want to share." Her comment takes me back, and I know the look on my face is one of confusion. "He knows I like or liked this, but I haven't done it with him. In fact, I've refused to do it with him."

"But why?"

Looking down at the ground, she shakes her head before saying, "I'm not sure. I really like him, Charlie, like really, really like him, and I guess I'm scared I can't have both."

Her truth renders me speechless. It's not what I expected to hear from someone who likes sharing partners. "Haven't you been with married couples?"

"Yes, but it's different when you are the third person, with no emotional ties. I'm not sure I could watch him be with someone else."

Now, that I can understand. I would lose my shit if I saw Mason touch another woman. "Have you talked to him about this?" She shakes her head no. "I think you should talk to him about it. He runs a sex club. The man has seen it all." I can tell she's unconvinced, so I add, "Aren't there couples that share where only one person is shared, similar to what's going on now? Two men are pleasuring the woman, but the men aren't touching."

A deep voice behind us growls out, "Yes," and we both jump.

"Shit, Ellis, you scared the crap out of me."

He gives me a soft smile before wrapping his arms around Vivian from behind. Placing a kiss on her neck, I hear him say, "You should have told me."

I look away to give them privacy just as the woman on display takes two dicks at once. Her heady moans as she's stretched have me flooding my panties. "Fuck." I rasp as I turn to leave the viewing area, only to run into a wall of muscle.

The look on Mason's face is all fury. He's pissed, and before I can get a word in, he says, "We're not doing that." Immediately, he grabs my hand and leads me out of the viewing area. Once we are in the hall, I yank my hand out of his. His eyes go wide before he asks, "Are you serious right now, Charlie? You know how I feel about sharing. That is off the table for me." His eyes rake up my body before he gestures to my attire, "I don't fucking like this. Why are you doing this?"

Now, those words hurt. His first were a simple misunderstanding. I'm not here to be shared, but I did come here to seduce him. Their sting must register on my features because he's in my face before I can blink. "Baby, don't do that. That's not what I meant. God, I love every inch of this body. You're going to be my wife, but—"

I cut him off before his words can do any more damage and ruin what I came here for. "Can I show you something?"

His eyes search mine, and he kisses my lips before saying, "I'll follow you anywhere, Princess."

Reaching for his hand, I interlace our fingers and pull him down the hall. He follows silently until I stop in front of our destination. He looks at me quizzically before a knowing smirk takes over his face. "Room five?"

I give him a coy smile before saying, "Thirty minutes." His tongue darts out to wet his plump bottom lip as realization sets in.

He's getting the time I never gave him.



As I close the door behind us, his arms immediately wrap around me, his hard length pressed into my ass as his hands find my breasts. Fuck, I want to let him take control. After watching those three in the voyeur room, I am more than ready, but tonight I have something else planned, so I push back against him and unwrap his arms. The puzzled look on his face as I break away is priceless. I never refuse him. He's about to question me when I say, "Don't worry baby, you're going to come. Now, go sit."

He doesn't immediately move. I can tell it's because he's completely enthralled by this entire scene and I fucking love it. When he finally moves to sit on the couch, I walk over to the closet and grab a pair of handcuffs. Before seeing what's in my hand, he asks, "What's this about, Charlie? Not that I'm

complaining."

Turning, I face him and twirl the handcuffs around my finger before walking over to him with a little extra sashay in my step. "I wanted a do-over of the first night we met here at the club." His eyes narrow as he tries to follow where I'm going with this, and I can't help but smile. When I reach him, my hands roam over his shoulders as I move to slip off his suit jacket. With my tits in his face, he nips at my nipple, and I hiss before pushing him back. Meeting his heated gaze, I glare at him. "That night you gave me a nickname."

He smirks. "I did, Princess," he draws out as I unbutton his shirt before helping him remove it as well.

Once it's off, I say, "Hands above your head."

"Charlie, are you serious? You want to handcuff me?"

I twirl them around my finger once more before saying, "What else did you think I was going to use them for?"

