



Arranged
HEARTS

PART
TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

T. L. SMITH

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HEARTS

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TWO

T . L . S M I T H

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WARNING

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. This book is intended for adults ONLY. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

BLURB

Joey

I married, and I did all the things asked of me.

Then she ran away.

That was the end of it, or so I thought.

Until I found her again.

This time, should I let her get away so easily?

Adora

I was falling for my arranged husband hook, line, and sinker.

He was everything I was not.

And yet everything I didn't know I needed.

Until I was forced to run.

I just hoped he didn't catch me.

DEDICATION

To all my book lovers who want a man to push her against the
romance section and whisper, "*Which book, darling?*"

This is for you.

Variety GOSSIP

The 'Nice' Brother

Did anyone say *runaway bride*? Because that's the latest news.

And the not so 'nice' mafia brother will hunt her down.

The real question is, will she want him to find her?

ONE

JOEY

“Have you considered you are just a pussy-ass bitch?” The words echo from behind me. Loudly. I stand still, the drink in my hand swirling as I move it.

Calm.

That’s what I need to be.

Otherwise, I will turn around and put a bullet in his ass.

Or head.

Either will do.

“Lucas,” Keir warns.

“But for real, clearly he let Adora go when we all know Joey could have stopped her if he wanted to,” Lucas replies, really grinding into my remaining patience.

He isn’t wrong. I could have, but a part of me didn’t want to. Not for the fact that she ran away, but because I couldn’t hurt her.

I hate that.

I hate that she pulled these emotions from me. That I let her, and now...

A knock sounds at the door. Not even waiting for a second, I get up to answer it because it’s better than sitting in this house I shared with her, discussing how we plan to kill her.

When I pull it open, a man is standing there. He eyes me nervously before he shoves a leash at me that’s attached to a

small, out-of-breath, tan French Bulldog.

“What the fuck?”

“Are you Joey?” he asks.

“Yes, but I’m confused as to why the fuck you just handed me this.” I try to pass the leash back, but he shakes his head and backs up.

“Adora left a message. She said, ‘*Give him to my husband, he loves dogs.*’”

Her name leaving his lips shocks me, so I step up closer, my chest almost slamming into his. “You spoke to my wife?”

His head shakes back and forth frantically. “No, no... I didn’t. I told you I had a message, a-and it was signed from Adora. Here, take it.” He pulls a letter from his pocket and tosses it at me, then flees down my steps, almost tripping over his feet on the way.

“Whose dog is this?” I ask him before he’s out of sight.

“My co-worker, Becca.”

“What’s the dog’s name?”

He smirks as he reaches the bottom step. “Fendi.”

“Really?” I deadpan.

“Yep, really. She’s needy, word of warning.” Then he’s gone.

And when I look down, two big brown eyes stare up at me.

“What the fuck am I going to do with you?” The dog, of course, doesn’t reply, it just looks up at me with curious eyes.

“What the fuck is that thing?” I turn to find Lucas standing there, a bowl in his hand as he eats all my shit.

“Get the fuck away from my food.”

“I was hungry.”

“I don’t care. Fuck off.”

“You sure you don’t have your period? Chanel gets snappy at me the same way, but I just help her with a massage...” He

pauses as he takes another bite. “With my cock.”

As I walk back inside, the dog following close behind, I have no words for him.

Keir is still seated at the counter, clicking away on his phone.

It’s been a week since she left me.

A week of no contact.

Not a single damn word.

“Found him.” Keir turns around, lifts his phone, and shows me a photograph. It’s a picture of a man, likely in his forties or fifties, and next to him is Adora. Sunglasses cover her face, and she’s wearing a large hat. Her lips are pinched tight, and his hand is around her waist as they walk. “Go and get the girl.”

“Do we have to?” I ask, barely refraining from huffing.

“Get her.” He isn’t talking about Adora. Now that we found her, she’ll be next.

Betrayal in *the life* equals one thing.

Death.

“I’ll go with you. Chanel is away all week on flights. I have time,” Lucas says, and I glance back to Keir.

“Not a chance in fucking hell.” My hand clenches around the leash, and the dog hides behind my legs. That’s when Keir finally notices her.

“I don’t even want to ask.”

“Wren will love the dog. Take it.” He stands to come closer, squats down to view the animal, and looks up at me.

“What’s its name?”

“Fendi.” He smirks before he pats the floor, and Fendi goes to him.

Keir and I grew up with dogs, and when our family dog died when I was a kid, we just couldn’t stand the thought of getting another one. So we never did.

“You’ll collect her when you get back,” he says and turns for the door, the dog trailing behind him. But, before he walks out, he shoots over his shoulder, “Lucas, try not to get yourself killed.”

“I’ll do my best.” Lucas salutes, still munching away on food that isn’t his.

“So, when do we pick up the pretty young one?”

TWO

Joey

“DO you think she is as pretty as your wife?” Lucas taunts as we stand outside the large gate in front of the school.

“No,” I answer bluntly.

“Is that because you still want to fuck her when you know you have to kill her?”

The gate opens, and we step through. I ignore his comment, and he shuts the fuck up for once in his life. The *preside*, i.e., the headmaster, greets us on the other side. Her smile wavers as she spots us, but she politely guides us in. As soon as we get to her office, I see the girl, sitting in a chair, a bag at her feet, and her knees shaking anxiously.

I wonder if she realizes her sister does the same thing.

Abigail’s eyes flick to us and go wide. She stands and glances around the room.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I say, stepping over and offering her my hand. She takes it, albeit hesitantly, and I lean down and kiss her hand. She sucks in a breath at the contact, her eyes still locked on me.

“I know who you are.”

I look over my shoulder to the *preside*. “Give us a moment.” She opens her mouth to argue, but Lucas holds the door open for her.

“You speak English?” I ask.

“Fluently.” She smirks, then pulls back her hand. “How can I help you, Mr. Rossi?”

“Clever girl.”

“I am my father’s daughter, after all.”

“You are...” I don’t bother mentioning her sister is as well. “How old are you?” I inquire.

She seems to straighten her shoulders before she speaks, “Eighteen.”

“I’m going to ask you to pack your things, Abigail. We have places to be.”

Her arms cross over her chest at the demand. “You want my sister?” she asks, her eyes giving nothing away.

“I do.” I smile.

She shrugs. “Whatever.” Then she opens the door and walks out as Lucas steps back and watches her go.

“Maybe we should follow her to make sure she doesn’t run.”

“She won’t run,” I tell him.

“So sure of yourself.”

I ignore him as we walk out of the office and out the front door to wait near the gate. After ten minutes, Abigail comes out dragging a suitcase and a backpack.

“Perfect timing. I was about to bounce out of that place anyway.”

“You know you aren’t coming back here, right?” Lucas tells her. She rolls her eyes at him as we get into the car, but she doesn’t answer.

“So, what did sister dearest do?” she asks me.

“You seem to not like her,” Lucas remarks, watching her intently. Then, sitting in the limo, she crosses her legs and leans forward toward him.

“I despise her.”

“Why?” he asks.

“She killed our father and thought it was the right thing to do.”

“Did you ask her why?” I interject. Her arms cross over her chest again as she sends a glare my way.

“No, I didn’t have to. I saw her with Scott. I know why she did it.”

“They’re married,” I say, watching as she grows more irritated.

“Yep, they sure are.”

“And why do you think she did it?”

“Because Scott always wanted power. So, like a good little wife, she took ours and gave it to him.” She bites the inside of her lip while her eyebrows scrunch. “The cheek of them to live in the house we called home.”

“The cheek,” Lucas agrees, rolling his eyes.

She ignores him and glances down at my hand.

“You’re married?”

Lucas spits out his drink and glances at me.

“I was.”

“Pity.” She shrugs. Lucas raises a brow, and I shake my head at him, knowing full well what he’s about to say.

“You like Joey-boy here?”

“I’d fuck him, yes.” Her words are so vulgar for someone her age, especially one who has been in an all-girls school.

“Aren’t you a little virgin?” Lucas has no filter, and he couldn’t care less. Me, I don’t want to hear what she has to say. At all. She is not where my interest lies.

“Please. I haven’t been a virgin since I was sixteen. And a word to the wise, young ones last longer, bend farther, so you

know. If you're up for it?" She gives me a flirty smile. I look away, not wanting to even engage in this conversation.

"You may dislike her, but you sure as shit have a mouth like her." Lucas is right. She is full force, shoves stuff in your face, and makes you deal with it. Though, my wife—scratch that—*fake* wife never propositioned me for sex before like that.

"Is he shy?" she asks Lucas.

"No, just been fucking your sister." I look back at her then and see her shaking her head. She turns her body away from me, and I can tell she hates that.

"So, what's the real reason we're going to her? Is it because she broke your heart, and now you want to kill her? Or do you want her back?"

"More than likely the latter," Lucas answers for me.

"She did break your heart."

"No, she didn't. Just confused it. There is a difference," I tell her, my tone grating. If they keep on with this shit, I may just floor the gas into the nearest tree.

"If you say so."

We drive for over an hour, stop to get some food, then drive for another hour. Abigail doesn't speak again, nor does Lucas until we get closer to our destination. I know we're almost there when she turns to glance out the window and a small smile flashes on her lips.

"You should ask her why she killed your father," I tell her. Lord knows why I'm helping her.

"I don't need to know why. I walked in after she did it. The relief on her face of what she had just done will haunt me forever. I was a mess, and she was smiling."

"Women don't kill for no reason," Lucas adds, surprising me that he's somewhat defending Adora. "She would have had a reason."

“Women kill all the time,” Abigail bites back. “She was probably jealous because father loved me more.”

“Tell them you’re here to see your sister,” Lucas orders, sitting back, so they see her when Abigail winds down the window to the guards.

“They’ll see you,” she says, an unimpressed expression.

“Tell them we’re your guards.”

“On one condition.”

“What?” Lucas asks, and that makes her smile. But it’s wicked.

“That I get to kill her.”

“Done,” Lucas answers, and I know he’s lying, but she doesn’t need to know that.

THREE

ADORA

Small hands grab my legs, and I smile at their feel.

“Why do you look sad?” Eyes the exact same color as mine stare up at me. My father’s genes are strong. “Aren’t you happy to be back?”

I reach down and lift him into my arms. How can something so perfect belong to me? I missed so much and tried to tell myself it was for the right reasons. But now I know I can’t. I know I could never leave him again. No matter what. Two years without him was harder than I could have ever imagined.

The price we pay for love.

“I’m not sad. I’m so, so happy. What do you want to do today?” I ask him as Scott walks in. His eyes find mine, then he glances at our son and then to my finger, where he made sure I put his ring back on. It wasn’t a request.

He won’t let me sleep in the same bed as him. He knows I like to cut people’s throats when they sleep like I did to my father.

I wouldn’t trust me either.

I would do it again if I knew I could get away with it like I did last time.

That night, when Scott showed up, I received a text, went outside, and there he was waiting for me.

“Told you I would find you.” He did, and I always thought he would. But I figured if I stayed in plain sight, both men

who wanted me wouldn't find me. How wrong I was.

And I had also hoped Scott wouldn't be stupid enough to go against the Rossi's. That's like signing your own death warrant, which I did when I left Joey for Scott.

"You look beautiful."

I hate him.

Loathe him.

I don't answer.

I know I look beautiful. It's because he requests I wear what's in my closet and nothing else. I place Jerome on my lap and pick up his headphones and position them on his ears before I press play on what he's watching.

"Do you plan to speak?"

"I hate you," I tell him, voicing the most prominent thought cycling through my mind right at this moment.

"You don't have to love me for me to fuck you, Adora. You know this."

"I'm sure you didn't go without while I was gone," I reply.

The nanny walks in and smiles as she reaches for my son.

"No, the help knows how to suck cock."

The nanny's eyes go wide as she looks at me, not in shock at what he said but... with guilt.

"You're fired," I tell her simply. She stands up straight, eyes wide, and looks back to Scott, who shrugs before he stalks off.

"Miss, I—" she begins to plead, but I cut her off.

"Get out. You'll never touch my son again." She slinks off, and Jerome has no idea what is going on.

I sit with him for an hour and play before it becomes dark, reveling in his presence and resenting how much I've missed. Once it gets closer to bedtime, I bathe and tuck him in, pressing a kiss to his head. I'm just about to leave him for the

night when he asks if I'll read him a story. And that question has my heart feeling just the slightest bit of relief.

Despite my hate for Scott, I know he does love his son.

He just sucks with women.

"Dinner's ready. Come to the table, Adora."

"I ate when Jerome did."

"You did not. Now move it."

I kiss Jerome's head once more and leave his room. Some nights I sleep in there with him for the comfort of knowing he is all right.

He's sitting at the head, and two of his closest men sit on either side of him. He nods for me to take the seat at the other end of the table.

"I've given you time. Now we talk."

"Time?" I ask, lifting a brow.

"Yes. You are my wife, Adora, and here, that means something. A lot, actually."

"Not to me."

"Yes, I heard you were fucking women again. Would you like to do that here? Maybe we can arrange for a woman to join our bed for the night?"

"You can fuck whoever you want."

"I can, indeed." Nodding, he cuts the steak on his plate before he puts a large piece into his mouth. "I want to fuck you more. I always did enjoy fucking you."

"You seem to want those who don't want you."

His men smile around the table, and Scott tells them to leave. They get up and walk out without argument.

That was always his problem—he got told no.

Until me.

And then he thought it would be cute to have me, fuck me, impregnate me, then marry me. He was married once—most

men in this life are. It's what glues families together. But he killed her after her third miscarriage. So she was useless to him. And then he got infatuated with me.

Only I didn't want him.

I never wanted him.

He was someone my father gave me to. He didn't fuck me straight away, choosing to wait until I thought I could trust him. And when I did, he had me. It only took once, that's all it was. One time, and I knew I was fucked. Then, a year or so later, I was pregnant.

My father immediately told Scott to wed me, which he was more than happy to do. My father took a real nice payment for our pairing.

And then, for years, I was trapped here with him.

My life was normal, I guess you could say. I had a baby, and I was young with no help. I saw my father on the odd occasion.

But the day that set it all in motion was when I heard them talking about Abigail.

"SHE ISN'T LIKE ADORA. She will be..." I hear my father's voice, "... easier to tame."

I hear Scott laugh.

"Adora is easy."

"She is never easy. Neither was her mother."

"Maybe you don't know how to tame them, old man."

"I'm not much older than you, Scott, so watch your mouth." They went silent, and I stuck to that door, listening. Jerome had just gone to sleep, and I was returning to bed. Some nights I fell asleep in his bed and would wake up with Scott pulling at my arm to go to our bed because he wanted sex.

I hated those nights most of all.

Tonight, though, I was on my way back to our room.

“You know, dealing with me gets you the things you want. Did I not give you what you wanted?” Scott asks.

“Money,” my father answers.

“Yes, and plenty more of that.”

My father has money, but it seems when you have a lot of it, you still want more.

“She isn’t even sixteen yet.”

“I like them young.” I hear them move, and I run straight to our bedroom and sit heavily on the bed. That’s when I see Scott’s gun on his bedside table.

“Adora.”

“You plan to buy my sister?” I ask, and his lip quirks up.

“You were listening.”

“I was.”

He removes his belt from his trousers but pauses before continuing to undress. “Show me why I shouldn’t. You only fuck me when you want something. Show me why I shouldn’t buy her as well.”

And I do.

I have sex with him, even though I absolutely loathe him.

I kiss him, even though his lips are filled with lies.

I touch him as if he is a lover, not a villain.

That’s what he is to me.

A villain.

When I’m done and lying next to him, he touches my shoulder. “How nice is it going to be to have your sister here?” He gets up and heads to the shower.

That night, I kiss Jerome and leave the house.

And I pay a visit to my father.

SCOTT SMILES at me from across the table. I was an adult when I left him, with hardly any life knowledge because I was stuck with him for years. Now, I am not the same person.

Life changes you.

I'm a woman now.

"You are a very beautiful woman, Adora. It's the only reason you're still sitting here."

"Yes, *woman*. How does that sit with you?" I ask, leaning in. "You took me as a teenager, had me in my early adult years. And now, I see you for everything you are. Do you really still want me since I'm not young anymore?"

"It's only been two years, Adora."

"It feels like a lifetime."

It feels like forever.

I'm in my mid-twenties now and am not the naïve girl he once had.

And I've been married. Twice.

Once to the man in front of me, and once to a man I think I very much might love.

"Tell me, was it the sister that finally pushed you over the edge?"

"You know it was."

"You did well hiding her, but it was you I wanted. Not her."

"I'm sure it was," I reply, then take a breath, but it does nothing to calm me. "How old was the nanny?" I bite back, picking up the glass of wine. "Eighteen?" His eyes narrow in on me as I take a sip. "And let me guess... you've had her since I was gone."

His hands slam onto the table. "You left your child and ran off, Adora."

"I knew you wouldn't hurt him. He is a boy, after all."

That was my only saving grace. Scott wanted a boy more than anything, and he loves our son. It shows by how much our son loves him. I hate that part and wish Jerome loathed him as I do. But I had to do something, even if it meant sacrificing myself by not seeing my beautiful boy. No matter what Abigail thought of me, I wasn't going to let her live the life I was forced to.

“So that's the reason. Would you have done the same if he was a girl?”

“No,” I answer immediately. I would not have done the same if I'd had a girl. I would have stayed in fear he would sell her off or worse. It's easier to hide a grown person, not a baby. And I knew for sure if I took his child, he would hunt me down and kill me. On the other hand, if I left, I could devise a plan to get Jerome back.

And let's be real, kill Scott in the process.

“Seems we have a visitor,” Scott says, glancing at his phone. I ignore him until he speaks again. “Your sister.”

And with those two words, I feel my heart drop out of my chest.

FOUR

“Do you even have a plan?” Abigail asks as we get closer to the gate. As soon as the car comes to a stop, the front door opens, and a man steps out. “He’s always given me weird vibes,” she remarks, referring to the man. She goes to open the door, but I stop her.

“Who are we?” I ask her to reaffirm.

She gives me an eye roll. “My guards.” Then she climbs out of the car. Lucas and I follow as I slide on a hat, and Lucas pulls on a beanie. We both stand behind her as the man walks closer, his arms outstretching as she approaches. “I’m not hugging you. That’s gross.” He pauses mid-step. The smile he had in place for her drops, and he shakes his head.

“We’re basically family, Abigail.”

“Are we?” she questions.

“Your sister is inside. You can tell your men to go home now. You will be safe here.” Abigail looks over her shoulder and smiles.

“No, thanks. I’m fucking one of them, so I want them close for bedtime.”

“How you sound so much like your sister is beyond me.”

“Where is sister dearest?” I ask him. Scott eyes us cautiously, which makes Abigail snap her fingers in his face. “Sister. Where is she?”

“Here,” Adora says from the doorway.

Abigail turns to her, and Adora's face is full of panic. She doesn't notice me at first as her eyes are too busy locked on her sister. She steps past Scott, but he grabs her and pulls her to his side. "You're early." Those whiskey-colored eyes that I have come to love don't look my way. Seeing another man's arms around her takes everything in me not to step forward and put a bullet directly between his eyes.

"You're late, as usual," Abigail says back with snark. "A few years too late, wouldn't you say?"

"You look good," Adora tells her, looking her over. That's when her eyes flick to me. I see the moment she recognizes us—without the hats, I'm sure she wouldn't have taken so long. Her eyes widen, and her body goes stock-still. Luckily for her, her husband doesn't seem to notice as his eyes are firmly on Abigail.

"Do you think your husband would let you fuck one of my men as well?" Abigail asks, catching on to who Adora's looking at. *Me*.

"Adora only wants me. Isn't that right?" He tightens his hold on her, but she keeps her hands to her sides, not touching him.

"Doesn't look like she even wants you to touch her." Abigail smiles, her gaze flicking between them tauntingly. Scott glances at Adora, but she averts her eyes as soon as he pulls her even closer.

"What do you want, Abigail?" Scott finally asks. "Why are you really here?"

"Are you saying I'm not welcome, Scott? I thought we were... *basically family*." This one has a mouth on her.

Scott doesn't flinch, keeping Adora glued to his side.

"You should stay somewhere else," Adora states. We all look at her. "And you can come back during the day to visit."

"But I'm here now. Let's go inside and have some food and drink?"

"You're too young to drink," Adora snaps.

“Sister dearest, I’ve been drinking for a long time.” She clicks her fingers at Lucas and me and smiles. “Follow me, boys. Scott, if you would be kind enough to show us to a bedroom, my boys will sleep with me tonight.”

“Follow me.” He turns and grips Adora’s hip, giving her no room for objection to follow him. She glances over her shoulder, flicking her eyes from her sister to me.

Tonight should be very fucking interesting.

FIVE

Why is he here?

Did I really think he wouldn't find me?

I mean Joey, my husband.

And from what I've learned about him, he's incredibly clever, more so than anyone around him.

"You'll be in my room tonight, for appearances," Scott whispers for only me to hear, and a shiver runs right through me.

"Thought you didn't want me in there."

"I'll pat you down," he says with a shrug, holding the door open. "And if need be, I'll tie you to the bed."

I want to tell him to go fuck himself, but Abigail is walking up behind me with Lucas and Joey.

I know they aren't here to bring me home.

He's here to kill me.

I wonder if my sister knows that and if she's okay with it.

"Nice home. How long have you lived here, sister?" Abigail asks. I glance back and see her licking her teeth in annoyance. She's mad at me, that much is clear.

"You should stay somewhere else with your men."

"My men?" she asks mockingly, looking back at them. "I guess I did say that, didn't I?" Lucas keeps his head down, but Joey's gaze stays locked on me.

Scott walks off to the bar and starts pouring us drinks. One of his men is stationed at the door while we all stand inside.

“Whiskey?” Scott asks my sister.

“Vodka,” Abigail replies, and I grip her arm.

“Get away from here,” I say quietly through gritted teeth. Locking eyes with her, I can tell how angry she is. Why? Who damn-well knows?

“Haven’t you missed me, dear sister?” So much venom is laced in her every word, and I wish I had a moment to speak with her alone to get to the bottom of it. “Scott...” I drop her arm as she looks past me at him. “Did you know your wife has been fucking someone else?”

My eyes betray me and stray back to Joey. Fortunately, my back is to Scott, so he doesn’t see.

“Oh, really. And how would you know this?”

“I met him,” Abigail continues, unrelenting.

“Really?” Scott hands Abigail her drink. “Seems since she ran away from me, I had heard she preferred women over men.”

Scott doesn’t know about Joey and for that, I am thankful. But Abigail, she may. If she doesn’t, I am not sure why she’d be saying these things.

“Oh, I didn’t know that. Chasing the puss, hey, sis?” she says with a laugh. I finally manage to break my eyes off Joey.

“It’s late.”

“Is it? I think the night is just beginning.”

“*Signore,*” one of Scott’s men calls. They speak in Italian before he follows him out.

As soon as the door shuts, I grip Abigail’s arm, her drink splashing over both of us.

“Get out of here,” I tell her, getting in her face.

She pulls her hand free. “That’s not going to happen. I have nowhere to go.”

“You can go back with him.” I point to Joey, who remains silent.

“Your fuck buddy?” Abigail laughs, but this time it’s without humor. “Did you know he’s married too? He wears a ring. Are you just a hussy?”

“I was his wife, Abigail,” I seethe, and she pauses, then her eyes widen.

“Lies.” She shakes her head but glances back at Joey, who’s too busy watching the door to notice us.

“We have company.” Lucas gains our attention as the door opens, and in walks Scott. With Keir.

“Why is he here?” Abigail asks.

Oh, so she does know things. Though in our world, you always know who is next to lead. We have all heard of Keir.

“It’s time you all left. We have business to discuss.”

“They can stay,” Keir says as he looks at each of us. “I see you met my brother and cousin.” Scott looks on, confused, though he tries to hide it until Joey removes his hat and nods.

“No, I didn’t.” Scott glances at Abigail, swallowing hard. “Seems my sister-in-law is keeping secrets.”

“No, that would be your wife,” Abigail bites back.

Everyone’s eyes fall on me, but it’s the icy-blue gaze I can feel burning through me that hurts the most. He’s furious. I just know he wants to tear my head and limbs from my body and then put them back into their precise locations with no anesthetic. He may be angry right now, but what he doesn’t understand is that I had to do what I did. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Scott is the father of my child. And no matter how much I despise him, I can’t change that fact.

“They stay.” Keir pulls out the seat at the head of the table where Scott usually sits. No one else is allowed to sit in that seat, so when I glance at him, I’m surprised he doesn’t say anything. He’d be stupid to say a word, and I doubt he’s that foolish.

“Sit,” Scott tells me, nodding his head to a seat in front of where he’s standing. I walk over, and he pulls the seat out. I sit, and his hands land on my shoulders, not quite squeezing but holding me in position. A silent and subtle threat.

I can feel Keir’s gaze on me.

“She is beautiful, is she not?” Scott says to him, but Keir says nothing. “To what do I owe this surprise visit?” He looks back to Joey and Lucas. “And to have your men enter my home under false pretenses as well.”

“You have something that is mine,” Keir states.

“I have *nothing* of yours.”

“You know of the laws of our families, Scott. Let’s not play this game. I guarantee I *will* beat you.”

“I do know the laws.”

“And you know of the ties between Adora’s family and mine.”

Scott’s fingers dig into my shoulders. “Her father broke that, not me.”

“You were aware of it, Scott. Do not play coy with me.”

“Yes, I was aware.”

“I’ve come to take back what is rightfully ours.”

“You can have her.” There’s no argument from Scott. “I’ll keep her sister and our son.”

Abigail’s eyes go wide.

Keir glances at her, then to Joey. “Joey?” he questions, and my heart picks up pace.

Joey walks over to Abigail and stands directly in front of her. “Would you like to come back with me or stay here?”

“You,” she answers without hesitation.

My hands are sweating, and my leg won’t stop bouncing. *I can’t go. I can’t.*

“You can,” Keir says to me, his tone cold and expression steadfast. I didn’t even realize I said it out loud. “Would you rather your sister wed Joey?” My eyes find Joey, but he doesn’t even look at me.

“No.”

“So, you either come back and deal with the mess you made, or Abigail is his.”

“I can’t,” I say on a broken whisper. “I can’t.” Tears are now streaming down my face.

This can’t be happening.

He can’t demand this of me.

I can’t leave Jerome here.

“I have to stay. I request to stay,” I quietly state, the words leaving my lips on a breath as I glance at Joey. “Don’t take me. I can’t take another loss.”

He looks straight through me as if he doesn’t even care. No emotions flicker in his eyes, but they’re soulless. How could he do this to me? It’s like everything he felt for me never existed.

“Bubble, Joey. Bubble!” I scream, standing abruptly and pushing Scott’s hands off my shoulders with little resistance. As I hurry over to him, I can feel all eyes on me. I reach him before anyone can stop me, gripping his shoulders so tight that I feel like I might break my own fingers.

His eyes, so uncaring, stare down at me. The very same eyes that once worshiped me. I did this, I know, but the hurt is evident.

“You burst that all on your own.” He doesn’t shrug me off, just stays where he is.

My hands drop to my sides, losing all faith as I stare into his blue orbs. “I’m sorry, Joey. He has my son. I had to leave.”

“Shit way of going about it,” Lucas interjects.

I don’t even bother glancing his way. It was shit, I know, but I knew I had to come back.

It was time.

Scott destroyed my bookstore and possibly even found my sister. Unfortunately, there was no other choice.

“That’s an understatement,” Joey adds. He looks past me at my sister. “Abigail, it’s time we go.” As she stands to obey, he looks to Keir. “Adora can stay.”

“Joey?” Keir questions.

“We got one. That’s what I will take.”

Tears are streaming down my cheeks now. I can’t stop them and can’t seem to form words.

I consider myself a strong woman.

Independent, at the very least.

Now... right now, I want nothing more than for Joey to wrap me in his arms and call me his darling. I’ve missed his touch and endearment every single day since I left. But he does neither as my sister strides past me and straight to him. He reaches for her, and she goes willingly.

I look into his eyes one last time.

“You made this choice,” is all he says, and there’s still no feeling in his words or disposition.

“So I get to keep her?” I hear Scott ask from behind me.

Keir stands from his chair, and everyone looks to him for his final decision. “She is no longer our concern.” He nods to Lucas and Joey, who turn and start walking out the door.

“Abigail.” She doesn’t look back as she follows Lucas. Keir walks past next, leaving with them.

Joey stops at the door, looks back, and I feel his eyes on me before I meet his blank gaze. “Please stay,” I sob, not holding anything back from him. Hoping he knows what I feel for him, that he sees the truth if he won’t hear it. But it’s a moot point now with all that has transpired. And he’s already shown me as much. His eyes close for a second before he, too, walks out and leaves me standing in a room with my child’s father.

“Good, now that’s done...”

Something hits me on the back of the head before I can turn to address him. I fall forward, my head throbbing as I clutch it. Wetness seeps between my fingers as I’m hit hard in the stomach.

He’s kicking me.

Beating me.

I hear his laugh echo through my ears.

Why?

“No one is going to save you now. You are *mine*.”

The asshole’s retreating footsteps fade as I lie on the floor, my body curling in on itself.

SIX

“So, she loves you,” Abigail says. “And you married her.” She shakes her head as she sits across from me, whistling. “Sis getting lucky.”

“Do you even like her?” Lucas asks.

Keir sits in the car, not saying a word. I know he wants to, but he won't in front of Abigail.

“Nope, can't stand her.”

“Why is that again?” I press, and her eyes fall to me.

“She killed my father.” She crosses her arms over her chest, which seems to be her go-to stance when she's feeling stubborn or defensive.

“Oh, you mean the man who sold her off like a plaything and was going to do the same thing to you?” I fire back.

Sitting back in her seat, she shakes her head in denial. “Bullshit! He wouldn't have. He loved us.”

“No, sweetheart. He loved power,” Lucas chimes in.

She focuses her attention out the window after that, and we ride to the plane without another word.

“UM... WHO IS THIS?” Piper asks, nodding to Abigail as she waits for us by the car after we land. “And why isn't Adora with you?”

“Change of plans,” Lucas replies, smiling. He throws his arm around Abigail’s shoulder and pulls her in, ruffling her hair. “We got this little shithead instead.”

“I’m an adult, thank you very much.” She shoves him off and fixes her hair. “Are you always this annoying?”

“Yes,” Piper and I answer at the same time.

“Where will I be staying?” Abigail asks no one in particular.

“With Joey.”

I didn’t plan that far ahead.

I was mad.

Too furious to think straight.

Do I even want this?

“Same bed?” she presses, her gaze drifting to me.

Fuck no.

Piper coughs.

“No,” I bark.

Lucas laughs as he gets into the car.

“Damn. Okay, well, what am I going to do here? I’ve never been out of my country.”

“You can work for me. I need a new bartender.”

“What happened to your last one?”

“I killed him,” Lucas says without hesitation.

“Well, I don’t want to be killed. So don’t kill me, okay?”

“I make no promises.” She only smiles at Lucas. *I wonder if she knows he would without hesitation.* Piss him off, he would off her head, and he wouldn’t lose a wink of sleep over it.

“So, how long were you married to my sister?” Before I can answer, she cuts me off. “And is it even considered legal if she’s already married?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Thought so. But, hey, if I have to marry you, you have to at least wine and dine me first.”

“You can’t drink here. You aren’t twenty-one.”

“But you can buy a gun?”

“Correct.”

“Damn, that’s some fucked-up shit.”

The car stops at my house, and I get out. Reaching for her bag, she follows, giving a wave to everyone in the car like this is just any other day. I hand her the door keys and nod to it. As soon as she’s up the stairs, I turn back to see Keir already with his window down.

“You should have killed her.” I assumed that’s why he was there—to kill Adora.

“We got what we wanted,” I reply with a sigh.

“No, we didn’t.” He turns away, and Piper drives off.

Scrubbing my hand down my face, I head inside. I find Abigail standing in front of the bookshelf.

“This was hers, wasn’t it? She always had a fascination with reading and an obsession with books.” She picks one up and starts flipping through it. “Especially romance.”

“It is.”

She holds the book in her hands as she turns to face me. “Will I have to marry you?”

“I hope not,” I answer her truthfully.

She doesn’t make a face at my words, simply looks at me, puzzled.

“Do you still love her?”

“I do,” I tell her. “But I also despise her.”

“How you finding that?” She smiles, and it’s unnerving. “Have you considered other avenues?”

“What avenues?” My eyes narrow as she bites her lip, trying to flirt with the wrong person. Again.

“Possibly fucking her out of your system.”

What the fuck am I going to do with this girl?

“No.”

“So you still want to fuck her.”

I shake my head at her words, changing the subject. “Abigail, it’s been a long flight, and I’m ready for bed.” I turn and head to the stairs. “You can take the spare room.”

“I want to sleep in your bed.”

“No.” I don’t bother saying anything else, heading to my bedroom, I shut the door and lock it—I don’t want any unexpected guests sneaking into my bed.

And when I turn around, I smell Adora.

She’s everywhere.

SEVEN

My ribs are sore.

It's been two days since Joey left and took Abigail with him.

Despite the intense pain I feel everywhere, I've been keeping Jerome occupied. It helps to keep me distracted.

I've missed out on so much with him.

The way he laughs now, how his brows pinch together in thought as we sit outside on the grass, toy cars in front of us while he pretends to drive them up into the garden bed.

Scott has been gone all day, and I'm thankful. The less time I have to see or be around that asshole, the better.

I need to find a way to get out of here, which means I will have to take Jerome with me this time. I touch his soft hair, and he looks up at me and smiles.

“Why were you crying the other night, Mummy?”

“I was just so happy to be back with you,” I tell him, leaning in and kissing the top of his head.

“Father said you are nothing but a piece of meat and replaceable. What does that mean?” My stomach twists, and if he wasn't in front of me right now, I'd be crying again.

“That's nothing for you to worry about. What car is your favorite?” I ask him, trying to deflect. It works, and he tells me all about the blue car. I listen to him intently until I hear

footsteps come up behind me, my nerves increasing the closer they get.

“Go inside. Brooke is here to bathe you,” Scott says to Jerome.

“I fired her,” I answer, not looking at him.

“I re-hired her.”

Jerome gets up as I feel Scott approaching at my back. When I finally glance over my shoulder, I see her standing at the door with her head bowed as she waits for Jerome.

“Go, buddy. I’ll be in soon to read you a book.”

“No, Mummy won’t be. She has plans. Brooke will read to you.” Jerome goes off, not even knowing that his father’s voice is filled with disdain. “Get up, Adora.”

I do, but not because he asked. I do it because it’s getting dark, and I need to go inside. Preferably to get Brooke away from my child.

“I thought a lot about your father today,” he starts as he grabs a piece of my hair and smiles, twirling it around his finger. “How special it was, the relationship between you two. And you went and destroyed that without a second thought. Look where that got you.” I say nothing but stand tall as he looks down at me. “I think he was on to something... how he used to get paid for your appearance. How the men would bid for you. I was the highest bidder, just so you are aware. He sold you to me like you were a toy. One I could collect. I treated you right, did I not?” When I remain silent, his open hand slaps me across my face, hard, but I take it in stride. “You will answer me when I ask you a question.”

“No.”

“See, you’re learning. I’ve come to realize you aren’t all that special. Not even the Rossi boys wanted you. So, what’s a husband to do with his wife?”

“Let me leave,” I bite out.

“You see... you leaving would mean you will take my son, which *will* never happen. So I was thinking...” He turns to

look behind him and then back to me. Those eyes that are full of hate meet mine again.

I despise his eyes.

I despise *him*.

“I think Brooke will suck my cock tonight. Maybe I’ll slide it into her ass if she behaves. And you, my dear wife...” he touches where I know my cheek is red, “... will be off, showing what you have to offer to my men. See who the highest bidder is now that you are older.”

I have no words.

I am stunned into silence.

He steps closer, his mouth brushing my skin. He inhales before he smiles against me, and as much as I want to rear back, I stay still. “This is going to be so much fun.” Then he steps away, and one of his guards grabs my arm. “Shower and put on a dress. I plan to make money tonight.”

The guard starts to pull me—not to the main house—to a small outbuilding. He opens the door and pushes me inside, following me and shutting the door behind us. Letting go of me, he then nods to a black dress on the couch. “Put it on.” He clutches his gun. “Any funny business, I have orders to rough you up. Even a few holes if I please. You can skip the shower...” He laughs. “I hear they like them dirty.”

Acid crawls up my throat as I turn back and reach for the black dress. Pulling off my sundress, I slide it on easily, and when I turn back to look at him, he points at the floor. “Heels.” I slide them on after I kick off my shoes. He opens the door, looks out, and then back to me. “The car is here.”

Have you ever felt like you’re in a nightmare that you just can’t escape?

I have.

And right now, I can’t seem to escape.

So I do as directed, almost on autopilot.

I follow this man to the car and climb in with him beside me. I look for options, but there are few, and those I have aren't that great. So it's either jumping out of a fast-moving car and hoping I'm able to run or staying and trying to plan my escape.

The guard's hand stays on the gun as we drive, my hope sinking lower and lower the farther we get from familiar territory.

Jumping from this car is looking very good right now.

"Smile and keep your mouth shut," he says as we come to a stop, and I take a deep, preparatory breath. I don't know his name, and I don't want to. I want to be back with my son, not wearing some slinky dress I don't own, waiting to be served to men I don't know. I'm an object to them—I always have been.

How the hell did I get here?

When the door opens to a lady dressed in a suit, she waves for me to get out, and the guard with the gun in my back pushes me toward her.

"Welcome. Please come in."

A red carpet leads to an imposing and stately mansion. Whoever owns this has money—a lot of it. I'm not sure why, but that makes me feel sicker.

The guard stays behind me and gives me a little push whenever I slow down. When we reach the doors, two women, also dressed in suits, pull open the large doors and offer kind smiles. But I know better than that.

"What's in there?" I manage to ask.

"You don't get to ask questions. Now, move."

He shoves me into a room full of women, all wearing black slip dresses like me, and men lounging in chairs everywhere I look. I don't bother seeing if I recognize anyone, as I have no allies in this country.

I never did.

It's why I flew to America.

“Walk around. You try to run... I will put a bullet in your shoulder.”

“Shoulder?” I ask him, my brows furrowing.

“You still need to be useful. I mean... some might have a fascination with fucking the dead, but these men want you alive.” He gives me another push, then takes up a post at the entrance. I feel his eyes on me as I take a few steps forward. I don’t know what to do, so I stay exactly where I am and take in my surroundings instead.

A server offers me a glass of champagne from a tray. I take one and down it quickly. My ribs burn at the movement, reminding me of my injury, and I wonder if they’re broken. Hopefully, they’re just bruised.

“I know you.” The voice is American, and it comes from behind me.

When I turn around, my eyes widen. “Jake.”

“Yes. Adora, if I remember correctly?”

“Correct,” I reply. A sense of relief floods me, but I must rein it in.

His hair is tied back, and he is dressed much like every other man in a black suit. It’s an all-black affair by the looks of it.

“You’re not here with Joey,” he states. And that’s when I feel his eyes look me over. Not in a sexual way, but just a quick scan as if he sees things I have hidden. “I had heard you ran.”

I met Jake once, and he seemed like a nice man. Decent, even. Considering he owns a sex club, that is. We all seem to perceive them as dirty places where old men go to get off, but his is nothing like that.

I glance over my shoulder to see the guard I came with watching me.

“Why are you here?” I ask quietly when I look back at Jake.

“I came for women.”

“Why?”

He locks eyes with me, his gaze searing. “Maybe I’ll purchase you.”

“I’m not for sale,” I tell him. And I’ll tell every other man here the same thing tonight. Consequences be damned.

“But you are. You’re in a black dress at *my* event.”

My mouth hangs open at his words. “*Your* event?”

“Yes, mine.” He looks behind him and clicks his fingers. A lady approaches holding a checkbook.

“You can’t just purchase me.”

“But I can. Would you rather I didn’t? There are worse options here, don’t you think?” He raises a brow, and I swallow. “Seems you have taken a beating. I don’t beat my girls.”

“You don’t?”

“No. All my women are treated with the utmost respect.”

The lady holding the checkbook nods, giving me a soft smile. Then he calls the guard over who walked me in. “Call your boss.” So he does and hands Jake the phone after some conversation I can’t make out.

Goddammit! I can’t believe this is happening.

“Five hundred,” Jake tells Scott. Then, shaking his head, he hands the phone to me. “Seems he wants to speak to you.” I take the phone with a trembling hand and lift it to my ear.

“Thought you may want to say goodbye to your son.”

“What?” I ask, confused, my pulse stuttering.

“You won’t be returning, Adora. But it’s okay, Brooke will take good care of him. Won’t you, Brooke?” I hear her say “Yes,” and I want to reach through and throttle them both.

“I’m not yours to sell,” I say through gritted teeth.

“If you fuck this up, I will kill our son, then you.” My breath catches at the seriousness in his tone when regarding our son, but before I can respond, he hangs up.

I look back to Jake, completely at a loss. “I’m not his property to sell,” I say in a voice I don’t even recognize. The guard who escorted me here is now gone. It’s just Jake and his assistant.

“Everyone has a price, Adora. You just found out yours.”

“Five hundred dollars?” I shake my head in disbelief. If they’re going to put a price on my head, that’s certainly not it.

“No, half a million.” Then he turns, ready to walk off, ignoring what I’m sure was my shocked reaction. “Maria here will show you to a room. Go and relax. I will talk to you later.”

“Am I your prisoner?” I ask with a shaky voice. My whole body is full of nerves having no idea what is to come, but I know I need to find a way back to my son.

“No, you aren’t. But go. You need rest. And then we can talk.”

“I have a son,” I tell him, desperate. “It’s why I came back. That man you just bought me from has him.”

“Well, I suggest you be on your best behavior if you want to see him again.”

My mind is blank.

I’m expressionless.

Emotionless.

Lost in a sea of nothing.

His assistant, Maria, smiles and shows me the way.

I snap my head back in the game.

Because my plan has changed.

I’m not here to see my son any longer.

I will take him.

And kill my husband.

Which one is first? I don't know.

But I hope to do both.

EIGHT

What the actual fuck?

What. The. Fuck?

I jump from my bed to find Abigail asleep next to me. When I look over, my door is wide open. The same damn door I locked before I went to sleep.

“Abigail.” I yank the covers down, which is a big mistake.

Jesus Christ, she’s naked.

When she turns at the sound of her name, she has no shame in showcasing her tits and even has the cheek to spread her legs a little.

“Yes?” she says with sleepy eyes.

“Get the fuck *out* of my room. How the hell did you even get in here?”

“I know how to pick locks. One of the boys I was dating taught me.”

“Sounds like a real charmer,” I mumble, walking to my bathroom. “*Get. Out.* And shut the fucking door on your way. You ever do that again, I’ll cut your head off.”

“Ohhh, knife play,” she sings, and my jaw grinds to the point of pain.

“Abigail.”

“Yes?” she calls sweetly which only serves to piss me off further.

“Get. Out!”

“I could help you in there, just so you know.”

Never!

I can never imagine anyone else but Adora, which makes me even angrier.

“I don’t fuck children.”

“I’m an adult!” she yells.

“Yeah, and I’m the pope. Now, *get out*. How many times do I have to say the words?”

It takes a few moments, but then I hear her footsteps as she walks away.

When I think it’s all clear, I huff out a breath and get in the shower. As I wash myself, I glance at the shampoos—Adora’s are still sitting there. Then, without an ounce of self-control, I lift it to my nose, inhaling her scent that I miss too damn much.

Ahhh... cotton candy.

She shouldn’t be affecting me this way.

“Is there a reason you’re sniffing that?” I jump at Lucas’s voice coming from the other side of the shower door.

“For fuck’s sake. Did I say you could come in here?” I yell. “Get out.”

“Why is your wife’s sister walking around naked?”

“Who the fuck knows? That one is as fucked in the head as you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he says, smirking.

“It isn’t. Now, go so I can finish showering.”

“Can’t. Jake called.”

“And?” I groan, rinsing off quickly.

“Seems he just bought your wife.”

What?

That...

Fuck!

Turning the water off, I step out, and Lucas passes me a towel.

“Yep. Called me because he said you never fucking answer.”

“I was sleeping.”

“Who needs sleep?” Lucas shrugs.

How Chanel puts up with him, I will never know.

I wrap the towel around my waist as Abigail saunters back in, still fucking naked.

“For fuck’s sake, Abigail, put on some damn clothes.”

“I’m free. Do you know how good it feels?” She does a spin, and Lucas and I look at each other.

“Go and spin your ass somewhere else. You want me to go home and tell my woman you’ve been prancing around naked in front of me? She may come over and beat your ass,” Lucas warns her.

Abigail looks at him, completely unfazed, then shrugs before she walks off.

“So, about your wife...” Lucas says.

“She isn’t my wife.”

“So why are all her things still here?” He nods in the direction of all her products.

“I haven’t had time to get rid of everything.”

“Bullshit. You don’t want to. There is a difference.” The psycho, at it again, with his accurate and infuriating presumptions.

“The fucked-up part is that I didn’t even want to be married,” I mutter as I walk past him out of the bathroom.

“And now you got your wish.”

“So it would seem.” I sigh, entering my closet to get dressed.

“Jake should be arriving tomorrow. Do you plan to see him? Or better yet, her?”

My phone starts ringing, and I see Jake’s name flash on the screen. Reaching for it, I put it on speaker.

“You owe me half a million,” are his first words.

“Why is that?”

“I have your little wife.”

“You can keep her.” The words taste sour as they leave my mouth.

“You know that’s not how I run my business. Meet me tomorrow at the airport to collect her. She’s a bit shaken. He’s been beating her.”

“How do you know?” Something in me misses a beat. The Adora I know would never allow someone to touch her without her consent. So if he hit her once, and she fought back, it has to be bad.

“She won’t say, but I have a doctor with her right now. Her face is black and blue, and the way she bends, I would assume she has bruised ribs, if not broken.”

I look to Lucas, my blood boiling.

“Did she appear hurt when we saw her?” Lucas says.

“No,” I respond through a clenched jaw.

“It looks recent. She took off her makeup that first night and her face was red, handprints on her too.”

“I’ll transfer you the money.”

“I’ll text you the details.” He hangs up, and I toss my phone on the bed to stop myself from throwing it into a wall.

“Keir is not going to be happy,” Lucas warns.

“It’s his fault. How many fucking times do I need to say it? He demanded I marry her.”

“Yeah, then he undemanded it.” Lucas laughs.