"Don't you trust me?" I tease.

He groans before pulling me into him and kissing his way up my neck, sending delicious tendrils of heat straight to my core. I clench, wanting nothing more than to let him fill me, but my brain remembers why I'm here as his lips make their way up my jaw. My hand comes back to his chest, and before his lips can find mine, I push him back, but this time he relents. Relaxing on the couch, he puts his hands above his head and says, "Tie me up, Princess."

Before he can change his mind, I cuff his wrists and hook the chain to the lock on the wall to keep him in place. Once he's cuffed, I stand back to admire my accomplishment, only to realize I need to do one more thing. Bending down, I run my nails down his chest, drawing out a hiss before I unbuckle his belt and pull down his pants and boxers in one go. His thick cock springs free and bobs toward his belly button, leaving a smear of precum on his toned abs. I lean forward to lick it off his stomach, and he draws out, "Fuuck."

I run my tongue up the underside of his cock before taking his crown in my mouth and sucking it clean. When I hear him pull against his cuffs, I smile and release him. "Charlie," he growls as I move to stand, "That's why you wanted to cuff me. You wanted to tease me."

Making my way across the room, I throw out, "Something like that," as I start the playlist. Miguel's "Quickie" is the first song I danced to for him. On

our first night in this room, I was nervous. I wasn't expecting to run into him ever again—and at this club of all places. I didn't want him to find out who I really was for fear that he wouldn't want me or even give me a chance. And because of that, I held back.

"Do you remember your rules?"

He looks at me and then shakes his head as realization sets in. "No touching," he grinds out, and I smirk.

"I'm only doing what I should have done then: ensuring there is no mistake that the rules are followed."

As the song rings out, I slowly untie the scarf binding my breasts so that they're on full display. Then, I slowly drag my fingertips down my stomach and over my hips, making my skin pebble in their wake before I reach the hem of my shorts and leisurely pull them down so that I'm left wearing nothing but my platform stilettos. Which is precisely how Mason wanted me night one. I am already incredibly wet from watching the woman in the voyeur room get pleased by two men at once, and I know the second I step up to the pole, Mason will notice.

When I reach the pole in the middle of the room, the spotlight comes on, and Mason sees the evidence of my arousal as it glistens under the direct beam of light. Again, he pulls against his restraints. "Charlie, you better get over here. I'm done with this game."

I give him a coy smile, biting my lip before saying, "No, baby. I'm just getting started." His cock twitches at my words as a bead of precum escapes his slit. "I think you more than like my little show. Patience, baby." I taunt. Mason is not used to relinquishing control, and in our relationship, I haven't pushed him. I haven't felt the need to. The past few months have been a whirlwind of crazy and, for the most part, I've let him run the show. I didn't care to rock the boat as I figured out what Charlie wanted and who she wanted to be. But it's okay to not always be okay and to lean on others when we are not strong. That's what I did with Mason. He was my safe place, my home.

Stepping up to the pole, I let my hand slide up its length before wrapping my calf around the bottom and throwing my body into a spin. Aside from the time I've been in this room with Mason, I've never danced on a pole a day in my life. But there is something genuinely cathartic and empowering about it. It could be the release of endorphins you get from using your body to put on a performance, but for me, it's more than that. For me, it's the freedom of self-

expression. Whenever I came into these rooms with Mason, I felt stripped down and exposed, and, for as nerve-racking as that is, it's also freeing.

I take one more swing around the pole before I drop down and spread my legs wide. When I do, I know there is no mistake, he sees my desire. "Fuck, Charlie, you don't have to untie me, but I need to taste you." His pleas fall on deaf ears. This is what I wanted all along. I was never a fucking Princess. He just didn't see me. But make no mistake; he will see me now.

Reaching behind me, I grab onto the pole to hold myself steady as I let my free hand roam over the swell of my breasts, pinching my nipple in its descent down my stomach. When my hand reaches my soaked folds, I don't waste his time or mine with any further teasing. I need relief. I dip two fingers in, and my core immediately tightens around them, desperate to extinguish the ache that's been building. I don't hold back my moans as I pump myself, chasing the orgasm I so desperately need.