Abigail walks in again, now dressed. Thank fuck.

“I want to go shopping. Can I have some money?”

“Fuck, I’d shoot it already,” Lucas says, shaking his head.

I pull out my card and hand it to her. *Good riddance.*

“Thanks. Have a good day,” she chirps, then she’s off.

“So when do you plan to tell Keir?” Lucas asks. “Because I can be there.”

“You just want to watch him go off on me.”

“Of course, I do. I am a sadist. Maybe he will even shoot you. It’s been a while since I’ve seen someone get fucked-up.”

“I’d like to *fuck you up*,” I tell him, striding out of my bedroom and down the hallway.

I dress as quickly as I can, grab my keys, and head out to the car.

Lucas follows me in his car as I head to Keir’s house.

We both slide out of our cars and head straight to Keir’s door, which is already open with Keir standing in wait.

“Joey just bought his wife back,” Lucas yells as we walk to the living room.

I hit him in the head, and he laughs and sits on the sofa.

Keir glares at me, waiting for me to confirm it.

“Jake bought her at one of those parties.” Of course, we all know of *those parties*. Most men think the gatherings are thrown with evil and perverted intent. And that’s what he wants them to think. But really, Jake is buying the women to offer them a better life.

He is the villain-hero—so not what you would think.

“And?” Keir prompts, growing impatient.

“He was beating her. And let’s not forget, I was the one saying I didn’t want to marry her, yet you insisted on it.”

“And then I let you off. You’d think that would make you happy.”

“I already fucking loved her by then,” I shout at him.

“Fucking hell,” Keir says, scrubbing his hand down the back of his head. “This isn’t good.”

“She’s mine.”

“Do you want her back?”

“No... I don’t know.” I shake my head. I’ve never been this frustrated or confused in my life when it comes to a woman. But she isn’t just any woman now, is she? She was once my wife.

“She will be *your* responsibility. Do you understand?” Keir warns. “If this gets fucked up, you *will* handle it. And you know what that means. You *will* kill her.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do,” he says as Sailor walks in.

“Hi, boys. So when should I expect Adora back?”

“Tomorrow,” I tell her.

“Good. We’ll pop over the next day... won’t we, Keir? Say hello to her for me.” She grips his arm, running her hand up to his shoulder, and he nods his head. Sailor knows how to work her husband. Or, perhaps more accurately, Keir only listens to her.

“I’m not that pussy-whipped, am I?” Lucas asks.

All heads turn to him.

“Yes, Lucas. You’re actually worse.”

He waves us off. “Sure, sure. I’ve got my balls intact in my relationship but can’t say the same about you two.” Lucas looks at Keir then me, but we stay quiet. It’ll either encourage him or I might just kill him.

“Chanel just called. Should I ring her back and tell her you’re going to the sex club tonight?” Sailor asks him, smirking.

“Don’t you dare. She will cut off my balls.” He cringes at the thought.

“Jake has her?” Keir affirms. I simply nod. “Okay.”

Seems I may be seeing my wife tomorrow.

NINE

I wait.

My feet are hurting.

My hands won't stop shaking.

But I have to go in there.

I wait ten minutes after the car leaves before I even move. He's gone, and *she's* in there with him. Pushing the back door open, I hear his giggle as she says something. Then his footsteps as they run away. As I enter the kitchen area, I see her pouring herself a drink.

Should she be drinking while watching my son? Of course not!

It takes Brooke a moment to notice me, and when she does, her eyes go wide in recognition, and her hand reaches for her phone. I lift the gun I took from Jake and point it at her.

"Do it, and I'll put a bullet in you." The sound of approaching footsteps hits my ears, and Jerome stops when he sees me, the gun now hidden behind my back. I bend down until I am at eye level with him, then glance at her before I speak to him, "Go and pack a bag, buddy. We are gonna go on an adventure. Pack all your favorite things." I smile at him and kiss the top of his head. He runs off, singing, as I raise the gun back to her.

"He will kill you for this."

"He can try." I shrug and walk over to her, adding the silencer to the gun.

“Do you love him?” I ask, and she nods with a hard swallow.

“Then you are as sick as him.” I shoot her in the head, and she drops to the floor. Stepping back, I wipe my face clean with a towel before I hide the gun and go get Jerome. His bag is already packed—it looks like maybe he has a bag packed in case they need it in a hurry, but he’s added a few things—and he’s smiling from ear to ear when I reach him.

“Time to go. You ready to run?”

“Run?” he asks, confused.

“Yeah, we have to beat the racing cars. What do you say, let’s see how fast we can go? Won’t that be fun?” He nods eagerly, and I take the backpack from him, then we leave the same way I came in. Running down the hill, I clutch his little hand to ensure he doesn’t fall as the car comes into view.

Opening the door, Jake is staring at me with narrowed eyes. “Kids are a no,” is the first thing he says, and I would laugh if it wouldn’t upset him more. I didn’t tell him what I needed to go back for, so he should have asked. “Where is my gun?”

“Gone,” I tell him with a smile taking over my face as I threw it out in the window into the closest river I could find. “I have his passport,” I add, as I toss Jerome’s bag inside and get him buckled in any way. Once he’s settled, I hop in beside him, leaning over the center console to speak quietly to Jake. “Please let me bring him without any trouble. You knew I had a son...”

He swears under his breath as the car takes off, and Jerome snuggles into me. I look back at what we’re leaving behind and can finally breathe again.

A new life.

A better life.

JAKE HARDLY TALKED to me on the flight, but that's okay because I didn't need him to. Jerome was excited to be on the plane, and so far, he hasn't asked about his father once. Which I am thankful for.

"Where will I go?" I ask as the plane taxis to a stop.

Jake stands and puts on his jacket.

He glances at Jerome, then back to me. "Joey paid me back, so you are his issue now." My jaw drops as he nods to the tarmac outside. I look through the window and see Joey leaning against his car. With anxious energy, I get Jerome ready, and we step off the plane. Joey's sunglasses cover his eyes, but I can feel his piercing stare. He doesn't move as I walk over and stop in front of him.

"You paid for me?" I ask, confused with a little hope trickling in.

At first, I don't think he will respond, but eventually he does. "No, you owe me half a million. Which I expect back." He glances down at Jerome. "With interest."

"I can pay you back," I reply.

"I know you can." He opens the car door, and when I look inside, there's a child's booster seat already set up. "Courtesy of Sailor," he tells me.

"Does she hate me?" I ask. I took a liking to her and had hoped to be friends.

"No. Sailor hardly hates anyone, so you're in luck." I put Jerome in the seat, then shut the door and glance back at Joey.

"Do you hate me?" I whisper.

"Yes."

My breath hitches at his response, but I don't say a thing as he opens my car door, and I slide onto the seat. When I look up, he doesn't meet my eyes, just shuts the door and walks around to his side. We drive in silence, and Jerome falls asleep in the back seat.

When we arrive at Joey's place, he doesn't speak as he gets out. He comes around and opens my door for me before he returns and opens Jerome's door.

"I can get him."

"I've already got him." He picks him up, and Jerome rests his head on Joey's shoulder as if it is the comfiest place on earth.

I think it just may be.

The door opens, and Abigail is standing there, dressed in skimpy clothing, her hand on her hip as she looks at us. "So this is my nephew." She looks at Jerome, but Joey doesn't stop for her. He goes up the stairs and straight into his room. I follow him, unsure what is happening, to find him laying Jerome down on his bed.

"I'll take the couch," he states, then walks past me, not even glancing my way. I manage to take a deep breath and walk over to the bed, noting that everything of mine is still here. He hasn't changed or moved a single thing. My perfume still sits on the bedside table along with my calendar. My clothes are still in his closet, and his wedding ring is on top of one of the chest of drawers.

I pick it up and slide it into my pocket.

I had to drop mine on the side of the street so Scott wouldn't know, and I regret that with every fiber of my being.

The door opens, and Abigail steps in. She doesn't bother announcing herself as she walks farther into the room and stands near the bed, watching Jerome.

"I don't like you. You're aware of this, right?" she asks. Her hand reaches out, and she touches Jerome's face. "He looks so much like Papa."

"He doesn't," I bite back. "He looks like me."

She smiles, but it doesn't meet her eyes. "You also look like Papa." She shrugs. "It's why I could never understand how you could have killed him."

“I had to,” I tell her. *Why can't she take my side on this without the ugly explanation?* “And I would do it again.”

“Yeah. So I heard it's because he would sell you off. That's not really true now, is it? I was thinking, you used to sneak out all the time.”

“No, I didn't.”

“Yes, you did. Papa would complain that you did.”

“That's because he was lying. And you believed every lie that left his lips...” I pause, taking a breath. “But that's okay. I saw it for both of us.”

“You aren't the hero in my story, Adora. You are the villain.”

I walk to the closet where my things are stored and grab a pair of pajamas. Taking a deep breath because I'm fighting for sanity, I reply to her, “I'm happy being the villain. If you wouldn't mind, I need to shower.”

“You know, if you haven't killed him, he is going to want his son back.”

“He can try.” I smile, looking right into her eyes.

The door opens again, and Sailor is there.

She looks between Abigail and me. “I can come back another time?” she says hesitantly.

“I was just leaving,” Abigail tells her. “Going out tonight. Don't wait up.” She waves before she walks out.

“Family, huh?” She laughs.

“Do you have a sister?”

“Oh, God, no. I'm an only child.” Her eyes shift to Jerome. “He looks like you. I just wanted to check that you're okay. I had heard...” She doesn't say it, instead choosing to trail off, but one look at my face, and you can see the bruising.

“I'm good. Excited to sleep next to my son and wake up with him tomorrow.”

“I really am sorry. Please let me know what I can do.”

“No need to be sorry.” I wave her off. “I would love to bring Jerome around to meet Wren, if that’s okay? Maybe in the next few days?”

“Of course.” She looks behind her before turning back to me. “Keir is calling me. I’ll pop back in a few days. Give you a bit to get settled.”

“Sailor...” I suck in a breath before I say what I need to say—she may have insight that I don’t.

“Hmm...” Her hand pauses on the door.

“He hates me.”

“You hurt him. Give him time.” She closes the door, leaving me alone with my son.

It’s been a long time since I felt safe with Jerome. But that night, I sleep the best I ever have.

JEROME IS NOT next to me when I open my eyes, and that realization jolts me awake. Heart pounding, I jump from the bed and run to the bathroom, trying to find him. When he’s not there, I rush out of the room and down the stairs, my eyes frantically searching. As I reach the bottom, I find him sitting at the kitchen counter with Joey in front of him. Their heads turn my way when I release a gasp of air.

“We’re cooking pancakes,” Jerome says happily, and my chest warms at seeing him so content. “And did you see the puppy, Mummy?” Joey turns his back to me as he goes back to cooking. I walk over and wrap my arms around Jerome’s waist to hug him from behind.

“Puppy?” I ask, confused.

A little dog comes running around the corner, straight to Joey.

Becca’s dog—he must have agreed to take her.

I wasn’t sure if he would keep her but seems he did.

“Are you helping?” I ask, looking at Jerome because Joey does not want to pay me a lick of attention.

“I did. I stirred, and Mr. Rossi said he will do the cooking.”

“His name is Joey. You can call him Joey,” I tell him before pulling away and speaking to Joey’s back. “Thank you. You didn’t have to cook for him.”

“Should I let him starve?” Joey says, his back still to me. I notice he has Mickey-shaped pancakes cooking, and I smile.

“No. So thank you.”

He turns to me, his eyes falling to my chest, and his icy-blue eyes darken. I look down to see a purple mark, which is now healing.

“Sorry, I’ll cover up.” Then, handing me the spatula, he goes to leave. “Joey.” He stops but doesn’t look back.

“We can find somewhere else to live if this is too much.”

“I like it here,” Jerome pipes up, so I ruffle his hair as I wait for Joey to respond.

“You can stay. It’s half yours, isn’t it?”

“It’s not. We aren’t legally married.”

I watch as he takes a deep breath before he silently walks off.

“Time for some pancakes?” I ask Jerome.

“Yes, with Nutella.”

“Nutella?” I question him.

He claps his hands. “And strawberries.”

“Strawberries it is.”

“Any for me?” Abigail asks, walking in, looking like she hasn’t had a lick of sleep. She sits on the seat next to Jerome and takes his water, gulping it all down. I grab him a fresh glass. “Shit, you are bruised.”

“Language, Abigail,” I scold, nodding to Jerome.

“Well, you are. I’m sure he sees it... unless he’s blind.”
Maybe I should wear something with a high neck and sleeves,
at least until I’m healed. “I’m going to bed.”

“It’s morning.”

“Not for me.”

TEN

She is covered in bruises.

Walking down the stairs, I spot Jake straight away. He's sitting at his bar, a bottle of water in front of him, as he goes through his books. I have keys, so I let myself in. When I sit next to him, I place the bag on the bartop. He glances at it and goes back to his paperwork.

“Payment for your wife, I presume?”

“Yes. With interest.”

He smiles at my words, then slides the bag back to me. “Give it to your brother. Payment for a year. No need to have you boys back in here anytime soon.”

“You don't like our company?” I joke with him.

“Oh, I do, but my clients are starting to recognize you all. It's bad for business, which I'm sure you understand.”

“We own a percentage of the company,” I remind him.

“Correct, but it's not yours. Let's not get the two mixed up. You are protection, nothing more, nothing less.” He pauses, then searches my face before asking, “How is she?”

“Do you care?” It's not like Jake to care about anything but business. Business is all he knows. As far as I'm aware, he has never been married or even been in a relationship.

“She seems like a decent enough woman. Had to be to marry you,” he jokes. “Her son was well mannered.”

He is, which is surprising, especially considering who his father is.

“She’s fine. Cooking breakfast as we speak.”

“So why aren’t you with her?” he asks, his brow furrowing. “You should leave to be with her.”

“I’m not sure that’s the right thing to do. It’s over between us.”

“That doesn’t sound convincing,” he says.

A knock sounds at the door, and he gets up and goes up the stairs to answer it. Two girls come in, giggling. They walk straight past me and head to the back.

“Did you get everything you need over there?” I ask as he sits back down.

“Yes, you Italians sure do love money.”

“It’s our love language,” I reply, smiling.

“Anyway, as I said... you need to leave.” He waves me off and pushes the bag toward me. “And try to be nice to your wife. I’m sure she had her reasons. And it was you she chose to come back to. Remember that. She could have run the minute she got her son back, but she chose you and to stay with you.”

Ha. Did she, though?

Or did she figure I was her safest option?

I’m thinking more of the latter.

“Simone has been asking for you.”

I stop, money in hand. “Did you tell her?”

“I told her you were married, but she didn’t believe me.”

I laugh. Trust her not to believe I could be married. I haven’t seen her since I found out about Adora. It was easier that way. Simone was a piece on the side with needs I could fill. Because in return, they filled my own. I always knew I was destined to get married, so why have anything serious?

“Should I give her your number?”

We used to meet here. This was our spot. She never had my number. Like I said, clean and easy.

“No.” I don’t even have to think about my response.

“See, still pining after your wife. Fix it.”

I say nothing as I walk away.

ELEVEN

ADORA

Joey hasn't been home, and I haven't seen him or Abigail since this morning. It's quiet as I make my way down the stairs with Jerome asleep in his bed. We haven't left the house all day, watching movies and playing cars, then we had a bubble bath before bed.

It was a good, easy day.

Walking into the kitchen, I grab a bottle of wine from the refrigerator. As I pour myself a glass, I hear someone enter. Joey stands there, his hand scrubbing down his face so he doesn't see me. When he finally notices me, he lowers his hands and spins on his heel to head back out.

"If you plan to run every time you see me, I'll move out." He stops in his tracks, stalks back in, and sits on a stool at the counter. Pouring him a glass of wine, I slide it over to him. He looks at it, unsure. "It's not poison, I swear."

"For some reason, I don't believe you."

"Believe it or not, you are one of the only men in my life I trust right now. Or really ever have."

He takes the glass and puts it to his lips, downing a big sip. I do the same.

"Where is Jerome?" he asks, finally meeting my eyes.

"Asleep."

"He looks like you." That makes me want to smile.

“Thank you,” I reply quietly. His gaze falls to my chest, but it’s covered. I have one of his button-up shirts on that I pulled from his closet with only panties underneath. I wasn’t planning to come down here, but I couldn’t sleep, so here I am.

“Did you fuck him?” he asks, and I shake my head, readying myself for what he might ask next. “Did you ever plan to tell me the truth?”

“No.” I won’t sugarcoat it because he may as well know the truth now. What do I have to lose?

“So you thought, what? Just stay here until you work out how to go back?”

“Yes...” I pause, my heart pounding. “You weren’t meant to happen, Joey. I mean, I knew I had been promised to you. But I figured I was married already, which I knew you didn’t know, and I couldn’t tell you. But I thought enough time had gone by that maybe the control of the contract had eased.”

“The contract never eases.”

I sigh, and he takes another big sip of his wine.

“We all heard about Keir’s contract. It’s been floating around in our world since it happened.” Keir was arranged to marry another woman, who is not his current wife. His circumstances are different, though. He was going to go through with it, despite the craziness that followed her. Until she started in on his current wife, then it was over. His love for Sailor is amazing, and I can see why he fell in love with her.

“Do you regret it?” he asks, and for the first time since everything went down, I see a flash of vulnerability in his eyes. I grip my glass and walk around the counter until I stand beside him. He turns his body, so we’re facing each other.

“Do I regret marrying you?” I ask him, and he nods once. Immediately I shake my head. “No, never.” I smile. “You were one of my best forced choices, apart from my son, that is.”

He pulls me closer, and I melt into him. I’ve been dreaming of being in his arms again. Before I can think or stop myself, I’m leaning down and kissing his lips. He lets me,

though he doesn't kiss me back at first. But like a clock that ticks, he seems to realize he has control. Holding me tighter, fully against him, so no air is between our bodies, he kisses me back with a force that only he can.

Joey takes ownership of my mouth, almost bruising it with his lips.

His hands roam my body and slide under his shirt until he reaches my hips. He lifts me as if I am no more than a toy until I'm on his lap. My legs wrap around his waist, and I start to move my hips. I moan as I feel him harden beneath me.

It feels...

... so fucking good.

Only Joey can bring this out in me.

Becca had filled me with butterflies, but Joey has me with every breath I take.

Who the fuck knows why?

Our lips separate, and his hands move down to my ass, pulling at my panties, snapping them at the sides. As soon as they are gone, my eager hands slip between us and reach for his zipper, trying to free his cock, but he stops me and pushes my chest back, breaking us apart. He tears my shirt open, and my breasts come into view. Licking his lips, he leans in and takes my nipple into his mouth. He groans against my skin as he moves to the other side as the sensations of his tongue's caress, lips sucking, and teeth nipping have me turning into a whimpering mess. He then places gentle kisses on my stomach where I'm bruised, his fingers outlining them with gentle strokes.

I know he wants to ask me more questions—I can see it in his eyes. But I reach for him again, and he lets me pull him free this time. I scoot forward to push myself onto it, his shaft rubbing up and down my pussy. I need to lift to put him in, but I can't stop moving right now. Just feeling him against me like this is perfect, and I close my eyes, taking in all the sensations.

“Are you hungry for my cock, darling?” The use of the word ‘darling’ sends shivers down my spine and directly

between my legs. “Words,” he barks at me, halting my movements.

I say nothing, looking into his burning gaze before smashing my lips against his. He laughs as I lift my hips and hover over him. He’s faster, though, stopping me mid-air and making me wait.

“Tell me you want me to fuck you, darling. That this cunt only wants me. And I’ll let you sit on it all day long.”

“Yes, it’s you, Joey. Only you!”

“See, good girls are rewarded. Now, sit on my cock. Slowly.”

I do as he says and lower myself. As soon as I feel him enter me, another moan slips from my lips, and he shuts me up with a hand over my mouth. “Shut up, or I’ll fuck you and leave you on this floor to clean up the mess.”

“Fuck me, then,” I bite back.

He lets out a growl and grabs hold of my hips, then starts to move me, fast and hard and angry, slamming me down each time.

Leaning in, he bites my shoulder, but not hard enough to leave a mark, just enough to stake his claim before he moves to my neck, which I bare willingly as he sucks. I know he’s marking me there for all to see, and I let him.

I can’t seem to stop myself.

I’m a fool for this man.

“I almost fucked someone else today.” I pause at this, but he doesn’t let me stop for long. Instead, he keeps on moving my hips for me. “But then I thought... I have my whore of a wife at home, so why not go home and fuck her.”

His words make me stop moving completely, and I slap him hard across the face. Then, pushing away, I go to get off of him, but he holds me still.

“You like my cock, darling. We can make this work. You spreading your legs when you need to. I know you enjoy it,”

he taunts me, and just when I thought things could start to get better, I see his hate for me in his eyes.

“Fuck you.” As I climb off of him, I hear a giggle.

We both turn to see Abigail leaning against the wall, watching us.

“How long have you been there?”

“When you climbed his lap.” She smiles menacingly. “I guess I can see now why they all keep you around. But, gosh, sis, I need to learn your tricks.”

Joey stands, tucks his cock back in his pants, and returns her smile. “She is the best fuck.”

“It’s rude to watch!” I yell at her.

Joey simply laughs at my words.

“You didn’t seem to mind when I watched you play with yourself.”

“Damn, you do know your stuff, sis. Maybe you can give me some tips.”

“Don’t be a whore,” Joey says, smiling as he walks off. “I can take you to a place where you can watch people fuck. You can even join in.”

Her eyes light up. “Really?”

“Really,” he confirms, then glances at me. “I didn’t finish, so I need to somehow.”

Abigail smiles even wider, while I look at him, shocked at how he’s speaking to me. *Where has Joey gone?* The one who looked at me with devotion. Who gave me a bubble bath when I needed one? In his place is a man I don’t even recognize.

“Let me get my coat.” Abigail’s running up the stairs as I make my way over to him.

“Don’t take her there,” I demand.

“Do you think you can tell me what to do?” He laughs.

“Please don’t take her there. No matter how mad you are at me, don’t take her there.”

Abigail comes down the stairs and goes straight out the door, not even stopping to say anything to me.

Joey lingers.

“I’ll be gone by morning,” I tell him.

“If you must.” He shrugs before he walks out, shutting the door behind him. As soon as he’s gone, I run up the stairs and start packing. Jerome wakes, and I manage to throw on a dress from the pile on the floor before I go over to him.

“Is it still nighttime?”

“It is... go back to sleep.”

“Why are you up?”

“We’re going to go to a hotel. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“But I like it here,” he complains, rubbing his eyes. I brush the hair away from his face.

“I know, baby, but a hotel is where I need to be right now.”

“Okay, let me help you.” He gets out of bed, and I smile to keep from crying. If I ever did anything right in this life, it’s him. Solely him. He starts to pack his bag, and I do the same, throwing everything in and carrying it downstairs. When we get to the steps, the front door opens, and Joey is there. Abigail’s not with him. He pauses, glances at me, then continues into the house, not saying a word.

“Come on, buddy,” I whisper, walking out the front door.

Jerome yawns as the Uber I called pulls up, and I settle him into his booster seat before I get in and look back at the house.

Joey is standing there, a drink in hand, watching me.

I look away first as we pull away.

I’ve ruined us.

I have to accept that.

I did this, and that’s okay because I would do it again if needed.

I will *not* apologize for wanting my son back.

We pull up to a hotel, and I check us in and then order room service. Jerome eats ice cream before he passes out again.

And I stay awake all night.

Wondering what my next move is.

CAN WE MEET TOMORROW?

I READ the text from Sailor but don't reply. *She knows?* Or if she doesn't yet, she will. Joey tells his brother everything. And this is going to be a topic of conversation I will need to have soon.

HE KNOWS WHERE YOU ARE, **just so you are aware.**

OF COURSE, he does. Joey knows everything. Turning my phone off, I lie down and dream of a life where we are free.

A life where no one controls anyone.

What a life.

Pity, it's not mine.

Yet.

TWELVE

“Do you plan to see her?” Sailor asks.

“I do.”

“Well, it’s been a week now, and she isn’t answering my calls,” she says as we sit down for dinner. Everyone is here. Piper watches as Lucas shakes his head. “I invited her for dinner.”

My mother grins before she gets up and heads to the kitchen—she’s always liked Adora.

“She won’t come,” I tell her as I reach for the glass in front of me. She left, and she made her point. And even though I had a hand in it, I didn’t think she would, but I should have known better. She never does what’s expected.

“She will.” Sailor smiles like she knows something the rest of us don’t. The doorbell rings, and everyone goes quiet. Sailor stands and walks quickly to answer the door. I hear soft voices as we all sit silently, waiting to see if it’s Adora.

She wouldn’t, would she?

“Look who decided to join us,” Sailor announces, leaning down and smiling at Jerome. “I have a little girl around your age. Her name is Wren. She’s making spaghetti right now with her nona. Want to join them?” Jerome holds on to his mother’s hand, and my mother walks out holding Wren’s. Mother takes one look at Adora, then immediately walks over and hugs her before she bends down and introduces herself to Jerome. He goes with them, leaving Adora standing there by herself.

“Sit. I’m hungry,” Keir tells her.

Adora looks around the table to the only free seat, which just so happens to be right next to me. I can see the fight in her eyes as she decides whether or not to come closer.

“*Sit*,” Keir says again. And this time, she does move, and I pull the seat out for her with one hand.

“Thanks,” she whispers as she sits.

Chanel is the first to break the silence. “The bookstore,” she says. “I miss it so much.”

“Same.”

“Do you plan to open another?” Chanel asks.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I owe some money to someone, so once I pay that, I guess I’ll see.”

“Well, I, for one, hope you do.” Chanel smiles.

“I can help,” Lucas offers, and everyone looks to him. “What? I did last time without any of you fuckers knowing. I enjoy books.”

“Yeah, don’t we all know,” Piper chimes in.

“You just need to get laid more.” Lucas waves her off.

I feel Adora relax a little next to me, which makes me mad. She doesn’t get the luxury to do that.

“So... your sister is a whore,” I state, loud enough for everyone to hear. “Asks me every day to fuck her.”

“Joey,” Sailor admonishes.

“What? I’m telling no lies.”

“So, did you fuck her?” Adora asks, lifting a brow.

“No, not quite my style.”

“What is your style?” she inquires, smiling, but it’s not the nice one like the one she gave me last week. “Watching, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, that and smart-mouth whores who know how to fuck.”

“Well, shit! Lay it all out for us to hear. I’ve been told I’m a good therapist,” Lucas says.

“No, you ain’t,” Chanel says, rolling her eyes. “Never take advice from Lucas unless it’s how to kill someone.”

“Hey, I know how to make you come with just a few words.”

Chanel instantly goes pink in the face.

“Enough!” Keir’s growl finally shuts them up. Which is hard to do with Lucas. He never shuts the fuck up, the smartass prick. “Adora. You are still a part of this family, at least until we get things sorted. Which we will, make no mistake.” Keir gives me a look, and I know exactly what his look means.

I will have to stay married to her.

Because I don’t want the sister.

I won’t go there.

I like them beyond the legal limit. And brunette. And spicy. With whiskey-colored eyes that can make you fall to your knees without hesitation. Which describes exactly the woman sitting next to me.

“What if Scott comes for us?” Adora finally asks. “Will I have your protection then?” I stare at the side of her head, but she doesn’t glance my way, her eyes on Keir.

“Of course, you will.”

“He is the child’s father,” I say to her.

Adora’s head swings to face me. “And?” she questions.

“I’m not sure we should be involved in that. We got you out. You should be thankful.”

“Correction... Jake got me out. You did fuck all.”

“Did you really think he would have gotten you out if it wasn’t for me?” I ask.

“Why waste time going to the movies when you can come to a family dinner?” Piper says from across the table. I don’t

even bother acknowledging her smart-ass comment.

“You think Jake would have collected you if it wasn’t for me? Let you go to get your son if it wasn’t for me?” I laugh in her face, leaning in so we are almost nose-to-nose. “You would be stuck sucking who knows what cock right now if it wasn’t for me.”

“Fuck you, Joey Rossi,” she seethes.

“You did that last week, remember?” I remind her, licking my lips.

“Oh shit! Now it is getting good,” Lucas chimes in.

“Shut it, Lucas,” Chanel warns.

Meanwhile, if Adora’s eyes could kill, I would be dead.

“This isn’t the place. Maybe you two should go upstairs and chat.”

“We don’t need to chat,” I say, turning back to the table. “What’s for dinner?”

“Don’t you mean dessert? I think you may be having your wife,” Piper says.

“Now that is a show,” Lucas adds.

Fuck my life.

“I’m not his wife,” Adora states.

“That’s right, she was a secretive whore married to someone else,” I remind our audience.

Adora stands, throws her napkin on the table, and turns to look at Sailor. “I have to leave.”

Sailor stands as well.

“Nonsense. Get your behind in here while I chat with my son.” We all turn as my mother enters. Sailor grabs Adora’s hand and takes her to the kitchen, shutting the door behind them. My mother walks over until she is behind me and smacks me across the back of the head. “Are you stupid?” she yells. And I’m sure even though Adora is in the kitchen, she can hear the exchange.

“This doesn’t involve you,” I say to my mother.

“You’re right, it doesn’t. Because if it did, I would have smacked you the minute you gave that girl lip.” My mother’s hands go to her hips. Keir quietly watches as our mother goes off on me. “She’s hurting, and you are being an asshole about it.”

“She lied and deceived me. She’s lucky to be breathing,” I snarl.

“So are you, but I remember your brother giving you another chance, which he never does.”

“Damn right, Ms. Rossi,” Piper says, clapping. I glare at her, but she merely shrugs without a care in the world.

“Be nice. You don’t have to take her back. Hell, we all know you love her. So be nice, Joey. I raised you better than that. You know how to treat a lady.”

“She ain’t no lady,” I mumble.

Then she smacks me again on the back of the head and swears at me in Italian before she storms off.

THIRTEEN

ADORA

“I should go.” Jerome is playing with spaghetti and laughing with Wren, having no idea what is happening around him. Unfortunately, I’m so wound up that it’s hard to stand still.

“No, don’t let him win.”

“He’s already winning. I don’t want to fight anymore. I’ve done that my whole life and don’t want to continue... it’s exhausting.”

We stop talking when we hear his mother yelling.

“She likes you, you know. More than me, that’s for sure,” Sailor says as Joey’s mother, Bianca, walks back in.

She strides over to my side and wraps her arms around me. “You and your boy are staying with me. Pack your stuff and meet me at mine.” She looks to Sailor, then back to me. “Now, go. Eat.” She pushes us out the door and walks over to the children.

I want to tell her no, but I have a feeling she’ll insist anyway, and having a mother figure around is not something I am used to.

As soon as we enter, Joey stands. “We should talk... in private.”

“Oh, please don’t. We enjoy it,” Piper says, lifting her glass of wine and downing it. Clearly, she’s drunk. I don’t say a word, and he’s leading me out of the dining room, down a side hall, then opening a door. Before I enter, I look inside and

see it's a bathroom. He follows me in and shuts the door behind us.

"We need to stop this," are his first words.

I meet his gaze and take a deep breath. "You started this."

His shoulders rise and fall at my words. "No, I did not. I accepted this from the very beginning. All this shit we are in now is solely because of you."

"I wanted to be happy with you," I tell him honestly. "But a part of me was missing." He has to know that—he has met the missing part of me.

"You still wouldn't be happy now. Let's not play those games, darling." His jaw clenches.

"You use that word in anger, but it does the opposite to me, just so you know," I fire back at him.

"Good, I'll continue to use it." His eyes assess me. I'm wearing a purple dress that stops above my knees but shows a little cleavage.

"Why do you stare at me like that?" He's made it clear he doesn't want me.

"Like what?" he asks, his eyes tracing my body.

"Like you want me but hate me."

"Because I'm at war with myself and those two options."

I'm taken aback by his words. Then, the truth punches me in the gut.

"You don't want to be married to me any longer?" I ask.

"No," he states.

"I guess that makes you lucky, then. Some of us don't get to choose."

"Keir will have us divorced before you know it. You can choose after that."

"Can I?"

He shrugs. "Probably not."

“Would you like to be friends?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“I don’t befriend people I fuck.”

“We will no longer fuck,” I inform him.

I can see his mouth perk up, but he chooses to say nothing.

“I don’t hate you, Joey. I’m rather fond of you, actually. You may be an ass, but you are a good ass.” I reach for his hand, and he lets me hold it. “You proved that to me with Becca. And you still have her dog.”

“It’s my dog now.”

“See? An ass wouldn’t take in a dog.”

“They will be waiting for us. I don’t particularly want to be smacked in the head again by my mother for being late.”

“I like her,” I admit.

“I know.”

“She wants me to move in with her,” I tell him, trying to read his reaction. “She actually demanded I do.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“I never wanted to be a burden to you. I know you don’t want kids.” That part made me fight our relationship, to begin with.

“No, I don’t.”

I nod, not expecting him to change his answer but hopeful one day he may. Making my way back to the dining room, everyone’s attention falls on us when we enter.

“Did you fuck in the bathroom?” Lucas asks.

“Lucas,” Bianca chides.

He laughs and raises a brow, expecting us to answer.

That isn’t going to happen anytime soon.

DINNER WENT WELL AFTER THAT, and Joey and I had no more tussles. Actually, we hardly spoke, even as I left. Not even a goodbye. Bianca sent me back to the hotel, requesting Lucas drive me and assist with the packing. He pulled a face but took me anyway.

“You two should just fuck again. I like him better when he’s getting pussy,” Lucas says as we walk into the hotel room, and I roll my eyes. Jerome went with Bianca as he fell asleep at the table. I didn’t want to leave him, but she insisted that I go and get my things and meet her at the house.

“No, that’s not going to happen,” I tell him.

“Worth a try.” He shrugs.

“Did you come to Italy to kill me?” I ask.

“Sure did.”

“And why didn’t you?”

“Keir got there... plans changed.”

“Did Joey plan to kill me?”

“Yep...” He pauses, gaining my attention. “You broke his heart. Of course, he wanted to kill you.”

We carry my things to the car, and Lucas heads to Bianca’s place.

“Stop at Joey’s, please.”

Lucas smiles.

“My pleasure. But I ain’t waiting while you go and get your booty call.”

“I just want to give him something I took.”

“His heart.” Lucas laughs at his own joke.

“Ha-ha. Funny.”

“I thought so.” He smirks.

We stop in front of Joey’s house, and I go up and knock. While I wait, I think Abigail will answer, but a blonde is standing there when the door is opened.

And the first thing I think of is when we were in Joey's car, and he told me to take off my blonde wig because he liked brunettes. Now I really know why.

"Hi." Her voice is sweet as she smiles at me. "We didn't order food."

"Is Joey here?"

"Yeah, he's in the shower right now."

"Oh, is he?"

"Oh shit," Lucas says, obviously having gotten out of the car.

I push past her, and she yells something at me. I don't care. Taking the steps two at a time, I open his bedroom door and go straight for the bathroom. Opening the door, I see him with his head against the wall with a bathroom full of steam.

"Simone, give me a minute."

"Simone, right! Did she happen to suck your cock?" I ask, and his head whips around. When he spots me, his lips thin, then turn into a smirk.

"Are you... jealous, Adora?"

I move in closer, my body on fire. I want to hurt him so badly, wipe that stupid look off his face. *How could he?*

"Damn, jealousy looks good on you, just so you know."

"How could you?"

"How could I what?" He narrows his eyes, his expression mocking. "Did you forget Becca?"

"I ended things with her the minute I became yours." He reaches for me and pulls me into the shower with him, the hot water running over my face, but I don't care.

"You were never mine." He growls.

"I was," I insist as I pummel his chest. "Maybe you were fucking her the whole time." When he says nothing, I ask, "Have you fucked her?"

"Yes," he answers.

My mouth falls open with a gasp, but he is quick to cover my mouth with his. I bite his lip and tug it hard. He smacks my ass through my dress, making me yelp at the contact. Before he pulls it up, he moves my underwear and does it again.

“Joey?” the girl calls.

I bite his lip until I taste blood, for good measure, and go to step away from him.

“Fuck off,” he roars. *Not to me, but to the girl.* I push on his chest, but he simply laughs and pulls me back. “You ain’t going nowhere now.”

“You can’t keep me here.” He manages to move his hand from my ass and straight inside my panties. When his finger slips between my folds, I know he feels my arousal instantly.

“You want me.” He growls into my mouth. “Now, shut the fuck up and let me fuck you like a good whore, *darling.*”

I try to pull away again, and this time he releases me. I step out of the shower and drop my dress, followed by my panties while he remains under the water.

His eyes soak in every inch of me.

And I let him.

Need.

Want.

Lust.

Love.

Hate.

It’s all there in his heated stare.

Our chemistry is one of my favorite things.

He is one of my favorite things.

I think it’s the only thing my father did right before I killed him—picking Joey for me.

How well we clash, and how much we need each other without actually needing each other. It's confusing, but you get it.

And right now, he's not in charge. No way. The blonde ruined his chance to get everything he wants from me.

I step back and shut the door, the steam filling the room. A renewed confidence rushing through me at the look on his face.

"Get out," I order him.

He flicks the water off and steps out, his cock hard. His ink shining with mist and water.

He is marvelous to look at.

Stunning.

"Now, get on your knees. Like my good boy," I demand.

He chuckles and does as I say. I lift my foot, and his mouth makes contact with the inside of my ankle, kissing it.

"Perfume," he says with a knowing smirk.

"Your mouth shouldn't be talking, *darling*. It should be moving between my legs, wouldn't you say?"

Joey's hand reaches out and captures my ass, pulling me forward until his mouth lands between my legs, and he starts to kiss me softly, languidly. Licking between my folds but never quite touching the right spot, just to tease me.

I grip his hair when his tongue flicks where I want him and push his face against me. He chuckles but does as I request of him, causing a long, low moan to leave my chest. His mouth is as good as I remember. He licks, nibbles, and plays with me until he inserts a finger, then another. Soon, I'm not sure if my legs can hold me up a second longer. As soon as I feel the orgasm building, I let go of his hair and find my breast, squeezing the nipple hard.

His other hand that was on my ass slides between my cheeks and pushes in. Two fingers in each hole and a mouth that knows how to please.

A scream rips from me, and before I can collapse, Joey catches me. I try to calm my breath in his arms, still shaking from my release. Then, when I feel steady enough, I push off of him. Looking around, I see his shirt and reach for it, sliding it over my shoulders and then slipping on my panties. All the while, his stare penetrates the back of me.

“Adora.”

I ignore him, buttoning up his shirt and running my hand down my hair to fix it. Walking to the door, I grab the handle. When he comes up behind me, his cock is still hard and presses into my back.

“Darling.” Shivers rack my body at that word. Oh, how I begged to hear him call me that, exactly like that, for the last month.

“Go and fuck your blonde, Joey.” I pull the door open and walk down the stairs.

Lucas and the blonde are waiting when I reach the bottom step. “He’s all yours.” I turn back around to see him with a towel around his waist and a look of anger written all over his face.

I may pay for that.

But it sure as shit was fun to do.

“Um... you can’t go to Ms. Rossi’s like that,” Lucas says as we get to the car.

“Just drive. I’ll change.”

“Fucking hell. How am I meant to explain to Chanel you were naked in my back seat?”

“I’m not naked.”

“You better not be. I want to get laid too, you know.”

I pull on a pair of jean shorts and keep Joey’s shirt, tying it up at my waist. But when I look through the back window, I see no sign of him.

I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing.

FOURTEEN

JOEY

“Who was that?” Simone asks as I shut the door. Fendi comes running up to me, and I pick her up. She looks at the dog. “And when did you get a dog?”

“That was my wife,” I tell her.

“You have a wife?” she balks. “Oh my God, why did you not tell me?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I don’t fuck with married men, Joey.”

“We aren’t fucking,” I remind her.

Her hands fly up in the air. “So why am I here?”

“I need you to look after the dog.”

She shakes her head. “And you really had no one else to ask other than me?”

“You just so happened to be there, so I figured—”

“No, you did not figure. You hardly thought.” Her head won’t stop shaking as she processes what just happened, and I smile.

“You’ll love her.” I offer her the dog, and she takes her easily. Immediately, the dog starts licking Simone, and she smiles. “See, you love her already, don’t you?”

“I thought you invited me back because—”

“I never brought you here,” I remind her.

“Yes, true...” She looks down at the dog again, pursing her lips. “I always thought that something more would happen between us, but I knew you were always waiting for her,” she whispers. “You said the first night, ‘one day I will be married. This can be nothing more than fucking.’”

“It was some good fucking, Simone.” I smile.

“Yeah, it was. But you never really tried with me. I wonder, did you try with her?” She walks to the door, the dog cradled in her arms. I don’t respond.

“I can only watch her for the weekend. I have plans next week.”

I nod. “I can pay you,” I tell her.

“No, it’s okay. You know I don’t mind at all.” I hand her the bag I had packed, and she takes it.

“My car will take you home.”

“Joey.”

“Hmm...”

“You should try. Adora cares for you. And you care for her. Just try.”

I lean in and kiss her cheek. “Goodnight, Simone.” She walks out with the dog, waving to me once she’s getting into the car to leave.

“Who was that?” Abigail asks, walking up the stairs. She looks up at me and glances at my towel. Her hand holds heels, and her face is smeared with makeup.

“You’re moving out,” I tell her, and her mouth drops open. “I’ve packed your things.” I hand her a bag, but it falls to her feet when she fails to grab it. “That car...” I nod to the car waiting at the curb, “... is ready to take you. You are staying at a hotel for a month. After that, you will have to work it out. You are not my responsibility any longer.”

“You can’t just kick me out,” she screams. “You took me. You said I could stay with you.”

“Maybe you should have stayed with Scott.” I turn to walk back inside, and she follows.

“You can’t just dispose of me like I’m your wife. She may be easy to kick over, but I sure as shit am not.”

I smirk, thinking of my wife’s leg up on my shoulder. Should I even call her that anymore? My wife? When really, she isn’t. But I just can’t separate the two.

“I want you to understand something, Abigail.”

She crosses her arms over her chest.

“Your sister is more of a woman than you will ever be. She cares even when she shouldn’t. She didn’t have to put you in a school where you were protected and no one could find you. She didn’t have to save you. But she did.”

“She didn’t save me.”

“She did, you clueless little girl.” I shake my head at her, irritation flaring in my chest. “That there shows me you need to go out into the big world and mature. Because right now, you are a dumb little high school girl who uses her body to get what she wants and doesn’t know what to do when she doesn’t get it.”

“How dare you.” Her arm rears back to slap me, but I capture her hand in mine.

“And I would refrain from touching me again.”

“Why? My sister can.”

“She can. She has that privilege. You, on the other hand, do not. So next time you touch me, you won’t like what happens.”

“What are you going to do?” She tries to free her hand, but I hold it tight in mine.

“I’ll kill you, little one.” I drop her hand and step back, striding over to her bag and shoving it into her arms. “Now, leave. And grow the fuck up.”

She finally steps out the door, eyes narrowing as they stare at me. “She will hate you for kicking me out.”

“How about I tell her you snuck into my bed, naked? Think she may hate that?” I reply, watching as a flicker of uncertainty travels through her gaze.

“She loves me more than you.”

“That may be true, but she can spot a liar. And you, my dear, are that.” I slam the door in her face before she can say another word and walk back to my room to get dressed. As I step out of the closet, I see my wedding ring sitting on the bed.

When did that get there?

FIFTEEN

“You should probably wipe your tears before we get up there,” Lucas says as we step to the elevator. I swipe at my face, and Lucas swears as he hands me a handkerchief from his pocket. I thank him and dab at my tear-stained cheeks before I blow my nose. When I go to hand it back, he lifts his hands and shakes his head.

“Hell to the no.” He picks up the bags in the elevator as we get to Bianca’s level. When the doors slide open, Bianca is there with Jerome, covered in chocolate.

“We baked a cake, Mommy.”

“Did you?” I say with a laugh, genuinely smiling.

“Well... we watched a show. A marvelous show of love and hate,” Lucas adds, grinning as he walks inside. Shaking my head, I follow him, and Jerome takes my hand.

“I have a room all set up. I hope you don’t mind sharing,” Bianca says.

“No, of course not. I’ll enjoy that.” Because after having so many nights away from him, I’m trying to make up for every lost second.

“And you’ve seen Joey.” She taps the side of her neck, indicating to me. I touch mine and know what she means—he marked me.

“We aren’t talking right now.”

“Okay, well, give him time. He’s in love with you, sweetheart. This is all new for him.” I smile at her, even

though my heart sinks. She's his mother, of course, she's going to be nice about him. And I like her. I wish I had a mother like her.

I had an evil stepmother and a horrid father.

Seems I haven't had much luck in a lot of ways in this life.

But when I look down at Jerome and those eyes that are exactly like mine, I'm reminded of just how lucky I am now. Because he's finally with me.

"He really is a marvelous kid. I enjoy spending time with him," Bianca says before she leaves us to get changed and unpacked. Jerome stays with me for a few minutes before he has to check on the cake. Then, grabbing my phone, which I haven't checked for a while, I switch it on to see multiple recent messages from Joey and open it so fast I don't even think, and I wish I did because it snaps me back to reality that somehow, we just don't work anymore.

WE DON'T WORK.

WE CAN'T WORK.

THIS THING **between us is just sex.**

We have great sex.

LET'S **leave it at that.**

I SCRUNCH my nose up at his messages, immediately annoyed. *What kind of message is that last one?*

I REPLY BACK.

LEAVE IT AT THAT?

HE RESPONDS RIGHT AWAY.

YES. I like to bend you over and fuck you so hard that you even forget your own name. That's our relationship.

I FORGET **your name with my vibrator.**

HA, take that, smart-ass.

AGAIN, he replies almost instantly.

BUT YOU DON'T **because you're still thinking of me.**

I PUT THE PHONE DOWN, not wanting to delve into it with him anymore.

THE WEEK by goes quickly as I start to shop around for locations to set up a new bookstore. I miss my little shop so much. It was my happy place.

Bianca has access to a privileged school, which Jerome has already been accepted into. And with my free time when he starts next week, I want to work again.

I'm eager to fill a store full of novels with love and adventures as crazy as mine, maybe some even more deadly.

We all love a thrilling dark romance.

Sweet, fantasy, comedy. I'm down for anything, really.

It's why I opened my shop in the first place. I've always loved books. But when I lived with Scott and was basically a prisoner in his house, I fell deeply in love with the pages and then would have to come back to reality.

Reality sometimes sucks ass.