The first night we shared in this room, Mason pumped me with his fingers until I was on the brink of coming, only to withdraw last second and refuse my release. The memory of that night and the torture I know I'm giving him now have me opening my eyes. When they land on Mason, his fists are clenched, his arm muscles straining against his restraints as his chest heaves. I have no doubt this little show has him equal parts pissed and turned on. The evidence of his arousal is dripping down the side of his thick, erect cock, one that I desperately want to fill me. The thought of him stretching me sends me over the edge, and I come hard.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he grinds out, his cock twitching with the need to be stroked. Finding my strength, I pull myself up on the pole until I'm once again standing. Then, bringing my fingers to my mouth I suck off my arousal. "My god, Princess, what are you doing to me?"

"You still don't get it, do you?" Walking over to the sofa, I straddle his legs before stepping onto the couch and tilting his head back to rest on the ledge. "I'm not your Princess. I'm your mother fucking queen. Now clean it up."

He smirks before saying, "Fuck, yeah, you are. Put that pussy in my mouth." Lifting a knee, I rest it on the seat back next to his head, opening myself up, and he dives in greedily, groaning against my pussy as he sucks my clit into his mouth. When I look down, the sight beneath me has me on edge, and I want to fall all over again. The man I love, willingly tied up and worshiping my body. I adjust the angle so that he can take more of me, and

he does so eagerly.

When his tongue spears my hole, I can't help but grind down on his face, forcing another delicious groan to escape from deep in his chest and vibrate through my core. "Yes, Mace. Fuck, don't stop." My words only spur him on as he licks me harder and deeper before moving to my little bundle of nerves. Teasingly, he bites down before pulling me into his mouth hard. My hands grab ahold of his chained arms to steady myself as I see stars from the orgasm that rocks my body. My god, this man knows how to please.

He slowly strokes his tongue through my folds, licking away my juices as I ride out the aftershocks of my orgasm. Once my pussy has stopped spasming and the evidence of my arousal has been thoroughly licked clean, he places a kiss on my inner thigh that brings me to my knees. I pull his hair, righting his head before licking the evidence of my arousal off his lips. He leans in to take more, but I pull back. "Sorry baby, no kissing."

He growls his frustration, and I feel his cock twitch against my ass, and I can't help but bite my lip to stifle the smile that wants to take over. When I move to pull off his lap, his arms pull hard against the cuffs, as I knew they would. "Something the matter, baby?" I have no doubt if his arms weren't tied behind his head, he would have held me in place and slammed me down on his dick.

"Prin—" he starts, but I cut him off, feeding him the exact same words he gave me in his office when he punished me by withholding yet another orgasm.

"Don't give me a reason not to give you what you want."

The fury building inside of him is unmistakable. I have no doubt if he wasn't tied up, he'd be pounding out his frustration, feeding me every delicious inch of that glorious cock, but I need him to see me as his equal going into this marriage.

I know Mason trusts me, and I realize he isn't consciously trying to control every move I make. His obsession with knowing my whereabouts whenever we are apart is rooted in the fear that I'll disappear again. But I also need to correct some of the behavior I've let slide as I've collected pieces of me. I've put off important conversations over the past few months as I tried to find my voice and the woman I want to be now that I have all my truths.

I'd be lying if I said living with the man I thought was my father, who also turned out to be my mother's killer, didn't mess me up. I didn't go back to work. Instead, I tapped into the savings I had stocked up to pay off my debts.

Mason won't take a dime of my money for anything, but I didn't feel right using his money for my essentials. He's already set me up with my own cards and everything, but I haven't used them once. It's part of why I needed this moment. I don't need him, I want him, and there is a difference.

"Charlie, what is this?" he pants through his frustration and desire, both equally stealing his sanity. To keep him with me and throw him a bone, I drop to my knees in front of him before running my tongue up the vein that runs the underside of his cock, licking up the salty evidence of what I do to him.

With his cock in my hand mere inches away from my mouth, I say, "We've owned our secrets and lies. We've shared our truths. I've trusted you with my heart. Now it's your turn to let me protect yours. I'm not going anywhere, Mace. No one is out to get me. We're about to share our lives together forever. We need to do it as equals."

I kiss his tip before circling my tongue around his crown and taking him into my mouth when he all but pants out, "Charlie, stop."

When my eyes meet his, I see his regret, but more than that, I see understanding, and that's all I needed. "Mace, I know you didn't mean it. I just needed you to see it."

I don't give him a chance to respond before I take his cock down my throat to its base. The sound he makes as I pleasure him after teasing him for so long has me clenching with anticipation. I feel his balls start to draw up as I bob up and down. Sliding my hands up his muscular thighs, I knead my way up, digging my nails in as I do and giving him all the pain and pleasure he served me. When he makes a move to thrust up, I pull off. The groan that rips through his chest and falls from his lips is animalistic. He can't hide his need for release, no matter how much he might not want to be affected by this sweet torture.

Mounting his lap, his hooded, distressed gaze locks on mine. The man looks utterly feral and unhinged, and I fucking revel in it. But he's not ready for it yet. He still hasn't begged. Grabbing the base of his cock I run his tip through my wet folds and watch as his breathing slows. He bites his lip, no doubt holding back his need to come. I'm sure he could blow all over me just from me running my soaked lips up and down his length. He's holding back, and I don't want him to. I need him to give in to me and trust me.

"Charlie, please, baby. I can't take it anymore. I need you."

Before the last word leaves his lips, I slam down onto his cock and watch

as his eyes roll back into his head. His cock twitches deep, and when I move to start my pace, he says, "Shit, baby, don't you dare move. I swear to fuck I'll come."

Leaning forward, I kiss his chest before slowly dragging my tongue up to his neck. His breathing slowly becomes more labored until I reach his ear and say, "Fill me up, Mace."

"Fucking take it," he growls, and that's when I know he gets all of it. Those are the exact words I gave him the night I let him have me for the first time in this very room. When all of this was still one big game. Our entire existence has been one wicked beautiful lie. But we can't live rooted in the fear of our pasts. We have to step into the now.

I slide down his length and bottom out hard, taking the pain with the pleasure and letting it imprint on my soul, never to be forgotten. I start a punishing pace, the sound of our combined arousal amplifying over the music. Ever since Mason fucked me in the mirror while we were in Sicily, I've been obsessed with watching him take me. It's so fucking hot watching my juices coat his dick, and my lips stretch around his length. *Fuck*. My pussy starts to grip his dick, and I move my eyes from where we are joined, only to find him watching me. The look on his face is one of pure adoration, and it sends me spiraling. My body gives out and I fall on top of him as my orgasm tears through me. I rock against him, drawing out every delicious spasm as I feel hot ropes of cum fill me up. Somehow, I find the strength to lift my arm and hit the button above the lock that held his cuffs to the wall. His arms instantly fall over me, crushing my body to his.

"Charlie, I love you so damn much. You're my fucking world. There's never been anyone else at my side because it's always been your place. I don't want to lose you baby."

I tilt my head and find his eyes. "You won't lose me."

CHAPTER 22

"A HARMFUL TRUTH IS BETTER THAN A USEFUL LIE."

- Thomas Mann



MASON

This past week has been unreal. Saturday, Charlie surprised me with a bachelor/bachelorette party at Covet. That was the last thing I expected to walk into when I found her there. The last time we were there was the day I lost her. That day still leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I haven't been able to forgive myself for the selfishness I let cloud my better judgment and put her in danger. I didn't trust her, I didn't trust us, and because of that, I let someone manipulate the narrative and come between me and my girl.