"Adora, I have to head out. Joey is here." I'm lying on my bed in my room when Bianca pops her head in. Jerome is doing a trial day today to see if he likes the school. So I've been lazing around, reading, and daydreaming.

Scott sometimes enters my head, but I try to get rid of him quickly. One thing I know is that he's scared of the Rossi family. But when Scott wants something, he finds a way. And that part frightens me the most.

That fear has only been made worse by not having Jerome around me all the time.

What if one day I'm picking him up from school, and he isn't there?

What if Scott gets to him? Or one of his men?

I have spiraled about this countless times, even after confirming with the school that he would only be released to Bianca or me.

"You okay, or do you need me to stay?" she asks.

"Mother, she will be fine," Joey states.

"Will I?" I ask him as he comes into view from behind his mother. She kisses him on the cheek before she offers me a wave and walks off. He stands there, waiting for the front door to shut before he makes a move, just a small step into my room.

"Why are you here?" I'm the first to speak.

"Have you spoken to your sister?" he asks.

"No. How is she?"

“I wouldn’t know because I kicked her out.” I sit on the bed, ready to tear his throat out before he continues, “Sent her to a hotel, which is paid up for a month, and told her after that she is on her own. Time for you to stop coddling her.”

“I do no such thing,” I argue with a huff.

“Well, I’m sure when she’s out of money, you’ll hear from her,” he says, shrugging. Joey glances around the room before his eyes connect with mine again. “Will you take a walk with me?”

“Should I?” I ask, my brow quirking all on its own. “I mean, your girlfriend wouldn’t care, would she?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend. I have a non-wife.”

“Hmm...” I stand and reach for a cardigan as it’s starting to get a little chilly, and I hate the cold. “Where are going?”

“Friends, remember?”

“Who fuck,” I add in as I approach him.

“Yes, about that...” He moves fast, his hand gripping my neck before his lips slam onto mine. I let him kiss me, and it’s perfect.

How did he learn to kiss like that? How does he know how to kiss me in a way that all I hear, feel, and breathe is him?

I hate that he consumes me.

But I also revel in it.

Reluctantly, I push him, and he steps back, his lips red and swollen. I bet mine look the same.

“Should we go?” I go to push past him, but he doesn’t move, and I can’t slip by him because he is standing in the doorway.

“Why did it have to be you?” he asks. This man knows just what to say to have my heart beating only for him and crumbling to pieces in the same breath. His hand lifts and brushes back a stray piece of hair that fell across my face. “I wish it were anyone but you. It would have made this whole

process of moving on easier.” Gripping my hand, he gives it a small squeeze before we start walking.

He doesn’t let go until we reach the busy sidewalk. When he finally releases me, he slides his hands into his pockets and looks straight ahead.

If I had to guess, I would say he is conflicted. And I get it. I do.

So I don’t say anything and wait for him to speak first.

“I’ve gone back and forth…”

“Okay,” I breathe, nervous and confused, but listening.

“A part of me doesn’t want to be with you, Adora.” I bite my lip at his words. “Another part is screaming at me whenever you are near me because I want you so much.” He stops, and I stop with him. Cars are honking, and buses are everywhere, the streets are packed, as is typical in New York.

“This is for you.” He pulls a set of keys from his pocket, offering them to me.

“What are these?” My eyes narrow in question as he sets them in my palm.

“He may have taken things away from you, from *us*, but I want you to have this.” He nods to something behind me, and when I turn around, there’s an empty shop.

“I don’t get it.” I turn back to him, and he steps closer until his hands touch my shoulders, and he spins me, so my back is to his front.

Leaning down, he whispers in my ear, “Your bookstore. Yours and only yours,” he says, causing shivers to rack my body. “The last one was taken from you, and we know he will never repay you. This is one of my properties. And now I am gifting it to you. The lawyer will draw up the paperwork and send it to you tomorrow.”

His words shock me still.

What? How? Why?

I glance over my shoulder at him. As he stares at me, so many emotions cross his face. I wish I was only responsible for the good ones.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know. I wanted to...” He pauses, seeming to struggle with what he wants to say next. “This does not mean I want you, Adora. I want to fuck you. The two are different.”

“Are they, though?” I whisper. He’s so close that he could easily kiss me again, but I know he won’t.

“For me, they have to be.”

I nod, trying like hell to accept it, then take a step away from him and go straight for the door. But I pause before putting the key in the lock. “I think you should do the honors,” I tell him, handing back the keys. “I’m too nervous.”

He takes the keys and unlocks the door, then swings it open. As soon as I step in, a smile erupts on my face.

This is my new home.

I know it.

I feel it.

My last bookstore was everything to me when I had lost so much.

This is that and so much more, and I’m so excited for the fresh start. I spin around and face him, and he’s watching me from the door, a smirk flirting on his lips.

“I think you should lock the door,” I tell him as I saunter toward him. “Friends who fuck, right?” I slowly remove my cardigan, and he nods, reaching behind him to lock the door with ease. His eyes never leave mine.

“Stop,” he orders as I get to my dress. I do as he says, and he walks over to the windows and pulls down a blind that’s full of dust. Standing in front of the now-covered window, he looks back at me. “Undress.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, my hand caressing my shoulder, playing with the neckline. Waiting...

“*Darling*,” he teases. “Undress, now.”

“As you say.” I smile and let the dress fall to the floor. “Tell me. Who do you like fucking more, your blonde or your brunette?”

“Do you have to ask?”

I reach for my panties, my fingers brushing the waistband. “Yes, now answer.”

“You. Which you know.” I turn around and slowly pull panties down my hips, giving him a full view of my ass and everything else. I hear him take in a deep breath before a groan rumbles from his chest.

Rough hands slap my ass, hard. I yelp but stay bent over. I can hear the rustle of clothing and know he’s undressing. When I turn back around, he is standing there naked.

“You are in control. Where do you want me?” he asks. His cock is hard, and his chest is ripped to perfection. I just want to touch him all over. Stepping forward, I stroke my hands down his torso, stopping on a new tattoo. It’s randomly placed under his rib cage... a set of books.

“It’s new.” It’s not a question.

“It is,” he confirms. I look up at him, and those eyes that hold so much and yet so little stare back at me. And for some reason, my belly takes flight with butterflies before I ask the next question.

“What does it mean?”

“You.”

“Lie down,” I tell him, pushing him away from me. He glances at the floor and doesn’t even fight me on it, lying down and waiting for me. I walk over to him, position my feet on either side of him, and shuffle up until I am above his face, my pussy directly above his line of sight. “I want...” My hands trail down my belly, and he watches the action until I reach between my legs. I slide my fingers between my folds and smile down at him. “Joey.”

“Yes, darling.” His gaze meets mine again, and it’s hungry.

“How does it look from down there?” I ask, feeling how wet I am for him.

“Fucking marvelous.” I insert a finger into myself while he lies there motionless and clutch my breast with the other hand.

“Joey.”

“Darling.”

“Would you like me to sit on your face?”

“Fuck yes.” He growls, reaching for my legs and gliding his fingers up my thighs. He grabs my ass to pull me down slowly, letting me lower myself at my own pace. When I get to my knees, he lifts to meet me like he’s starved and makes me come with his mouth.

What a fucking mouth it is.

SIXTEEN

JOEY

If God created perfection with the devil, made someone so magnificent in every way yet so fucked-up, it would be her.

She is a mixture of both.

My redemption and my sin.

I shouldn't be doing this.

But like a fool, I can't help myself.

I need her like air.

I want her like the heat of a fire.

And I'll take her as the flames take life.

She sits on my cock with no hesitation whatsoever, as if I were made for her.

Maybe I was.

Pity our life is so fucked-up.

She has a kid.

I don't want kids.

She is married.

I thought I was married to her.

So many fuck-ups, yet here I am, letting her ride my cock like it's her lifeline.

It's a damn good lifeline, that's for sure.

I feel her squeeze around me, and her hands come down and smother my face. Then, she slips her fingers into my mouth, just two, and I wrap my lips around them and suck while she continues to ride my cock.

Fuck, she's a goddess.

She tightens when she comes, screaming my name like a prayer. Her fingers leave my lips, and she falls forward, her mouth finding mine and kissing me as she rides it out. I grip her hips, not letting her slow down as I start to move her body for her. Moaning into the kiss, she takes my bottom lip and bites as she comes again.

I come not long after her, and the minute we are done, she collapses on my chest, not moving.

My cock is still in her cunt. Her sweet, beautiful cunt.

"Joey," she breathes against me.

"Yes?"

"I like fucking you."

"I love fucking you," I reply, wiping her hair from her face. "Let's not change that."

"Okay," she agrees tiredly, and after a few breaths, she gets up and proceeds to dress while I watch her, stuck to the floor, not wanting to move from this space.

"It's officially christened," she jokes, her dress strap sliding up her shoulder.

"Not everywhere," I tell her with a shrug. I can already think of at least ten other spots where I'd like to take her.

She raises a brow at my words.

"You bought me a bookstore," she says as she pulls her sweater back on. "And I still owe you half a million."

"I did." I nod, finally getting up. "And you do." She watches me slide on my trousers.

"Normal people don't buy their ex a bookstore."

“Is that what we are? Exes?” I question. I think part of me will always view her as my wife.

“Yes. I see no other way to put it. And I think you’ve said as much.”

“Hmm...”

She glances at her watch and then back to me. “I have to go. I have to pick up Jerome.”

“I have to work,” I tell her, stepping to the door. When she gets to me, she stops.

“This is going to get messy. You realize that, right?” Adora licks her lips. *Fuck, I want to be the one licking those lips. Every. Single. Day.*

“Tomorrow, meet me at Jake’s,” I tell her, and her brow furrows.

“You want to go back there?”

“Yes.” I don’t even bother denying I enjoy that place. She should very much know that. “Is that an issue for you?”

She starts to shake her head. “No, no, it’s just—”

“Jake got you out of there,” I remind her.

“Yes, and his place of business was nice, considering what it is.”

“It’s a place where people can fuck and fill their desires without judgment. Do you not have desires?” I ask, stepping closer.

“You’ve pretty much ticked every box.”

“Have I?” I lift her chin with my fingers to see those whiskey-colored eyes that hold me hostage.

“I don’t crave anyone else when I’m with you, so I would say yes.”

I lean into her lips without kissing them, whispering into them as they part. “No other desires? Don’t want to be tied up?” I wait for a response, but she gives me nothing.

“Blindfolded?” She sucks in a breath, and I step away from her. “Until next time, darling.”

Her eyes follow me as I walk out, and it takes everything in me not to look back at her.

SEVENTEEN

ADORA

Jerome loves the school, which is a relief. I want him to be happy here. Even if it means sacrificing myself, I will make him happy. I've done it before, and I will do it again because that's what you do for someone you love.

Joey.

I can't deny that I love him.

It's there, buried deep in my chest.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach when he is near. My heart pulsates when I see him.

I dream of him.

And only of him.

In my nightmares, he is always there as well.

I'm not sure which is worse.

Reaching for my ringing phone, I answer it without even looking.

I shouldn't have.

“Adora...” I know his voice straight away. I would know it anywhere. Hanging up and throwing my phone, my nerves skyrocket as it continues to ring. It's late, and everyone is asleep, and the last thing I want to do is wake anyone. Quickly getting up, I grab the phone and silence it. But it continues to vibrate. When it finally stops, I sit there staring at it from the bed, then it starts to ding with messages. They come in fast, and I can't help watching them light up my screen. With shaky

hands, I reach for it like it's a ticking bomb and manage to open them.

DID you really think you could hide from me?

YOU TOOK something that is mine.

THAT WAS YOUR FIRST MISTAKE.

IF YOU EVEN THINK OF involving them, you will never see my son again once I have him.

MAKE NO MISTAKE, Adora. Jerome is mine. Not yours.

I TURN THE PHONE OFF.

Jerome is his?

Ha. That's a lie.

That asshole may have had him while I was here, but our son is mine. I remember how our son was conceived, and I remember how his grubby hands touched my body. I hated having his hands on me. *Hated* it.

When I first had Jerome, I thought I would get a break, but no, that was laughable. The doctor told Scott to wait six weeks, so he put a calendar on his phone, and the minute it hit six weeks, he was back between my legs. And it's not like he went without. He was fucking people behind my back, and I had hoped that would suffice, that it would do, but it seemed I was wrong.

Scott has an unhealthy obsession with me.

I have never really understood why.

And I still don't.

Getting up and going to the kitchen, I find Bianca drinking a glass of water. She offers me a small smile.

"Your sister was here today." My mouth opens at her words—she didn't tell me that at dinner. "I told her to come back when she was sober, and then you two can talk." Drunk, I can't even comprehend her. *What is going on?*

"I'm sorry," I say, and she waves me off.

"It's no problem, but I would watch that one. She doesn't really show compassion. When she tried, I could tell it was fake."

"I'm going to find somewhere to live. I can't keep relying on you and Joey all the time," I tell her honestly. I have too much crazy going on in my life, and the last thing I want to do is to bring it to her to her doorstep.

"But you can. That's what family does. You should go and see him. You don't look tired anyway."

"I saw him today." Joey mentioned Bianca wants us back together.

"I know, but he knows family issues."

"I think I might just go to sleep," I say, turning to go back to the bedroom.

"Adora." I stop. "Goodnight."

I say, "Goodnight," and head back to bed.

That night, Scott was in my nightmares instead.

ABIGAIL IS WAITING out front for me when I step out. Jerome smiles up at her, and she doesn't even bother returning it.

"Why are you here again?" I ask. This time she didn't come up to the door. Instead, she chose to wait for me

downstairs at the front of the building.

“Do you not want to see me? You know the reason I’m in this mess is because of you,” she says. Her voice is high, but she isn’t screaming.

“I did not tell you to get in that car with those men. You chose that. Then you proceeded to follow those men back here. So do not play the victim card, Abigail.” Jerome tugs my hand. “I have to walk Jerome to school.” As I head down the sidewalk, she comes up beside me. I don’t tell her to go away because, despite everything, she is my sister.

“Do you know how he found you?” she asks. I look down at Jerome, who is too busy watching the cars drive by to pay us any attention. “You sent me a letter. The return address was your bookstore.” She smiles, and I take a deep breath as a wave of nausea hits me.

No.

No.

No.

“You’re lying,” I snap as we get to the school. The teacher takes Jerome’s hand, and I kiss him and sign him in for the day. He doesn’t even pause before he runs off, too excited to play with his friends. Abigail stays back at the gate, waiting for me. The teacher offers her a small wave, and she returns it before I make my way back to her.

“You would like to believe that, wouldn’t you? That I was lying.”

“Yes.”

“Pity, really. I was mad at you. Found his address and sent it to him,” she says simply. “He didn’t even know it was me.”

“I’m sorry you have so much hate in you. I’m sorry that you think the world owes you something.” I shake my head.

I can’t fix her.

I can’t keep on helping her and trying and trying.

It doesn’t get me anywhere.

“Becca, that was her name, right? The one you were with before Joey?” she continues as I start walking ahead, not wanting to speak to her anymore. If I do, I know I’ll say something I *will* regret. And unlike her, I care. “Here you were, living your best life while I was trapped in a boarding school.”

I spin around to face her, getting right in her face. “That was a great school. I picked that school for the privacy and freedom you got with it. There was not a better school,” I argue.

She doesn’t even react. “Yeah, it was great. But what would have been better was having someone who loved me. Papa loved me.”

I throw my hands up in the air, withholding the scream that wants to tear from my throat. *She doesn’t get it.*

“Okay, let’s make me the villain. You’re good at that. Aren’t you? Just like he was. Never taking accountability. It was his downfall in the end.” I smile at her, the same smile she’s been showcasing.

“Do you plan to kill me too?” she asks, glaring as she looks at me.

“Push me, and I very well might.”

“If she won’t, I will.” Joey’s voice echoes from behind me.

Abigail and I turn to find him there with Merci. She was helping me look after the bookstore before it was burned down.

“You two deserve each other. You know that, right?” Abigail remarks, disgusted.

“This your sister?” Merci asks. I nod, and Merci just smirks and looks her up and down. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Abigail snarks, turning her back to her and looking at me one last time. “I need money, a lot of it.”

Merci laughs at her words.

Joey just stands there.

“I can’t,” I tell her. And right now, I don’t feel guilty about it. “I owe someone.”

“You don’t. And let’s be real, you have ways of getting it. We all know your boy thing over here...” she points her thumb to Joey, “... will give it to you.” Then she’s huffing a laugh and stalking off without another word.

“I could kill her,” Joey offers.

“No,” I say immediately.

“So, new bookstore?” Merci muses, clapping her hands excitedly. “Joey told me last night at Chanel’s. I took his credit card and ordered some of what you had in stock before for rush delivery, and it should be coming today.” She smiles proudly. “And Joey said he will cover my wages until the shop’s up and running.”

“He what?” I ask her, shaking my head as I try to process what she’s just said. “So, first, we need to find bookcases, tables, well... everything.”

Joey holds his credit card out to me, but I make no move to take it.

“I already owe you money,” I remind him and push his hand away. I really need to work that out soon. It’s been a while since I’ve dipped into that account of my father’s money. I try never to use it since I was hoping one day to give it to Jerome for his twenty-first birthday. To me, it’s blood money.

“Take the card, Adora. It’s an investment,” he says, still holding it toward me again. “I know you’ll be good for it. Lucas shared sales on the last one.” Merci takes the card from his outstretched hand when I still can’t get myself to.

“Don’t worry, boss. If she won’t, I will.” She smiles and links her arm through mine. “How long until you have to be back to get your boy?” she asks.

I tell her as we walk off.

Joey’s already left without a goodbye.

I'M KNOCKING on his door, and there is no answer. Merci and I shopped all day, then collected Jerome and shopped some more. We got everything we needed, and I wanted to personally hand his card back. It's late. Jerome is asleep at Bianca's place, and I'm standing in front of his apartment, knocking with no answer. I try to call him, but he doesn't pick up.

My phone rings as I hang up from trying Joey.

It's Merci.

"Hey," I answer.

"Forgot to say, we have to work out an opening day and promote it as much as possible."

"Yeah, sounds good."

"Where are you? It doesn't sound like you're in bed like you should be," she jokes.

"I'm at Joey's, but he isn't here. I was going to give back his card." I hear Merci yelling, and when she comes back, she huffs.

"Chanel says Joey was with Lucas. Best bet would be Lucas' club."

"Thanks," I tell her, hanging up before she gets out what she was going to say next.

WHEN I ARRIVE at the club, I shut the car door to a quiet night, the only lights come from inside the building. Not from the front, the back door, which is slightly ajar. As I approach to pull it open, I hear voices, soft voices, almost whisper-like.

Should I knock?

Deciding that's the best thing to do, I rap on the door. The voices go dead quiet, and no other noise is heard as I wait. Wrapping my arms around my chest, I step inside. I head to where the light is and push open the door. Inside I find Joey, his back to me, no shirt on, and a knife in his hand.

Lucas is sitting at a table next to him, counting money. As my gaze travels down, I see a man lying on the floor, his eyes wide as he looks up at Joey. In one swift movement, Joey reaches down, and the knife slices like butter across the guy's throat.

Is this what they do? I mean, I know it is, but seeing it is completely different. Joey stands, wipes the blood on his jeans, and looks at Lucas.

"I hate you."

"Yeah, yeah," Lucas says, laughing. "You lost the bet. It was your turn."

"You two gamble on who to kill?" I ask them, horrified. Both sets of eyes fall on me.

"Told you I heard a woman," Lucas says. "And yes, I beat him in a game of chess, so the next kill he had to do naked. He wouldn't go that far and only removed his shirt because he's a pussy-ass bitch." He rises from the chair, looking at me with curiosity. "And why are you here?"

I glance over to Joey, his chest bare and tensed. I'm remembering him naked, fucking me in the bookstore and how much I liked it.

A lot.

"Why is your ex-wife looking at you with fuck-me eyes." I blush and look away. "Oh, yes, she wants you to fuck her. Death turns her on. Who knew," Lucas taunts.

Joey stalks over to me, grabs my hand, and guides me outside into the cold air. I can't help but drink him in up close, but then he's bringing my gaze back to his with a hand around my jaw. The same hand he just used to slit someone's throat.

"You just killed someone."

“And you wanted to fuck me because of it.”

I shake my head, his hand tightening its hold as I do. “It wasn’t because of that.”

He leans closer at my whisper. “Do you like it when I’m bad? Would you like me to be bad to you?” *Yes.*

When I don’t answer, his eyes pin me. “Darling.”

“I think we should get married again. For real,” I blurt out and want to smack myself immediately. It’s like my heart decided what it wanted and gave me no choice in the matter. His hand drops, and he steps back from me. I feel the distance like a gaping chasm immediately, and I hate it. I know he wants me. He’s just better at fighting it than me.

“Why, do you need something?”

“I started to enjoy being married to you,” I tell him the truth, my hand reaching up to touch his chest.

“And I enjoy blow jobs, fucking, and watching.” He shrugs.

“You enjoy me, do you not?” I slide my hand along his chest, his tattoos under my hand.

“I enjoy doing all those things I listed above. With you.”

“But do you enjoy being around me without those things?” I ask, my hand falling lower.

“Yes,” he says reluctantly, his eyes watching my hand.

“So why can’t we get married?” My hand stops, and he looks at me.

“I don’t want to marry you.”

I let it fall from him and suck in a breath. “You just want to fuck me.”

“For now!”

Lucas calls out for him, and he turns to go back inside. He yells something in the doorway and is back at my side in flash. “You need to go home.” His hand touches my back, eliciting a shiver, and he walks me to my car.

I turn to face him, pulling out his credit card and handing it to him. “Yours.”

He opens my car door, and I slide in. He gently closes it, and I roll down the window.

“Did you get everything?”

I nod and reach under the seat to pull out a bag. Handing it to him, he takes it with a furrowed brow and peers inside. “I don’t need your money,” he says, sounding irritated. And then he’s pushing it back toward me.

“You made me use your credit card, and I owe you money for Jake.”

“Jake has been paid. That debt is clear.”

“Not with me, it isn’t,” I press, shoving it back to him.

“Keep your money, Adora.” He takes it from me, opens the back door, and throws the bag in. Reaching in through the window, he grips my face with his fingers. When I look at him, I see him for what he truly is—ruthless with a heart of a gold. *How can the two exist together within him?*

I watched him end another person’s life.

Yet here he is, gripping my face again like he’s about to kiss me.

Variety

GOSSIP

The 'Nice' Brother

Can you smell wedding bells?

Again?

I guess we will see?

EIGHTEEN

“You’ve got it bad,” Lucas comments as I walk back in. The body is already being cleaned up and disposed of.

“What would you know?” I bite out, reaching for my shirt.

“Tell me, why did you say no?” he asks, not caring about the blood being mopped on his floor. *Why would he, though?* For us, seeing blood is like a normal person seeing rain. “And why the fuck was that back door not locked?” he asks, pinning me with a glare.

“No one is stupid enough to walk into the back of your club.”

He clicks his fingers. “Hello, your thing just did, did she not?”

“She knows us. To her, it was nothing.”

“You should marry her,” he says, so sure of himself. “I know you think she scorned you, but you want her, and she clearly wants you.”

“I don’t want to get married.”

“Why? Because the first time wasn’t all it was cracked up to be?” He laughs.

“No. I don’t want kids.” That gets him to shut up for a few seconds.

“Yeah, I see the issue then.”