When I showed up at the club and found her outside the voyeur room, I was beyond mad. I was irate. There was no way in hell I was going to let another man put his hands on her or see her naked body, and I thought that's what she wanted, another tryst before we said our vows and put those experiences to bed. Of course, I'll give her whatever freaky shit she wants, but sharing is a hard limit. But once she pulled me down to room five, the first place I ever had her, and said, 'thirty minutes,' I knew she was giving me the time I never got, and I was instantly hard.

However, when we got into the room, the dynamic changed quickly. Charlie wanted to control the situation, but that's typically my role when it comes to intimacy. While I take charge, put her where I want her, and take her how I wish, the woman is always thoroughly ravished, coming multiple times during one session. So, her need to dominate took me by surprise, and it was hard to rein in my desire. Seeing her need drove me crazy. I wanted to fuck her hard, but I had to pull back. It was clear that night was something she needed, and I wasn't going to refuse her. I couldn't if I wanted to.

In the beginning of our relationship, I taunted her. I was a dick and hated it, but it wasn't because I didn't want her. She was playing the game just as much as I was, but she held all the aces. Unlike me, Charlie knew who I was from the start, and she hid it from me. I don't think that excuses my behavior, but the point is we both hurt each other and made moves out of fear and anger. That's why I thought the room was a redo of sorts. She was giving me everything I asked for without reservation because there were no more secrets or more games to be played.

However, as time passed, I could tell the setup was more than just a do-over. It was an awakening. Charlie wanted me to see something, and damn if

it wasn't hard to focus. When she slid down that pole and spread her thighs, putting her glistening pussy on display, my brain went fucking blank. For a man, a scene like that is purely animalistic. I felt like an unhinged, wild animal needing to mate his partner, to fill her with my seed and give her babies. I cut my wrists as I pulled hard against the cuffs when she plunged her fingers inside and brought herself to orgasm. It was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my fucking life.

But I wasn't prepared for the words she was about to deliver. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to blow when she climbed up the couch and told me she was my mother fucking queen. Damn right, she was. I fucking ate her pussy like the starved man I was. At that moment, I realized what was happening and why she was tormenting me, and I was in awe. While in my eyes she was always my queen, my words and actions said differently. I wasn't treating her like one. I was treating her like a fragile flower. Coddling her for fear her stem might break. But Charlie isn't weak at all. Her stem is forged in steel, she is strong, she is resilient, and fuck me if she isn't fierce. She knew exactly what she needed for herself and for me.

'Trust that I'll protect your heart.'" Those words cut deep. This woman went through hell and back the same as me, with all the same sick, twisted, and depraved thoughts. I knew I had been overly concerned with her safety and obsessed with her whereabouts, but I'd justified my fear, telling myself I had to do it because I couldn't always be with her. I had to work, and my mind had to focus on other things besides her, and this way, I had tapes and apps to be my eyes and ears when I couldn't. I was trying to do it all to be everything I thought we needed. Charlie was not herself when we got home. I could tell her light had been dimmed, and I needed to be her strength, but what I missed was that she had been mine all along. In a game of chess, a queen saves the king, and that's precisely what she did. I'm not doing life alone anymore. I have her.

"Mason, do you have everything packed? I don't see how I have three suitcases, and you only have one." Charlie questions as she walks out of the master closet with more clothes in hand. The bed is filled with suitcases, and I can't for the life of me understand why.

Coming around the bed, I pull her back flush to my front and kiss her neck before saying, "I'm not sure why you think you need all these clothes for our honeymoon. I plan on having you naked the entire time."

She lets out a moan that's half desire and half irritation. "Mace, I'm

serious...." With my lips still on her neck sucking her soft skin into my mouth, I grab a handful of her breast and tease her nipple through the thin lining of her tank top, and she lets me play briefly before pushing against me and pulling out of my embrace.

"Charlie, tomorrow is our wedding day, but if this is too much, we'll call it off." Her eyes meet mine, and I see her confusion, so I add, "I'm doing this for you, baby. I don't need all the extras. I just need you, and if this isn't making you happy, it stops. I don't care about the money."

Five months ago, we flew back to St. Louis for Gianna and August's wedding—well, their reception anyway. Ethan called me and said August was taking Gigi to the courthouse to marry her one afternoon. It was a surprise for her and a 'fuck you' to his parents. Gigi never cared about a big wedding. The one they were supposed to have was for his parents and appearances. That night, Ethan rented out a bar downtown for all their friends and gave a few of his trusted paparazzi friends press passes for the night just to ensure their elopement was front-page news on all major networks the next day.

I had been carrying a ring around in my pocket for weeks waiting for the right moment to propose, and it finally felt right on that trip back home. Vivian filled Charlie in on all the sordid details of August and Gigi's past, and I believe it made her own demons feel less ugly. The morning after the wedding, she said she wanted to drive past her old house before we went home. As we left the subdivision, she squealed loudly, 'Mace, oh my god. Look, it's still there. Can you believe it?'

It took me a second to realize what she was talking about, and then I saw it. The treehouse where we sealed our fate and gave away our hearts was still miraculously standing. It had been pretty dilapidated when we'd used it. To see that it was still standing after all those years felt like an omen. I pulled her out of the car, and we snuck into the backyard and into the treehouse, where I asked her to be my wife.

"Mace, you know I want to marry you. I dreamt about marrying you before it was even a possibility, and what we have planned for tomorrow is perfect."

Vivian and Gianna did a lot of the planning. I know they were making up for the wedding they didn't get to plan for Gigi, and I questioned whether Charlie didn't just go along with their plans to be nice. But after the club last weekend, she explained that teaching me a lesson and making sure she was

my equal wasn't her only purpose in throwing the party.

Charlie didn't want us to miss out on more than we already had. Our lives were already going to look different than most, and while she was okay with that, she wanted the fairytale she spent years reading about, and if that was on her heart, I would give it to her. Dropping to my knees in front of her, I say, "Then tell me."

She pulls her eyes away from mine before saying, "I don't want to go back to work at Lark." Relief instantly flows through my veins. I thought for sure this conversation was going to be a lot heavier.

"Charlie, I don't want you to work." I run my hands up her exposed thighs until I reach her hips, where I squeeze and say, "I want you to stay home and take care of our babies."

Her eyes are instantly glassy when they find mine, and before I can offer any words, she says, "No, Mace, you don't understand. I don't want to return to Lark because I want to work for Nico." Releasing her hips, I run my hands through my hair and stand up. Those are not the words I expected to hear.

Three months ago, we started speaking with Nico again. Before I ever left his house with her, I knew we weren't saying goodbye for forever. It was only goodbye for now. While Nico did us dirty and used us as pawns in a bigger game, I knew time would bring understanding. But understanding didn't mean all was forgiven. That's something we've all had to work at. Nico and I have both had to learn not to fault the other for a past we cannot change. Because I want to be better and not let my emotions rule over my good sense, as I begin to pace, I ask, "Can you explain it to me?"

The old me would have blown up and told her it wasn't an option, but that reaction would have been misplaced anger rooted in fear. I don't want to lose her, but to keep her, I have to trust her. I have to trust her to protect my heart. My words bring her some relief because she blinks her eyes and wipes away her unshed tears with a renewed sense of vigor, and it hits me. Her perceived sadness was because she thought she would hurt me.

"I want to get to know my dad."

Her answer is simple, and I don't need further explanation because I am all too familiar with the sentiment. It's the same reason I started hacking. I wanted to get to know my dad, so I say, "Okay."

She repeats, "Okay," but there is a question in her tone, like she doesn't believe I am genuinely okay with her decision. I reach her in two strides and take her hand before pulling her flush against my front.

"Are you still taking my name?"

She furrows her brow before saying, "Yes, of course."

I press a chaste kiss to her lips before trailing them along her jaw and adding, "And you're planning on coming home to my bed every night?"

Her breath hitches when I nip at her ear, and she throws her arms around me before answering, "There's nowhere else I want to be."

"I love you, Charlie. If working with your dad makes you happy, I will not stop you."