“Yeah...”

“Is her kid that bad?” he asks. “You love your niece and nephew.”

“Of course, I do. And no, he’s great.”

“All I am saying is, maybe you are too hard on yourself. Maybe you should try.”

“Yeah, and maybe you should have ten kids and get married.”

“Fuck no.” He snorts and rises from his seat.

“Exactly.”

“You and I are built differently, Joey. I’m obviously the more fucked-up one. While I wear that badge with honor, you aren’t there yet. But one day, you very well may be.”

“I WANT TO HAVE A GIRLS’ night, but this time we stay inside and chill,” Sailor says at our weekly dinner. Adora came with my mother this time.

Keir sits silently at the end of the table.

“We have these family dinners, but us girls need a break too, with everything we deal with. So let’s make it a monthly thing.”

“Can I bring Merci?” Chanel asks.

“Yes, of course,” Sailor answers, smiling.

Adora stays quiet next to me.

“Adora?” I look at her to see her looking down.

“I’m not really a part of the family anymore. Actually, I’m not even sure why I’m here,” she says quietly, moving her food around on her plate with her fork.

“Well, you’re here because you don’t have a bullet in your brain for fucking us over.”

“Lucas Rossi, watch your tone,” my mother chides him.

He smiles at her and apologizes.

“You’re here because we think of you as family,” Sailor adds. “Our circle is small, and you are a part of it. Right, Joey?” Sailor looks at me, her brows raised, waiting for me to say something.

“You are always welcome,” I tell Adora.

She simply nods her head as Piper starts talking about something else.

“I think it’s best I go,” Adora says, getting up. “I don’t feel well.”

The table falls silent as she heads into the kitchen where the kids are sitting with Sailor’s nanny. She walks out, holding Jerome’s hand.

“Let me take you home,” I offer, standing and moving around the table to meet them.

“No, no, it’s fine. I just need rest.” Her eyes look heavy, and her smile is gone, not even peeking out for her son. I reach up and touch her forehead to check for a fever, and she swats my hand away. “I’ll be fine. Go and enjoy your dinner.”

But I don’t listen.

I follow her to her car and take the keys from her. “Let me drive you. You don’t look well.”

I can tell she wants to argue with me, but she doesn’t. Instead, she nods and puts Jerome in the back. When she’s settled in the passenger seat, she rests her head back and closes her eyes. She’s snoring softly before I even pull away.

Shit, that did not take long.

“Ice cream,” Jerome says from the back, making me smile.

“Chocolate?” I ask, and he claps his hands happily. “Adora, do you want ice cream?”

She mumbles something but doesn’t reply.

Pulling up to the ice cream shop, Jerome jumps out, and we head in to get him a cone with sprinkles. When I get back

in the car, I see Adora hasn't moved, and she's still snoring.

"Your mom must be tired," I say to Jerome and he nods his head. "Adora." I lean in, and she opens her eyes. Those eyes that I get lost in, that haunt me, stare back at me dully. "Fuck it! You're coming to stay at mine. I'll call my mother, and she can bring your shit over. You can't even open your eyes."

How did I not notice it before? She wasn't really speaking when she first arrived.

"Hmm..." is the only response I get from her.

I call my mother, and she tells me she will bring stuff around after dinner.

As I pull up at home, I shut off the engine, then gently lift Jerome from the car. He's fallen asleep with chocolate ice cream all over his face. After taking him to the guest room, I go back for Adora, who still hasn't moved. I pick her up easily and lock her car before I carry her inside the house.

I contemplate putting her on the couch.

It would be the smart thing to do.

Yet, I take no notice of the smart thing and carry her to my room, where I lay her on her side of the bed, removing her shoes and tucking her in.

She stays there for two days.

Only drinking water when I wake her and barely speaking the whole time.

NINETEEN

My head hurts.

And that smell...

... I know that smell.

My brain recognizes it straight away.

Joey.

Managing to pull myself into a sitting position, there's a bandage on my arm.

"We had to give you fluids," Joey says from the bathroom door, his hair wet and a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Oh my God. Jerome. Is he okay?" My head is groggy, and it throbs, but my first thought is of my son. The second is Joey, who is still observing me.

"He's asleep. It's nighttime."

"How long have I..." I trail off.

"This is your second night here."

"What? Oh my God." I go to move, but the pounding in my head stops me.

"You had a viral infection. Knocked you on your ass. The doctor says you should be fine tomorrow, but to take it slow."

"You called a doctor?" I ask, shocked this has happened, and I've slept through it all. "And Jerome?"

“He’s been here, watching TV and eating all the good food. I’m sure he’ll be sad to go home, but that won’t be till tomorrow because you need to sleep.”

“I need to shower,” I tell him.

As my mind comes back to me slowly, and I vaguely remember getting up a few times to go to the bathroom. Even that’s a blur.

“I hardly ever get sick. My father used to say when it hit me, it hit me hard.”

“It absolutely hit you hard.” He grimaces as he approaches the bed. He smells good, fresh, whereas I more than likely smell very much the opposite.

“Can I borrow a shirt to sleep in?”

He nods, offering me his hand to help me. He pulls me up with ease, so gently in his strong grip. When my legs feel a bit wobbly, he scoops me right up as if I weigh nothing.

“I’m sorry my breath stinks,” I tell him, trying to turn my face away. “And thank you for taking care of me. You didn’t have to.”

“I did.”

“Oh...”

“My mother would have had my balls.” He sets me on my feet in front of the toilet, then turns on the shower and steps back. I lift the lid and go to pull my pants down, but I look up and say, “You can go now.”

“That’s not happening. You either piss in the toilet or the shower. Either way, I’ll be standing here watching.”

“So demanding.”

“You told me you were fine last time, then you fell over.” That little tidbit of information ends the conversation.

So I pee in front of him, and it doesn’t feel weird because he doesn’t make it weird. As soon as I’m done, I kick off my pants and remove my shirt before I step into the hot shower.

“Can you drive me back when I’m done? I don’t want to be a burden,” I say, looking over my shoulder at Joey. He’s standing there in his towel, staring at me. I can feel his eyes boring into my skin.

“You need to eat.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll order food.” His eyes still haven’t met mine.

“Joey,” I say softly.

“Hmm...” His eyes find mine then, and I see something in them that I haven’t seen in a long time—lust.

“I’ll eat some French fries.”

He lifts a finger and points it at me. “Stay right there. Do not move an inch.” I nod as he walks out, and within a few seconds, he’s back, phone in hand as he orders food. When he’s done, he places the phone on the counter, and then he’s back to chaperoning.

I turn around and pick up his shampoo. I love the smell of his things. Even when I lived here, I liked using them.

“Fuck.” Joey growls as my legs start to wobble when I bend. I manage to stand back up with the shampoo, but Joey is already behind me, his hand sliding around my waist to steady me, and his hard body pushed against mine.

“I was fine.”

“Yeah, and I’m not hard.” I still at his words as I feel him behind me and realize he’s now completely bare. “Sit down. I’ll wash your hair.”

He nods to the corner seat in his shower, which is a simple small ledge, and I lower myself onto it, closing my eyes for a moment. He takes the shampoo from my clutched hand. When I open my eyes to look up at him, his cock is in full view, as is his stomach, his tattoos, everything. I could look at him for hours like this.

“You keep staring at it... it may think you like him,” Joey jokes.

“I do like it. A lot.”

“When you’re better, you can tell it all you want... with your lips.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

His hands massage my scalp, and I somehow fall forward, so my head is now resting on his stomach while he washes my hair.

“Close your eyes.”

I do, and the water sprays over my hair. I don’t move, even after the water is no longer raining down on me. Next, he starts conditioning, and I hum at the feeling of his fingers running through my hair. “Why don’t you want to marry me again?” I ask. I’m going to blame my outburst on my sickness, even though I want to know the answer. He looks after me as if we are husband and wife. Yet, he won’t marry me again.

His hands pause in my hair before he answers, “I don’t want kids.”

“Neither do I,” I tell him. “Apart from the one I already have.”

“You don’t want any more kids?” he asks, seemingly surprised.

“Nope. Done and dusted,” I state, and I mean it. “It wasn’t my plan to have Jerome, but I wouldn’t change him for the world.”

“He’s a good kid.”

“The best.”

“Close your eyes again.”

“Your cock is still staring at me.” I feel his chuckle as my head rests against him. When he’s done, he flicks off the water, and I lift my head. “That was nice. Thank you.”

He reaches out and helps me stand, then leads me out of the shower. Grabbing two towels, he wraps the first around me, then the other around his waist.

“If I had energy, I would totally sit on your cock right now.”

“And I would let you,” he says as he helps me walk back to the bed. As soon as we reach it, I drop the towel and climb in. He picks up the towel and starts drying my hair. I almost fall asleep at the movement until he lays me back down.

“Go to sleep, Adora.”

“No darling?” I ask as my eyes become heavy.

“Goodnight, darling.” I feel his lips touch my skin, but I can’t say anything because my eyes shut, and I’m back asleep.

I FEEL GOOD, refreshed.

Not as weak as I did when I woke up yesterday. I’ve been up and used the bathroom and now just continue to lie here while Joey sleeps next to me. *Did he sleep next to me the whole night?* His hand moves and touches my belly—my bare belly. The warmth of him sends tingles all through my body.

Incredibly intense tingles.

I move just a bit, and his hand drops lower. He’s asleep, so I know he didn’t do it on purpose, but everything in me is on edge right now from feeling him right there. Reaching down, I lift his hand and move in closer to him, so his hand wraps around me. He pulls me in, still without waking, and now our naked bodies are flush against each other. I feel him start to harden between us as I move my hips ever so slightly.

And I get wet.

Let’s be real, I was already wet.

I want him.

Badly.

My whole body is alight and ready for him.

“Joey.” I slide my hand down under the blanket and grip his hip before I let it slide between us and to his cock.

His eyes open and lock on mine. “Darling.”

I smile at the endearment and hook my leg over his.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his hands gripping me tight.

“I’m...”

“Yes?”

“Needy.” I smile at him and let go before I lift the blanket and slide down under it, pushing his hips to the side, so he is lying on his back. I grip his cock in my hand before I lean down and lick the tip. That simple touch makes him buck under me, and with my other hand, I cup his balls.

“Fucking hell, Adora.” His hand grips my hair, and he pulls, not to control me but to show me he has me. And he does.

Going as far as I can until his cock hits the back of my throat without me gagging, I repeat the motion. And the sounds that leave his throat are deliciously addicting. I feel his balls tighten, and before I can stop him, he pulls my hair, lifting my head, so his cock leaves my mouth. When I look up, he’s staring at me intently.

“You stopped me,” I say, wiping my mouth.

Pulling me to him, my body falls onto his. He pushes my hair from my face, so our gazes lock once again.

“You want it so badly, come and sit that sweet little pussy on my cock.”

I sit up and lean back, smiling. His hands find my tits, and he grips them as I position myself, straddling his hips. They squeeze once more, pinching my nipples, before they slide up to my neck, gently holding while I drop myself onto him with a moan. When I’ve taken him fully, he grips my neck hard, bringing my eyes back to his.

“When did I last tell you I love you?” he asks, thrusting up into me, and a squeal leaves my lips at the force.

“I...” I shake my head with all words lost to me right now.

“Remember that I do when I fuck you like you’re my whore.”

He quickly flips me so my back hits the bed, and he covers my mouth with his hand. I whimper when he re-enters me, fucking me with hard, punishing thrusts that already have me close to the edge.

Reaching down between us with his free hand, his deft fingers circle my clit. He thrusts a few times, and then he stops, causing a whine to leave my throat. As his eyes lock onto mine, he brings his fingers to his mouth, licking and then spitting on them before he moves them down and starts rubbing at my aching clit again.

The problem, though, is he isn’t moving. His cock is buried deep inside me, but he won’t thrust. The friction he is giving my clit makes me shift back toward him, but he remains still.

Joey has the power.

I’m just the tool.

His fingers slow, and I feel his cock harden even more before he rubs just right, making me come with his fingers, and the fullness of his cock buried motionless inside of me. I bite his hand, and my fingers grip the bed sheets, my head tilting backward from the pleasure. I’m mid-orgasm before his hips finally move.

He growls near my ear, still covering my mouth, “That’s it, milk my fucking cock.”

Releasing my clit and mouth, he grips my hips.

“You scream, I’ll spank your fucking ass.”

I can only nod as he moves faster. It isn’t long until I’m biting my own tongue to stop myself from screaming his name.

“Adora.”

“Yeah?” I ask through a whimper as he sits up, pulling himself out of me.

“I think it’s time you went home.” Then he gets up and walks to the bathroom, leaving me on his bed, naked and full of him.

TWENTY

JOEY

She's gone when I come back out, nowhere in sight. I should be thankful—I did tell her to leave because it was the right thing to do.

She and her child should go and start somewhere new.

But then why did I buy her a bookstore if that's what I want?

Why didn't I take her money?

Keir walks into the kitchen and looks around before he sits at the counter. "You don't have to marry either one of them." I look at him, confused. I wasn't planning on it. "You weren't planning to anyway," he says, shaking his head, reading my thoughts. "If I told you, you had to, would you?"

"No. I did it the first time. I won't do it a second."

"First one didn't count."

"I remember vividly standing at that altar with you by my side," I tell him.

"Sailor likes her."

"Sailor needs more friends."

"Hmm..." He nods his head. "She says she doesn't like outside people because she wouldn't want to lie to them about who I am."

"Everyone knows who you are," I inform him.

“Touché.” Reaching for my bowl of grapes, he looks to the side where Jerome’s coloring stuff is set up and nods to it. “She gone?”

“Yep.”

“For good?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“Hello, pretty ladies,” Lucas says as he enters, and I have to close my eyes and take a breath.

“I didn’t invite you,” I grumble.

“You didn’t invite me either,” Keir points out.

“Where is the blushing bride? She all better?” Lucas asks. He walks to the refrigerator, pulls out two bottles of water, throws one to Keir, then turns to me.

“I should cut off your fucking hand.” I shake my head.

“You could try...”

“He would, just so you know,” Keir warns Lucas. Then he says, “But the payback Lucas would deliver you would make you wish you never did.”

“You’ve missed out on two days of work. I had to do your stupid jobs, and your restaurants were not happy. One mentioned something about you trying a dessert,” Lucas complains. “The other swore at me in Spanish and told me to die in a ditch.” He laughs. “Took me a while to work out what he said.”

“I’ve built relationships with them. They pay, and we never have issues for a reason, Lucas.”

“Yeah, because you are a pussy.” Lucas laughs.

“You can hit him,” Keir tells me.

I reach for a knife and throw it, and Lucas ducks just in time as it hits the wall behind his head.

“Asshole. You almost ruined this pretty face.” He touches his face with his hands, making a show of it.

“Why do you even come here?”

“Because, cousin, you are my absolute favorite person...” he pauses, and I raise a brow at him, “... to annoy.”

“Back at you, asshole.”

Lucas takes the stool next to Keir.

“So what were you two lovers talking about before I arrived?”

“Marriage.”

“Oh, are you getting married again?” Lucas waggles his brows at me.

“No, never again.”

“If you say so.” Lucas laughs. “I see the way you watch her. What do we call her, then? Ex-wife, side piece, your whore?”

“Lucas, would you like Joey to call Chanel a whore?”

“I’d kill him. Only I’m allowed to say that to her, and usually, it’s when she is begging for my cock.”

“You both should leave.” I point to the door before I lose my shit.

“Sailor asked me to remind you about her girls’ night in. Can you tell Adora?”

“Does Sailor not have her number?”

He shrugs. “She does, but she wants *you* to remind her.”

I groan. “She can text her.”

“If you say so.”

“So, the kid?” Keir asks.

“What about him?”

“He is going to be an issue with Scott.”

“Scott has made no contact. Do you think he would be stupid enough to?” I ask.

“Yes. Yes, I do. He is the type of man who’s fixated on things, and he wants her. And in return, he takes the son. So he

has her by the balls, as they say.”

He’s right.

I know he is.

Seeing her be a mother is different. Nice.

She’s softer with him.

Whereas with me, she was always hard. Uncompromising.

Not always now, but I never saw any softness in the beginning.

It took a while, and I understand why.

When someone tries to take everything from you, you never want to give any of yourself.

I almost gave her everything, which in turn has put up all my walls.

I’m happy to just fuck.

As long as she leaves when we’re done.

Another relationship is not what I need right now.

TWENTY-ONE

ADORA

Somehow, I managed to avoid him all week. Instead, I've been busy looking for apartments close to the new shop, which is coming along nicely with the help of Merci. She did some setting up while I was sick, which I appreciate.

It's Friday night. Jerome is in bed, Bianca has gone for a shower, and I'm sitting here wondering what I should do.

"I'm going to head to bed," Bianca says, walking out of the bathroom.

"I might take a walk. Is it okay if I leave Jerome here with you?"

She waves me off. "Of course. He's an angel, and once that kid is asleep, he doesn't wake up." She's right. He's a heavy sleeper, that's for sure.

Grabbing my jacket, I call a cab. I don't intend to walk to my destination. And I know where I'm going. As soon as the cab arrives, I think about sending Joey a message.

He's been quiet.

Then again, so have I.

I put my phone away, not knowing what to say to him.

"Thanks for the sex and for looking after me. Let's do it again sometime."

But after.

How he asked me to leave.

That stung more than I'm willing to admit.

A lot more.

The cab stops in front of the dark alley. I've been here before, and these places don't bother me.

When I push the door open to the club, the lady behind the desk smiles at me. "Color?" she asks.

"Red." She scrunches up her nose at my choice but says nothing. I'm not here to fuck or watch anyone getting fucked. I'm here to see Jake. "Is Jake in tonight?" I ask.

"Oh, honey, you're dreaming. That man doesn't see anyone."

"I'm not looking to fuck him. I need to talk to him."

She steps back after she's attached my wristband.

"Can you at least tell him Adora is here? I'll wait at the bar."

"He won't come," she replies before returning to her stand and opening her phone. Sighing, I head down the stairs, noticing how packed the place is tonight. I try not to look around, but how can you help yourself? The surroundings are hard to ignore.

Everyone is wearing colored wristbands, each indicating their willingness to participate. Some want it more than others. Some are here for their partners. Some just to watch. Walking to the bar, I sit as the bartender approaches.

"What can I get you?"

"Water." He raises a brow but pours it anyway.

"Anything else?" he asks. I shake my head as the stool next to me is pulled out, and Jake takes a seat. *Just like I knew he would.*

"You here for Joey?"

"Umm... no. Is he here?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

He glances away, and I follow the direction of his eyes where Joey's at the other end of the bar, a woman talking to

him and leaning in way too close for my comfort. He hasn't noticed me since his back is to me, but he's easy for me to spot by the mess of curls on his head and the way he sits. Like he knows what he wants, and no one will change his mind.

"No, I came to see you. And didn't know how else to get hold of you," I tell him.

"Okay." His fingers tap on the bar. "What is it you need?"

"I need to know if you've heard anything. I know you have ears there."

He clicks his tongue. "I haven't been back since that night," he informs me.

"Okay, well... I also came here to thank you for what you did."

"It's not an issue. Your debt has been paid. Now, if that's all?" He rises from the stool, his knuckles rapping on the bartop once more. And like that sound caught his attention, Joey's head turns to look my way. He spots me instantly, his brows pulling together in confusion. The blonde next to him tries to touch his shoulder, but he moves before she can.

"Thank you again," I say, lifting my water and drinking it all before I stand. I don't look back as I walk straight up the stairs and smile at the lady behind the desk. "Thank you," I tell her.

"He saw you?" she asks, surprise in her voice.

"He did."

Her hands go to her hips, lips pulling down in a frown. "Why?"

I don't bother answering her—it's none of her concern. Striding out the door, I pull my coat tighter around me as I check my phone for the time before I hail a cab.

"Why are you here?" I don't even bother spinning around to look at Joey. Instead, I move closer to the road. "Adora."

"Yes?"

"Why are you here?" he asks again.

“Just wanted to say thank you to Jake.” I still don’t turn around, keeping my eyes on the road.

“He won’t fuck you.”

What the hell! That makes me furious. I spin on my heel to face him, and he’s directly behind me, so when I turn, my hands have to come up to steady myself so I don’t fall.

“I didn’t come here to fuck him,” I snarl. “And why wouldn’t he? You fuck me.”

“Jake is very particular.” He leans in, and I can smell the whiskey on his breath. “Plus, you are mine.”

“Am I?” I ask, my expression turning indignant. “You told me to leave.”

“We fuck. It’s what we do. It’s how we cemented our relationship in the first place. Or did you forget?”

My head shakes on its own.

This man is such an ass.

“You’re saying we bonded because we fucked?”

“Precisely.” He nods.

“I need to get home.”

“Walk with me,” he says, reaching for my hand and clasping it. Without thinking, I weave my fingers through his.

Giving me a gentle pull, he starts walking, and I follow a step behind him. “Why were you there?” he asks.

“I think the real question is... why were you there?” I bite back. “If I need to answer, you go first.”

“I go there to think and drink. Usually, no one bothers me. I like the music, and people know to fuck off.”

“So who’s the blonde?” I ask, pressing further. “You seem to have a thing for blondes.” I don’t look at him when I say it.

“I have a thing for bookstore owners, it would appear.”

“Hmm...” Swallowing hard, I keep my mouth shut.

“I have a thing for a woman who can pull me from my deepest thoughts and hate with one glance. Do you think that’s okay?”

“Is she blonde?” I snark, and his hand tightens around mine.

“Now you answer, why were you there?” he asks again.

“I wanted to see if he had heard anything.”

“And?” Joey stops, making me stop too.

“He said he hasn’t been back,” I answer, bringing my gaze to his.

“Why do you care?” I shake my head and turn away, unwilling to give him any more information. “Give me your phone,” he demands, holding out his hand.

“Why?”

“Darling, give me your phone.” I hate when he calls me that because it makes me want to do as he asks. I pull out my phone and hand it to him, knowing he’s not going to be happy with what he finds. However, he doesn’t let go of my hand as he unlocks it and finds exactly what he’s looking for. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?” he asks angrily.

“It’s not your problem. We aren’t married. We just fuck, remember?” I tell him with a shrug that only pisses him off more.

“It *is* my problem.” He growls and hands me back my phone. “You tell me if he contacts you again.”

“Sure.” I shrug again and turn away.

“Adora.” He pulls me back so he can see me, then turns me just as fast until my back hits the wall. The street is quiet, but it’s not dead. “My sweet, darling, feisty Adora.” The way he speaks has my knees weakening. His lips move in and touch my neck, and I let them, welcoming them with a tilt of my head. His free hand moves to the waistband of my pants, his fingers sliding back and forth, teasing my skin above the material.

“Joey.”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?”

“It seems I have an issue keeping my hands to myself when you’re around.”

“I can see that,” I say as his lips move back up and touch my lips. They’re soft, tender at first, until he starts to get more demanding. So controlling. His fingers slip beneath my waistband, and his body presses flush against mine. I can feel him hard against me, and I start to move, not even caring where we are.

He feels good.

Too good.

“Damn, get a room. Or better yet, give us a piece of that ass.” His body stays pressed against me, but he releases my hand. His lips leave mine, the taste of whiskey going with him. I drop my head into the crook of his neck as he looks at whoever is there. When I turn my head, I see Joey has a gun in his hand, raised at the two men standing to the left of us.

“One bullet or two? You pick.”