She smiles and kisses my mouth slowly, teasingly, before saying, "I wasn't asking your permission."

I grab her ass hard, making her yelp before adding, "No, you weren't, but that pretty heart would have sacrificed her own not to break mine."



"This is messed up. You waited until my fucking wedding reception to tell me this." I try to keep my voice down and my face neutral, but Nico is making that extremely difficult.

"You're very good at accusing me of telling lies, but you, son, were very good at accepting my silence as truth. Have you asked me once about what happened to Chloe since you left my home in Sicily?"

He's not wrong. It's been eight months since everything went down, and I left my mother's fate to him, but when I did so, I assumed it was because Nico would dish out a fate far worse than any I could ever manage. I didn't realize that he would let her go. Charlie and I have had many discussions about our childhoods and the things our parents did. We compared notes and connected the dots to fill in the timelines and stories where things got blurry.

Charlie told me about the night she disappeared from Covet and the conversations she and Nico had leading up to her decision to follow him to Sicily. That night he spun a story that Natalie had been infatuated with him, but he hadn't wanted a relationship. Given the closeness in age between Charlie and me, and the fact that Nico, William, and Johnathan all attended CMU together, it was easy to surmise that Natalie and Chloe had to have known each other. Which shed light on the estranged relationship between my father and William. Because my mother showed up all these years later engaged to Nico, the same man Natalie was infatuated with, we assumed the

falling out was never really between my father and William but rather their wives. They both were in love with the same man.

Natalie's journals later confirmed that we were only partially correct. Both women were not in love with the same man. Natalie did in fact want Nico, but Chloe was in love with my Uncle William. Which is why I'm fuming inside. Nico should have ensured she took her last breath at his estate; instead, he gave her a happily ever after, handing her back to the one man she covets.

"The day William Croft comes after my daughter will be the day I take his life. I have him under surveillance 24/7. If I have reason to believe Charlie is at risk, you would be the first to know, but I can assure you that day will never come."

"That's why you needed Chloe for his location. You had your proof all along, but you couldn't find him." Fuck, so many pieces of the puzzle start falling into place in ways my mind wouldn't allow me to see before this moment. It was easy to connect the dots that my mother was the one who helped William with the suicide note and my car crash, but I could never understand why she showed up at the hospital, and now it's clear: William is still alive.

Our helicopter went down the same damn week Charlie's blood hit the system. It was too rare. We were already in San Jose, and it would only be a matter of time before my father found her. William orchestrated the crash, and my mother made it happen. He knew Charlie had blown their cover. It's why he faked his own death and went into hiding. It's why Charlie was left penniless in his death. He was never dead at all. He took his money and ran, but not before making one more play to ensure no one got to have Charlie.

"He did come after you." I state it as fact because Nico was in San Jose, just like me. He set up shop years before my father and I ever had for the same reason: to track down William. There is no way William wasn't actively sending hits his way. I take a long pull off my beer before setting it on the bar top a little too forcefully, drawing the attention of a few guests around us. "Son of a bitch." I hate how he's made me out to be a lesser man in all of this simply because he had more details. He sewed seeds of doubt into my mind that told me I couldn't protect my wife. First, with his words about keeping my house in order, then with his jabs about the attacks on my life, while he was fully aware of who the aggressors were all along.

"Si, he did, but I was able to thwart them because I was already onto their

game. It's why I had her sent back to him. William's disgust is a far better punishment than death. She will live out the rest of whatever time he allows carrying the weight of his disappointment, and he will wake every day to her face and be reminded of mine. That after everything, I not only found my daughter, but I found him, and he will live in fear of my retribution. Every day he breathes, he will question if it will be his last."

"Why wouldn't you tell us this months ago?"

He looks at the amber liquid in his glass, deep in thought for long moments, before saying, "I knew you loved her, but I didn't know your heart." I stay silent, hoping this isn't another one of those times when he fails to explain himself. Then, just before I'm about to question him further, he adds, "Tonight, she told me that after the honeymoon, she plans to come home and work by my side at Serra Tech."