“Fuck, man, we didn’t mean anything.”

“One,” Joey counts and lets off a bullet. The ring echoes through the night, and the guys take off running. He slides the gun into his jeans as he looks back at me. “Where were we?”

“I’m going home,” I tell him but make no effort to move. He smirks, slides his fingers into my pants, and brushes over my clit. I moan out, feeling my wetness as he plays with me.

“Aww, there she is,” he croons, leaning in and biting my ear lobe. “Darling, tell me something.”

“Yeah...” is all I can manage to get out as he slides one finger in while his thumb rubs my clit in small motions.

“Do you think about me when you touch yourself?” he asks against my ear.

“Yes.” I don’t bother lying.

“How do you touch yourself?” His fingers start to move faster, and my hands grip him anywhere and everywhere. My head leans on his shoulder, and I bite.

“Last time, it was with the showerhead,” I tell him honestly. “The time before that was with my trusty rabbit.”

“You can show me next time,” he says. When I don’t respond, he stops, fingers still in me. “Darling.”

“Yes, show you, of course,” I mumble, my thighs clenching around his wrist.

“That’s a good girl.” His other hand grips my throat, pushing my head against the wall as his mouth finds mine again.

I’ve been fucked with fingers and mouths and cocks. And my favorite one of them all is any way *he* chooses to touch me.

Only Joey can make me come in public, standing on the street, after he almost killed someone.

Who even does that?

There could be cameras.

Other people walking by.

But all that disappears when his lips are hungry for mine, and his hands are on my pussy and touching everything just right.

When I come, our lips break apart, and he steps away. His are pink from my lip gloss.

And just like last time, he’s done with me now.

“Think it’s time we got you home.”

“Yeah...” I sigh, fixing my pants and pulling my jacket closer around me.

“I want to tell you something... very truthfully,” he says. I look down as he adjusts his cock, and when he catches me, he winks. “I’ve never, in my entire life, wanted, *needed* someone

as much as I want and need you. I don't trust the feeling. It's not healthy to want and need someone that much. Relationships like that ruin people. I'm already ruined. If I went down that path, I would be fucked-up for good."

His honesty smacks me in the face.

"It's why I can't want you." *Smack*. "It's also why I can't seem to keep my hands to myself when I'm near you. It's you I dream of. It's you I fantasize about. I hate it." *Smack*. "It would be easier to put a bullet in your brain. Make my life a shitload simpler. Lucas even offered to do it." He pauses, and I hold my breath, unsure what that means.

Would he let that happen?

I'll kill Lucas. The asshole. He's supposedly my friend.

"But I still couldn't do it."

And then, I can breathe again.

TWENTY-TWO

JOEY

“Your fucking wife almost kicked me in the dick yesterday,” Lucas grumbles.

“What?”

“You dumb? Your fucking wife. You told her I was going to kill her, you fuck.”

“Fuck, you are annoying. Go home. Or anywhere but here,” I say, groaning. “And why the fuck are you up so early?” I mumble, putting my head under the pillow.

“I didn’t see you yesterday after she threatened me, so here I am.” Something cold touches me, making me jump from the bed to find Lucas holding a glass in his hands.

“You asshole.” I bounce over the bed, but he’s already moving and gone before I can get to him. When I reach the stairs, he’s at the front door, then he flips me off before slamming the door shut.

Goddamn him! I walk to the kitchen to pour myself a coffee. If I could kill my cousin, I would. Fuck, he drives me crazy.

I get dressed, then head straight to the bookstore.

Adora is there with Merci, her head down while she sits on the floor sorting her books into piles. Her hair is cascading over her face, so I can’t fully see what she is looking at. She’s wearing shorts and a white shirt, totally relaxed and in her element.

“Joey,” Merci greets. She stands and bites her lip as she approaches me. “Hopefully, you can help. Your girl is stressed.”

“I’m not stressed,” Adora bites back, flicking her hair away from her face and looking at me.

It’s those eyes.

They hold me hostage and don’t want to let go.

No matter how hard I try.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“The supplier sent me the wrong order. These are meant to be dark romance, not sweet.” She points to the books in front of her. “We have sweet. What we need is dark. And when I called, all I got in reply was ‘*That’s what you ordered.*’ Asshole, that is *not* what I ordered.” She slams one of the books shut. “Dark romance is hot. I need dark romance.”

“I think you’re living one.”

“You are *not* funny, Joey Rossi.” She gives me the evil eye.

“Ohhh, full name. Now you’re in trouble. Anyway, I’m off to get some much-needed caffeine. Drinks for you both?” Merci asks.

Adora doesn’t answer, but I nod my head. Sitting down in front of Adora and moving the books to one side, I reach for her legs and pull her to me, so her thighs rest over mine and her body is in front of me.

“Why are you being nice?” she asks, but before I can answer, her phone dings. She goes ramrod straight at the sound.

“Who’s messaging you?” I ask, searching her face.

“No one.” She turns away from me.

“If it’s a man, you can tell him I plan to be between those legs. And if anyone else even dares, I’ll cut their fucking head off.”

“I wish you would cut his head off,” she mumbles, but I hear her and reach for her phone. Moving forward, she rests her head on my chest. I pull her ass in closer, so she is sitting on my lap like a koala.

Opening the text, I read the first one.

YOU ARE SUCH A SLUT.

YOUR FATHER WOULD BE PROUD.

AND HE GOES on for several more messages of nonsensical crap.

“Has he tried to call?”

“No,” she says into my chest. “You smell good.”

“Guys, no sex in here.”

“Too late,” Adora says to Merci as she walks in, holding drinks.

“Oh my gosh, really? You’ve fucked in here already? At least let us open first.” She shakes her head before she walks away.

“You need to change your number and get a new phone.”

“I ordered one, but it hasn’t arrived yet. I can’t not have a phone with Jerome. If he gets sick or something happens at school, I need to get him.”

The door opens, and we see her sister standing there, sunglasses covering her eyes and a look of sadness etched over her face. I can tell from Adora’s reaction she wasn’t expecting her.

“Abigail?” Adora asks, looking at her but not moving from my lap. Abigail removes her sunglasses to reveal a bruise blooming on her face. “What happened?”

“Your new family happened,” she says, glancing at me.

“Huh? Who did that?”

“Your wing woman. Is that what you call them?” I have no idea who she is referring to. “Piper.”

Adora turns to me, her eyes wide.

“What did you do to her?” I ask. Piper would not have hit her for no reason.

“I did nothing. I was assaulted by someone in your ‘family,’ and you both sit there and look at me as if I am the problem,” she screams. “I am *not* the problem.” Her hands go to her hips.

“She really is a spoiled brat,” I say quietly.

Adora gives me a soft laugh, which makes Abigail even angrier.

“Do you plan to do anything?” Her eyes are on her sister.

I reach for my phone and message Piper, who answers straight away.

“Take a seat,” I tell Abigail. “Merci.” Merci pops her head out and looks at us before she sees Abigail and offers her a wave. “Do you have a drink Abigail could have?” I ask her.

She nods, goes to the back of the shop, and comes back with a bottle of water, which she hands to Abigail.

“Are you okay?” Adora asks. I like that she doesn’t bother to move away from me. I can feel her body relaxing the longer she stays on my lap.

“No. Not that you care. What are you doing anyway? Is his cock stuck in you so you can’t move?” she snipes, and I roll my eyes. I fucking wish it were.

“No.” Adora goes to pull away, and at first, I squeeze her closer, but I do eventually let her go.

She walks over and sits with her sister as the door opens again, and Piper walks in, smiling.

TWENTY-THREE

ADORA

“You,” my sister seethes, standing and dropping her water all over my shoes. I step back and pick up the bottle. “It was her. This... *thing*.” Piper stands just inside the doorway with her arms crossed over her chest.

“*Thing*? Do you want another black eye, kid?” Piper asks.

I turn to Joey, who is silently watching everything.

“Piper, why did you hit her?” I ask, and my sister huffs.

“Because she’s a psycho. Why else would she do it?” Abigail swears. “I mean, look at her. She’s surrounded by men, and she wants to be one.”

“I do not want to be a man, thank you very much. I enjoy having a pussy.”

Merci laughs from behind me before she disappears into the back room.

“Why did Piper hit you?” I ask Abigail.

“Clearly, she has issues.”

“I’m really holding back from hitting her again,” Piper says to Joey.

Joey steps up then and stops next to me.

“Piper, keep your hands to yourself, and someone tell me what happened,” Joey orders. He points to Piper. “You first.”

“Your little sister her...” Piper says, looking to Abigail, “... was found snooping.”

“I was not!” Abigail screams. *Too bad I don't believe a word she says.*

“Then she opened up that trap of hers and wouldn't shut it, so I shut it for her,” Piper finishes.

“Abigail, what were you doing?”

“The only reason she isn't dead is because she's your sister,” Piper adds, looking at me.

“Thank you, Piper.”

“You're welcome.”

My sister throws her hands up. “You're thanking her? Are you for real right now? Thanking her for what?” She points to her eye. “For hitting me? Why would you thank her?”

“Calm down, Abigail.”

“Fuck. You. I thought I could rely on you. What a crock of shit that is.”

“Not everything is about you,” I snap at her. “Have you stopped to think for a second, not everyone's life revolves around you?”

“Yours should,” she screams back. “You took my father.”

“I wish I hadn't. I wish you had that scumbag back in your life so you would know what a piece of shit he was when he gave you again to the highest bidder. Maybe then you wouldn't be so disrespectful, you little fucking shit.” My hands are bunched up at my sides as I fume, staring at my sister, who looks back wide-eyed.

“Oh shit...” Piper says.

“If you want a father figure so badly, go to a club and find someone to call Daddy. I'm sure it won't be too difficult for you.” I turn and go straight into the back room, not wanting to deal with her a second longer. I have enough to handle with Scott still messaging me. The *not knowing* with him is what does my head in. He likes to wait until the perfect time to spring something on me. Scott is good at that. Hopefully, by the time he does, I will be ready.

Because, in reality, it's simply a matter of time.

"Are you okay?" Merci asks as she pulls me in for a hug. "I'm proud of you. That sister of yours is a little shit. I would've smacked her long ago." She laughs. I pull away, thanking her as Joey walks in. "I'll just be out there making sure Piper doesn't bury Abigail."

"Thanks." She waves me off, stepping past Joey and going out front.

"She needed to hear that, even if it was painful for you," he says, sliding his hands into his pockets.

"I'm her only family," I remind him. "It's why I looked after her. I took away her other family."

"No, you did what was right. I would have done the same, but my brother got to our father first," he tells me. "Just don't kill your sister... you may regret it."

"I won't."

"You might. Feisty Adora, who doesn't care about anything, is coming back."

"No, she isn't," I argue.

Joey's hands land on my shoulders, soothing the tense muscles there. "I know how to calm her down if that's what you want?" His head nods to my pants.

"No, you are not going down there."

"What about with my mouth?" he asks with a slight smirk. "It's the respectable thing to do, to ease you from your anger." His hand trails down my arm, then over my hip, to cup me there.

"You like to use sex," I tell him.

I'm so tired of this.

"It's what we're good at."

"You keep saying that..." I say, shaking my head. "Have you thought about what I want? Maybe I don't want just

sex...” I pause, and his eyes dart over my face before I continue, “Maybe *I* want more.”

“You never wanted to get married. What’s changed? You should be happy.” His hands leave my body and fall to his sides.

I feel the loss immediately.

“Life changes...” I whisper.

A scream erupts, jolting me, and I push past Joey to get out front.

Merci is holding Piper back as she swears at a smirking Abigail.

“I should put a bullet in her head.” Piper growls.

“No, you will not,” Joey states, coming up behind me. He walks over to Piper, grabs her arm, and looks back at me. “You handle your family... I’ll handle mine.” He nods to the door, and they both walk out, leaving Merci and me standing there with my sister, who is still smirking at Piper’s back.

“Why were you snooping?” I ask, my question coming out more like a demand. “And where?”

“I was at Joey’s. No one answered, so I tried to break in.”

“Piper said you went to Joey’s first, then hers, and she caught you looking through the window,” Merci adds. “Just stating what Piper said while you were in there,” Merci tells me, her brows lifted. “I’ll leave it to you.”

“Why?” I ask my sister.

“Where are you living?” she questions me. Her demeanor softens the slightest bit as she takes a breath. “I went to his mother’s, and she said you weren’t there any longer.” She leans in, and I lean back. “So, where are you staying?”

“Why does it matter? If you need me, call me.”

“You don’t answer your phone.”

“I do. It’s on me right now.” I tap my back pocket. “What’s the *real* issue?”

“I hate it here. I thought I would like it, but I want to go back.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? Just like that?” she asks, her voice rising again. “Why that easy?”

“I’m not going to hold you against your will somewhere you don’t want to be. You chose to be here. So, here we are.”

“Yeah, well, it was stupid. No one is nice here.”

“Maybe you should look at yourself. Maybe it’s you,” I reply, keeping my eyes on hers. “Have you thought about that?”

“I’m pretty much perfect.” I want to laugh at her words, but I think she believes them.

“Okay, well, I think you should maybe see someone.”

“I’m fine,” she says, touching her face.

“No, I meant a psychiatrist.” Her mouth opens in shock like she can’t believe the words that left my mouth.

“Maybe you need to too,” she bites back. “He’s going to come for you. You know that, right? And your little boyfriend won’t be able to save you.”

“I think it’s time you left, Abigail.” I nod to the door. I can’t listen to her dribble anymore.

“Do you plan to show me out?” she asks.

“If I have to, I will kick your ass out. Now, I am asking nicely. Please leave.”

“I’m not leaving because you asked. I’m leaving because I have a hair appointment, and now I have to cover this black eye.” She whimpers as she touches the blackening bruise.

“Have a good day, Abigail.” I hold the door open for her, and she slides on her sunglasses and walks out without saying another word. Before I can close the door, I notice Sailor approaching, so I wait at the door and usher her inside. She takes in all the work we’ve done and smiles.

I like her. She has this way about her where she makes you feel welcome. I'm not really sure how to describe it. Sailor is different from Chanel, who is nice, but you know she would eat you alive if tested.

"This is so cute." Her hands run along the bookshelves I picked out. I went for a different style than last time and chose a sixties theme. The bookshelves are old, big, and beautiful. And *heavy*. "OMG, look at that phone." She walks over to a rack and picks up an old phone, putting it to her ear. "I haven't seen one of these for ages... it even has the rotary dial." She puts her finger in the hole and starts spinning it to the correct numbers.

Merci walks out then and says, "Hello," then she asks, "Crazy sis left?"

I nod, and she whistles.

"We all have them. A crazy one, I mean. Mine happens to be my boyfriend." Merci laughs. "Though, he's better now."

"Mine is my husband," Sailor says, smiling. "Actually, when I think about it that title belongs to Lucas. Poor Chanel."

"I don't think she thinks *poor Chanel*." Merci laughs.

"Anyway, I came to invite you both to girls' night at my house." She smiles at me.

"I have Jerome."

"He is welcome to come. The kids stay upstairs with the nanny, and we stay downstairs, drinking."

"I don't kn—"

"She's in." Merci throws her arm around my shoulder. "I'll pick her up."

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow night. I know, late notice, but when you don't work on schedules you just try to fit things in when you can."

"I have the shop."

"We'll all help."

“She’s trying to get out of it. But, girl, you need it. If anyone needs a girls’ night, it’s you.” Merci nudges my shoulder. “We can celebrate all the kickass work we’ve done here so far to prepare to open next week.”

“I do appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” I smile at her, my chest filling with warmth. “Okay. What can a few drinks hurt?”

“Your head, for one,” Sailor says, chuckling.

“Or your legs. You know, when you open them to people they shouldn’t be opened to,” Merci adds, making me laugh.

“Yeah, that needs to stop.”

“Does it, though?” Sailor asks, raising a brow.

“It does, I think.”

“See, you don’t even know. And Joey likes you. A lot. You both are confused, and all great love stories start off with some confusion.”

“Or they end in destruction,” I add with a groan.

“Yeah, but that’s what’s exciting about it... the make-up sex. How much make-up sex have you two been having?” Sailor asks.

“Too much.” I bite my lip. “Yet I still can’t say no.”

“Power of the dick,” Merci states.

“Power of the dick, lips, mouth, tongue,” Sailor adds. “Lollipops...”

“Lollipops?” we both ask, to which she blushes.

“Oh my God, you fuck with lollipops? Like, does he stick it in? What about infections?” Merci asks, visibly cringing. “I used to be a sex worker, so I’m familiar with these things.” She pauses, her nose scrunched up. “But lollipops? Wow.”

“Yeah.” Sailor sighs, a small smile on her lips.

“Ain’t no lollipop going up my pussy,” I add.

“Don’t knock it till you try it.”

“Try it? Nope,” I say.

Merci nods her head in agreement. “I’m with her. Keep your shit away from my very special zone,” Merci adds. “Who knew Miss Sailor was freaky? You learn something new every day.”

“I’m not, I swear.” She holds up her hands. “Well, there was that one time when he...” She looks away, and I know she is thinking about something really filthy.

“We can discuss tomorrow night. Want us to bring anything?” I ask.

“Yeah, yourselves. Keir did an alcohol run today and stocked up the bar. The boys are all working, but I managed to get Piper to stay with us. That was an effort.”

“I bet,” Merci says. “And Chanel, will she meet us there? I can call her if you haven’t.”

“Yeah, she flies in tomorrow and is coming straight from work.”

“Tomorrow,” they say, smiling.

And I’m already wondering how I can get out of it.

TWENTY-FOUR

“We aren’t going there,” I tell Lucas as he drives.

“Why the fuck not? I’m not driving your ass around because you don’t want to see your wife.” I go to speak again, and he cuts me off. “Ex-wife. I don’t give a fuck what you call her. Fuck buddy...”

“You can drop me off first.”

“No. I’m covered in blood, and I need to shower and fuck my wife,” Keir says, making us all shut up. “She won’t stop sending me pictures of her tits. What the fuck is wrong with her? Like I need an excuse to fuck her.”

We all stay silent.

Keir isn’t one to open up about his relationship. It’s usually just him and Sailor, with us on the outside looking in.

“And you all stink and need showers as well,” he tells us. “Come in, collect your women, and tell all the others to fuck off while I take mine.”

“It’s your house,” I remind him.

“Yeah, that’s why it’s your job to kick them out.” Keir looks at me, and Lucas just smirks.

“Lucas can do it.”

“No, Lucas can’t speak to women to save his life. You’ll do it.”

The car comes to a stop, and we all get out. When the front door opens, we hear loud music. They’ve been drinking and

doing God knows what for hours. Keir said our mother took all the kids back to her place to give the girls a break, which explains why the music is so loud.

Keir is the first to enter the house and goes straight to the girls. They are laughing, holding drinks in their hands. Meanwhile, Adora sits on the couch, watching them, her phone glued to her hand. Keir stalks right over, reaches out, and picks up his wife.

“Eww... you have blood on you!” she screams.

“Which you will help wash off.” We hear him say this as they leave.

Piper takes us in, a sour look plastered on her face. “I missed out on the action. You could have called.”

“We had it handled.”

“Yeah, yeah, assholes.” She picks up her bag and stomps out the door. Chanel and Merci are drunk and giggling. Lucas walks over and both of them put an arm over his shoulder.

“I’m a one-woman man now, Merci.” Merci giggles harder, and Chanel blushes as they walk out. They say goodbye to Adora but are too drunk to see her. To notice that something is wrong.

I’m sober as fuck, and I know. She stands, grabs her purse, and forces a smile when she sees me. “Time to go home.”

“Did you drive?” I ask.

“No, I’ll call a cab.” She moves to walk past me, but I grab her arm, stopping her. Her eyes lock on mine, and sadness is etched in them that I wish I could wipe away.

“Did you have fun?” I ask.

“I did, thanks for asking.”

“So what’s wrong then?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“All the other girls are drunk, and here you are, clutching your phone with a death grip, watching them instead of joining

in.”

“Piper wasn’t drunk.”

“Piper was hoping to get a call from us,” I point out.
“What’s your excuse?”

“I got a call,” she says quietly. “And a message.”

“Come back with me. I need to shower, then you can tell me about it.”

“That’s not a good idea,” she says, pulling her arm free.

“It is.”

“It’s not. I will only end up fucking you. And right now, that’s the last thing I want to do.”

Well, wasn’t that a slap in the face?

“Why don’t you want to fuck me?” I growl, leaning in.

“Don’t you have blood on you too?” she questions as she steps away. “Just leave it tonight, Joey. I want to sleep.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

“Thank you.” She wraps her arms around her body as we leave, which is unlike her. I know something is wrong, and I’m pissed she won’t share whatever it is with me.

But, then again, I guess I’ve lost that right.

“Have you heard from Scott?” I ask as we stand out front. The streets are quiet with only a few cars driving by here and there.

“Yes.”

I knew it.

“Is he the reason you’re upset?” I push.

She turns, faces me, and steps closer. “Stop it,” she bites out, determination in her voice. “Stop it, Joey. Just stop it. You hurt me more than anyone. You know that. So stop it.”

“I wasn’t trying—”

“No, that’s the thing. You weren’t, were you?” She shakes her head. “Not Joey, who doesn’t know what he wants, except that he wants to fuck me. Not Joey, who uses a sex club as an escape.” I can feel her distancing herself from me, and she rolls her eyes. “You always aren’t trying, are you? You’re just being you.”

“Does me being around you affect you?”

Her hands go up in the air. “Yes, because it hurts my fucking heart, Joey. All this back and forth.”

“It can stop, then,” I tell her, feeling urgent. The last thing I want is to stop being with her in the only way I can, but I’ll say just about anything to get her to stay. “We can stop.” The cab pulls up, and she takes a step closer to it.

“It *has* to stop. We both need to move on. This isn’t helping. I’ll pay you for the bookstore. I’ll send Merci over with the money. Do not come in again.” She opens the cab door and slides in. Not once does she glance back at me.

I stand there like a fool, watching her go.

Wondering if I am doing the right thing.

The last time we tried, it ended terribly.

This time, I was hoping for the opposite.

I guess we can’t all get what we want.

And I want her—there is no denying that. I’m just not sure I’m ready for everything she brings. When it was just her, it was different.

Now, it’s not just her I have to think about.

And I would never want to give false hope to a child.

TWENTY-FIVE

ADORA

The good news, I've found a place close to the bookstore, and Bianca has been awesome helping me move. She got me a couch, even though I told her I could get one myself. Her words were, "It's a housewarming present." The couch was super expensive, and now I'm not sure I want to eat on it. Jerome is in love with his school and also in love with Bianca, who helps out more than she should.

But I can't say no to the help because she is one of the only people I trust with him.

I haven't heard from my sister in weeks. For all I know, she's gone back to Italy.

Joey has made no contact as I asked of him. I sent Merci over with some money, and she came back empty-handed. So I assumed he took it. I didn't ask, to be honest.

And life, well, life is good.

Apart from Scott.

Who won't stop calling and sending me messages.

I glance back at my phone at the video he sent.

It's of Joey and me that night in the street. How he got it, I don't know, but it has put an uneasy feeling in my stomach ever since.

What if he's watching me?

Why hasn't he tried anything?

It's only a matter of time.

He's fucking with my head, and it's working.

I'm always looking over my shoulder, wondering when he will show up or what is going to happen.