Instinctively, I pull in a breath, letting my lungs inflate before slowly releasing the tension those words bring me. "Charlie wouldn't have made that decision if she thought it would hurt you. I'm sure her choice doesn't please you, but I respect the selflessness you gave in letting her make it no matter how much you may not like it. I now know that you will do whatever it takes to ensure her happiness, and because I know I can trust you with her heart, I trust you with this secret."

I almost spit my beer out with his last comment, but I manage to swallow before saying, "You can't expect me to keep this from her. She deserves to know." When I look up I find her being spun around the dance floor by Ellis. She's a vision in white. I haven't been able to take my eyes off her since the ceremony this afternoon. Charlie was right last night when she said we needed this. Sharing this day with our closest friends, seeing her laugh, and twirling her around that dance floor, I lost myself. The world melted away, and all that existed was us. She was mine, and I got to shout it to the world, and I know that feeling was mutual. Like me, she never thought this day would exist. I don't want to stain it with this pain.

"You saw my sacrifice to ensure that I could eliminate the threat to her life. I was willing to let her go if it meant keeping her safe. I knew she would see that I manipulated the situation and used her to get to Chloe, but the reward was far greater than the risk. Not all lies are told with bad intentions. Sometimes they are told to save someone else the pain and punishment of their truth."

As much as I hate it, I understand what he's saying. Knowing William is

still alive is a pain she doesn't need to live with, a fear she doesn't need to feel because neither Nico nor I would ever let it come to that. Her eyes catch mine as the song she's dancing to ends, and I know my time with Nico is up, so I say, "It stays between us, but I want full access. No more secrets. She is my wife, and she will be the mother of my children. Do we have a deal?" He nods in agreement right before Charlie wraps herself around my waist.

"Here you are. I was wondering where you disappeared to. There's one more song. Dance with me."

I bring our joined hands to my lips and place a kiss on the back of hers before saying, "Always."

As I let my wife lead me onto the dance floor, I can't help but be pulled back to my conversation with Nico and my promise to keep his secret. Charlie told me she would protect my heart, but what is my role, if not to be her defender, preserver, and shield, ensuring her happiness and safety above all else? What is the purpose of knowing this truth? It will only bring her a world of hurt. *Can't a lie be righteous if it saves someone from pain?*

Reaching for my chin, she brings my face to hers, pinning me with those hypnotic pale blue eyes that have forever held my heart before asking, "Aren't you happy we did this? Hasn't today been perfect?"

Leaning down, I tenderly kiss her lips before placing my forehead against hers and saying, "Every day with you is nothing short of perfect. Your happiness is the secret to mine." And before the words have even finished leaving my mouth, I know that Nico's secret is safe for another day. *After all, is my silence not justified by giving her this night?*

If I've learned anything through all of our trials and tribulations, it's that the truth never stays hidden. All lies have an expiration date, but the timing of the truth is everything.

The End

ALSO BY L.A. FERRO

Say You Promise: A Delicate Vows Duet (Book One)

-Gianna & August's Story-

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Say It's Me: A Delicate Vows Duet (Book Two)

<https://mybook.to/SayItsMe>

DIG: A Second Chance Romance

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.A. Ferro has had a love for storytelling her entire life. For as long as she can remember she put herself to sleep plotting stories in her head. That thirst for a good tale led her to books where she became an avid reader.

The unapologetically dramatic characters, steamy scenes, and happily ever afters found inside the pages of romance novels irrevocably transformed her. The world of romance ran away with her heart, and she knew her passion for love would be her craft.

When she's not trailing after one of her three crazy kids, she loves to construct messy 'happily ever afters' that take her readers on a journey full of angst, lust, and obsession with page-turning enchantment.

Chasing her literary dreams, she hopes to captivate her readers with the stories that have lived rent-free in her mind for years. As an avid reader, dominant alpha males and feisty heroines have always stolen her heart and she is optimistic her books will bring the same amount of heart and heat that inspired her.



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