"Holy shit." I see Merci's eyes widen as she holds out her phone. "Um, why are you sending me a sex tape?" she asks, her jaw slack.

My brows draw together as I have no idea what she's talking about.

My phone starts ringing, Sailor's name popping up on the screen, and I answer it.

"Is there a reason you're sending me a video of you and Joey doing it on the street?"

"What?" My nerves run wild as I walk over and grab Merci's phone to see that it's the same video Scott sent me. When I look at the number, it's one I don't recognize. I press call, and Sailor waits on my phone as it rings, and rings, and rings.

"So..."

"Shit! Keir got it too," I hear Sailor say. "I gotta go."

"Do you think..." I can't even finish the thought out loud.

"That we all got it? Yes," she says, finishing for me. "Who would send that?"

I shrug when really, I know damn well who sent it. And now I really don't know what to do.

"Joey wouldn't. Well, I would hope not since he's in it."

"We didn't have sex."

"It sure looks like you are," Merci says while watching it again.

"Will you stop? That's embarrassing."

"Oh, shit, sorry. I'll delete it." And she does, straight away. "Joey probably got it too."

"Yeah..." My phone starts ringing again, and Joey's name flashes on my screen this time. "I guess Joey got it," I say, my

stomach flipping as I press ignore on his call.

“You aren’t going to answer?” she asks.

“No, and I need to leave before he shows up. Which I know he will.” I reach for my things. “You good to close the store today?” She nods as I walk out in a rush.

Finally, I arrived at Jerome’s school and pick him up early, and we go on a play date. We eat ice cream and go to the park before we finally head back to our new apartment.

Joey doesn’t know where I live, and I asked Bianca not to tell him, which she promised she wouldn’t.

As soon as we get home, we cook homemade pizzas. As I check my phone for what feels like the millionth time, a knock comes on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Jerome says, taking off.

“Hold on,” I call after him, but I can already hear the door opening.

“Daddy!”

Everything freezes.

My body locks tight.

Then the first thing I do is reach for a knife and slide it into my pants before I walk out to see Scott standing there, holding Jerome in his arms.

“We’re cooking pizzas. You want some?” Jerome asks him with a big smile.

“Yes, of course. Think Mummy will share?” he asks sweetly.

Jerome looks back at me, and I give him a fake smile and nod my head.

“How about you go wash your hands?” I tell Jerome.

Scott puts him down and steps in, shutting and locking the door behind him. His eyes scan the apartment as I walk up to him and reach for the knife in my pants. I pull it out and hold it to his throat—the asshole doesn’t even flinch.

“You and knives.” He tsks. “Do you plan to slit my throat while my son is in the other room?” he asks, nodding at Jerome.

“Yes,” I reply without hesitation. “Just as you had no issues putting your hands on me.” I press the knife deeper into his skin.

“It’s sharp, that one.”

I see blood start to trickle from beneath the knife’s blade.

“Mummy.” I pull the knife away as Jerome runs out. That was my first mistake because I hide it behind my back when I turn, which let Scott take it from me, and I feel it press into my back.

“You can live without a kidney,” he whispers into my ear and presses the knife harder. It cuts through my clothes, and I feel the stab instantly. I try to hide the cry as Scott speaks to Jerome, “Go and check on your pizza.”

Jerome happily runs off again.

I push away from Scott, and he smirks while he holds out the knife, which has both our blood on it now. “This is yours.” I snatch it back. “Remember that I let you live.”

“Remember that I did the same for you,” I tell him. “Especially considering you should be six feet under.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen anytime soon.”

“Oh, and why is that?”

He looks around, stepping in closer. “We have Bianca, thanks to your sister.” He smiles, and that look in his eyes has my blood running cold.

“My sister?”

“She came straight back to tell me where you were when Bianca refused to tell us even after we cut her. Strong old lady, that one. But she’s old-school and had your address written down on a notepad.” His smile grows evilly. “So, ta-da, here I am. That’s an American word, right? I used it correctly?”

“You need to leave.”

“You want her dead?” he challenges.

“Keir and Joey would never allow you to kill their mother.”

“Oh, are you talking about the one you let violate you in public?” He sneers, referring to that video he sent of Joey and me.

“You’ve been spying on me?”

“That’s easy to do when you try to fuck in public like a whore. Why weren’t you that much of a whore for me?” he taunts, his gaze drifting over my body. I want to cut him open and see his insides. But Jerome calls us, and I clutch the knife in my hand, wanting to put it to use on his flesh. “We should tend to our son before you decide to use that and scar him for life.” He pushes past me and goes into the kitchen.

I loved this apartment. It was something I had for the first time for just me and my son. Now, I know all I will see is Scott tainting it by walking through the door.

Being in my kitchen.

Being in my space.

I hate him.

People as vile as him shouldn’t be allowed to live.

As I move toward the kitchen, the doorbell rings.

“You should get that, honey!” Scott calls out. I turn the knife in my hand and open the door to find a lady nervously wringing her hands.

“*Who are you?*” I seethe, and her head drops, eyes on the floor.

“Scott said I had to come. I’m a nanny. Magina,” she says in a small voice.

“Let her in. We need her so we can talk.”

“You think I’ll let your whore look after my son?” I say through gritted teeth. “Think again.”

Scott steps up behind me, and his hand reaches up and grips my neck, squeezing as he leans down to my ear. “Let her the fuck in, or I won’t be kind. I’ll slit your throat right here and now.”

That’s it.

That. Is. It.

I turn my attention to the nanny, whose eyes are still downcast. Scott has not let me go yet.

“You should go.” I slam the door in her face, which makes Scott squeeze even harder.

“Bad decision. Whore.” He moves, and I know his plan before he even does anything. He plans to hit me with his fists. When he pushes me forward, I manage to break his grip by ducking, and when I turn, the knife goes straight into his stomach. “Fuck,” he says on a grunt. His hands release me, and he looks down to his stomach, where the knife’s handle protrudes from his flesh.

I look up at him, shocked that I had done that.

“Never put your hands on me again,” I say as I step up to him.

That was a mistake.

“I am not yours, never have been. You asshole.” I go to step around him, but what I said only made him angrier. His hand shoots out and captures me, slamming my back into the wall next to the door. With his other hand, he opens the door, and the nanny is still standing there. She takes one look at us, and her eyes go wide.

“Go and occupy my son,” he commands. She looks at me, but Scott is blocking off my air, so I can’t speak. “Now!” She hurries past us, and those eyes that hold so much lust and rage stare back at me. “Silly, silly girl.”

I try to speak, but he applies more pressure.

“I was coming to bring you back. You would have eventually seen the error of your ways and realized I’m the

only one who's right for you. It's why your father gave you to me in the first place."

I reach up and scrape at his hands with my fingernails, but he doesn't budge. Then, lifting my knee, I hit his stomach. It misses the knife but makes him take a step back.

"You were always so feisty. It's one of the reasons I had to have you. Your father said you couldn't be tamed but look what we did. We tamed you for a short period of time."

"I was pregnant, you asshole."

"We can always make you pregnant again." My eyes go wide at his words. "You didn't want kids but look how much you love Jerome. It was a good choice."

I don't argue with him.

Jerome will always be my best decision.

That does not mean I want to do it again, though.

Especially not with Scott.

"You will stitch me up because if you don't, you will never see your son again. Magina has strict orders to hurt Jerome if you kill me."

I shake my head before responding, "You wouldn't hurt our son."

He leans in. "Don't underestimate my want for you, Adora. I will do anything if it involves you." A chill runs up and down my spine.

"Remove your hands." He drops them, and I touch my neck.

"My marks always look so good on you," he states, looking at my neck before he glances down at his stomach. "Now, get this fucking knife out of me and stitch me up."

I push past him and go straight for the bathroom, where the first-aid kit is stored in the cupboard. He doesn't follow me, just stands at the door, watching.

“Your room?” he asks, nodding to the door next to the bathroom. I nod, and he opens the door, pulling off his shirt before lying on it. As soon as I’m standing before him again, I pull the knife out none too gently. He grunts loudly before his hands grip the bed. “Stitch it.” Getting out the suture tray and supplies, I try to stop my hands from trembling. “Why do you have to disobey me? We could be happy.” I feel his eyes on me.

“I don’t love you. I have never loved you.”

“Not every relationship needs love,” he says simply. “Just obedience.”

I want to laugh, but Jerome calls my name, and Scott smiles.

TWENTY-SIX

“Yo, did you all see this?” Lucas steps into Keir’s dining room, where we’re all seated for dinner. He hands his phone to Keir, who studies it, and then lifts his head to me.

“Have you seen her?” he asks, and I know the ‘her’ he’s referring to is Adora.

“No, why?”

“Check your phone.” I pull it out of my pocket and see a message from an unknown number. When I press play on the attached video, I see myself, at night, with Adora in front of me. My hands slide down her pants as I push her against the brick wall.

“What the fuck?” My gaze shoots up to Lucas, who is smiling. “You’re sending out videos of me with Adora?” I shake my head, my jaw tight. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” My hands are clenched, and Lucas starts to laugh.

“As if. Though, if you want to send me some for my spank bank—” Chanel hits him, and he rolls his eyes before apologizing. “It was sent to me too, fuckhead.”

“Why would someone send you this?” Keir asks.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Keir excuses everyone, but I don’t move. Finally, when it’s just the two of us, he speaks, “You aren’t doing your job...” my brows scrunch together, “... as well as you need to be, I should have added. You’re distracted by her.” I go to speak, but he holds up his hand to stop me. “You are, and I get it. I’ve

been distracted by a woman before. You love her, Joey, so fucking marry her.”

“Tried that.” My phone beeps again. I look down at the unknown number flashing. Opening up the message, I see a picture of my mother. Instantly, my chest constricts.

“Keir?” I ask slowly. *This could be fake.* “Where is our mother tonight?”

“She didn’t show,” he says in a voice that makes my back straighten.

“Why?”

“No idea. She didn’t call, so I figured she was sleeping.” He shrugs.

“Call her.” He does it straight away without asking why. When she doesn’t answer, I slide my phone over to him.

His eyes go wide, and he shoots to his feet. “Get your fucking shit. *Now.*” He’s up and gone. I quickly reach out to a contact who is an expert hacker to see if they can find who sent these messages or even where they’re from.

Lucas walks back in just as Keir’s grabbing two guns and sliding them into a shoulder holster.

“Where are we going?” he asks, ready to go. No need to tell him why. He’s always ready for a kill.

“Where does she live?” Keir asks.

I know he isn’t referring to our mother, so I rattle off the address, the one I am not meant to know, as another message comes through.

“Who was that?” Keir pushes.

I show him my phone. This one is a picture of Adora asleep on a bed.

“Should have killed him when I had the chance,” I mutter, grinding my teeth.

“That’s not how things work, and you know it,” Keir says.

“Now look at where we are. This fucker has my wife and my mother.”

“Not your wife. But definitely *our* mother.”

“How do we know it’s him?” Lucas asks, and we both turn to him.

“It’s him.” I growl.

Lucas shrugs his shoulders.

My phone buzzes, and I read the text out loud.

“Seems Scott went through customs last night.”

“Maybe you should have killed him,” Lucas says.

“No shit,” I add.

We load into the car and peel away from the curb. Piper is behind us in another car with a few other men as an address comes through on my phone.

It isn’t Adora’s address.

It’s our mother’s.

“It’s saying Mom’s home,” I tell them.

“At her apartment?” I show him the text that shows an address.

“Fuck.” Usually, we would send someone else in first, but in this case, it’s our mother, so Keir and I are first through the door of our mother’s apartment. All the lights are off, but when he flicks them on, we see blood on the floor. Stepping farther in, a soft moan is heard, and everyone stops breathing to listen. Walking over to the couch, I see her curled up in a ball, her face and body covered in blood.

My mother.

Whoever the fuck did this is going to die a slow, painful death. This woman may be hard, but she loves hard and is always fair.

“Mom.” My voice is soft as I approach her.

She opens one eye, the other swollen shut from bruising. “He wants her,” she croaks before I put my hands under her legs and lift her off the couch.

“Where are you going?”

“To the fucking hospital.”

“Put her down. We have our own doctors,” Keir orders, but I don’t listen and carry her out anyway.

Lucas moves to hold the door open as Keir follows behind, knowing full well I’m not about to do as he says right now.

“She needs a doctor. *Now.*”

“Fuck.” He walks up and puts out his arms.

“Give her to me, and I’ll take her. You and Lucas go to Adora.”

I pass our mother to him, and we make our way back to the car while Keir places Mom gently in the car, and Piper climbs in to go with him.

“So, looks like we are off to kill your wife’s husband. And in case you were confused, that’s not you.”

“You should have gone with Keir.”

“I don’t do well in hospitals.” He smiles. “Something about all that sterile stuff makes me cutty.”

“*You make me cutty.*”

“See, we have so much in common. This is a bromance I never expected to happen. Two bros off to kill another bro, who just so happens to have fucked your wife.” I groan at his words. “But you know... not your real wife, your fake wife.”

“Lucas.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Okay, on one condition.”

“What?”

We get into the car.

“I get to perform your wedding ceremony.”

“Fuck no.”

“Okay, well... did you ever hear the nursery rhyme, “Ring Around the Rosie”?” he asks, and that’s just about all I can handle.

“Fuck, whatever.”

“Cool! I’ll get my minister license, and you two can fuck and get married again. Maybe this time, your wife won’t look like she needs to puke when you’re near her.”

“She didn’t want to—” Then I remember, *yes, she did.*

“Yeah, this time, she will want those dirty hands all over her body.”

“For God’s sake, Lucas, shut up!”

TWENTY-SEVEN

ADORA

After I stitched him up, we went out and pretended to be nice to each other. The nanny, Magina, has hardly said a word, except when spoken to by Scott.

He has her under his thumb, just the way he likes them. I guess that's what pissed him off about me. Not being able to have me like that.

That was never going to happen.

I often wonder if my circumstances were different, would I have been like that? I don't know hers well enough to judge her, but that doesn't mean I want her around my son if she can be ruled as easily as that.

"Give your mother a kiss and go to bed."

Jerome is sitting next to me at the table. When I look down at Scott's phone on the kitchen table between us, I see his screen saver is a picture of me lying on the bed.

"Do you like it?" he asks, noticing I've seen it. "I sent it to your side piece. What do you think he will think of another man sending him a photo of you?"

Magina stands, and I feel her looking between us.

"Take him to his room and leave," I tell her.

She nods, and Jerome kisses me before he goes to his room. He's none the wiser, and I'm as thankful for that as I am terrified.

"It's good to be alone again, isn't it, sweetheart?"

No, no, it's not. But I don't want my son here either.

"You made this situation worse than it needed to be," he says. Reaching for the wine he poured himself, he also takes a lot of pain medication.

"You did that all on your own," I inform him.

"How about you have a glass of wine with me?" He gets up, goes to my cupboard like he owns the place, and pours me a generous glass. I hear the door close and see Magina walking out of Jerome's room. "Sit. You can have one too," Scott tells her. She sits beside me, and Scott walks back with two glasses of wine, handing one to each of us before he sits back down.

"Why did you choose this shithole anyway?" He looks around with disdain before his eyes fall on me. "You were brought up better than this. This place is..." he pauses, and I couldn't give a shit how he's going to finish that sentence, "... beneath you."

"Is Bianca okay?" I ask.

"The mother?"

I nod, my fingers tightening on my glass.

"She'll live."

"I can't say the same for you," I say under my breath. He hears me and chuckles as he looks to Magina, who hasn't touched her wine.

"Drink." She does, and he looks at me. "Drink."

"I'm not in the mood."

"Drink!" He growls before he slams his hands on the table. I lift the glass, not wanting him to wake Jerome. "Was that so hard?" I say nothing. "The old bat, though, she is a tough cookie. I guess you have to be, raising boys. It's why I knew you would be a good mother to our son... you're also a tough cookie." I take another sip of the wine as he talks. Magina does the same.

He studies us closely. "You two are so different. You would be perfect if you listened like Magina does. Is it really

that hard for you to listen?”

“I am not your dog, so yes, it is.”

“Even an animal needs to be put in line, correct?”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” Lifting his wine, he takes a long sip and smiles. “Seems those men work fast.” He glances at his phone. I want to smile because he doesn’t know who he has messed with. “Not that I expected them to take long.” He fixes his gaze on me. “Time to drink up now, sweetheart.” When I don’t, his fist slams against the table again, and I lift the drink and finish it off, placing the empty glass back on the table.

“You trying to loosen me up?” I ask, my tone taunting. “That’s never going to happen around you.”

“No, I just need you passed out so you won’t try to stab me again, sweetheart.” He motions to the wine and nods his head. I stand and start to feel lightheaded.

“You...” I trail off.

“Yes, me. Did you really think he would come here and save you? That I wouldn’t be more clever than him? We’re talking about me here, sweetheart.”

Oh, how I hate that word leaving his lips or any word that leaves his mouth. In fact, it would be better if I cut his tongue out and sliced up his whole body while I was at it.

Way better.

“Why, my dear, you look a little...” he lifts his glass and smiles, “... sleepy.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t. You’re just confused. That boy confused you.”

“He’s a man. And he fucks better than you do, that’s for sure.”

His chair shifts back quickly, scraping along the floor, and then falls over at my words. Magina doesn’t even flinch,

already asleep with her head on the table.

I expect his hand before the blow connects. It hits me hard. Knocking me over, my hands barely catching me as I fall to the floor.

“You will not speak of him while I am here.”

“Why? You don’t like to know that you suck at fucking? That’s why I went to women to fulfill my needs until that man touched me?” I taunt, even through my haziness and laughter, I turn to lie on my back. He kicks my side, and my eyes close in pain. I can’t fight it any longer, and it simply hurts to keep them open. I feel his breath near my neck as he lowers.

“I’ll find him and bring him to you in pieces. Tell me which one was the best to fuck.”

I have something to say to him. I do. I swear. But I can’t seem to work out how to say it. My eyes get heavier, and I hear his footsteps fading away before I finally pass out.

SLOWLY AND GROGGILY, I return to consciousness.

What? Where? My head is a mess.

Tired is an understatement right now. But I know I shouldn’t be sleeping. Yet, when I open my eyes, I see the sun shining down on my body. How is that possible? The last thing I remember is falling asleep on the floor while Scott was here.

Oh my God.

Scott.

Jerome.

I try to sit up, but my stomach hurts, as does my face. My fingers dig into gravel, and the air is crisp as it breezes over me.

“About time you woke up.” I turn to find Scott standing there, surveying the area. “I bought this place,” he says, looking back at me. “When I did, I didn’t think *‘what a great*

place to hide a body,’ but now that I am here, with you...” He pauses, his cruel gaze boring into me. When he smiles, a shiver runs through me from head to toe. “Do you remember when we met?” he asks much too nicely. “I knew then that I wanted you.”

“That’s sick.”

“Is it? You were happy to marry me.”

“I was not happy.” I fight back.

“It’s a dump, this place. Just over there, if you step far enough, you will never come back. It’s a hole. Used for rubbish. It’s so deep that the rubbish will drown you as soon as you land.”

“Do you plan to throw me in it?”

“I’m not quite sure, but I think so,” he says, walking over to me. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a photograph, and then throws it to the ground. I look at it, confused. “It’s your mother, in case you have forgotten.”

“I know what she looks like,” I reply.

“I met her when I was around your age,” he starts, striding away from me.

I try to move but can’t. My body feels heavy, my hands are aching, and my head is throbbing.

“She was a beauty, just like you.” He turns back to me. “I wasn’t as powerful then as I am now.”

“You aren’t powerful,” I tell him. “Just delusional.” I don’t hold back from saying what I want to him because I know in the end, he will kill me anyway. It’s why I am here. He may as well get all my hate and loathing before it is all said and done.

“She told me she loved me before she went off and got with your father.” His eyes are watching me for emotion, but I can’t give him any. He doesn’t deserve them.

“So you took her daughter?” I scoff. “You do realize how fucked that sounds, right?”

How did I not know any of this before?

Why was this a secret?

It just proves how fucked-up he really is. And that's saying a lot considering who I am.

"No, I didn't take you for that reason. I stayed away, even when she ran off, and your father married someone else. I knew your father despised you because of your mother. You see, the truth is, she broke his heart, and Abigail's mother hated you because you were the product of what she hated the most... your mother."

"How do you even know all of this?" I ask, finally climbing to my feet.

"I've always known and was pleasantly surprised when you killed your father."

"Did I make you proud?" I ask sarcastically.

"You did. I went looking for you. What I didn't expect was for you to run to another country, hiding right under the Rossis' noses."

"Better sometimes to be in plain view."

"Yeah, how did that work out for you?" He walks back to me and crouches down to get in my face. "They killed all my men. It's just you and me now."

"What?"

"I got you out just in time, and my men paid the price."

"Joey," I whisper, realization dawning on me. He came for me.

Scott slaps me across the face.

"Yes, that low life."

"They didn't pay the price because of him. That was because of you," I point out. He pushes me back into the dirt, my hands scraping against the gravel as I catch myself.

"Your mother at least knew when to keep her mouth shut." He bends down close. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone before."

“You shouldn’t,” I reply. “I want to know nothing else that leaves those lips except where Jerome is. Now... *where is my son?*”

“I left him.”

“You what?” I scream, scrambling upright and standing.

“Do you think that man of yours will help him? Or is he a monster too? From what I have heard, all the Rossis are. They’re even worse than me.”

“They may be to others, but to me, you are the devil,” I point out.

“I’m half of something you love with all your heart, Adora. Remember that.”

“I can never forget.”

His phone starts ringing, and he glances at the screen before he slides it back into his pocket. I scan the area to see where I can run, but I know he will catch me, so I give up. I feel weak, and I need to find a way to get out of here.

“I killed her.” His words bring my eyes back to him. “She didn’t listen, so I killed her.”

“Okay,” I say, shaking my head, not knowing who he’s talking about. “Glad you got that off your chest?”

“She never ran away. She’s buried in those gardens you like to play in with Jerome in my yard.”

That’s when it hits.

“And boy, did she love you.”

What?

What?

The shock on my face registers, and Scott smiles.

“It wasn’t my plan to have you as well, but you are turning out to be like her.”

“You killed her?”

“Yep. Told your father I saw her run off one night. I left traces for him to find. Then, when you were old enough, and he despised you enough, I made a deal with him that I could have you.”

“I’m not my mother.”

“But you are so much alike, it’s scary.” He reaches into the waistband of his jeans and pulls out a gun. “The last words she said to me were along the lines of...” He licks his lips before he speaks again. “*She will never be yours.*” He raises the gun. “She was partly right. You won’t be mine now, but you were once. Would you like me to bury you next to her?”

“I hate you!” I yell.

“I know, but I love you.”

“No, you love the idea of me.”

“No. You and her. Imagine loving the daughter of the woman you killed, whom you also loved.”

“I can’t because that is sick.”

“Your mother was alive when she signed you off to be with Joey. Did you know that? Do you think she is sick? It was your father who pulled you from that and gave you to me.”

“I would have been better off with him all along,” I snarl.

The words only make him mad. So he pulls the trigger, and the bullet just misses my head, but it nicks my ear, making it bleed.

I clutch it and look at him. “You’ll die for that.”

“Oh, but as long as you come down with me, I’m fine with it.” He smiles before he aims again.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Scott was gone by the time we arrived. We killed his men. We didn't expect to find a woman asleep at the table, and Jerome tucked safely in his bed, asleep as well.

Adora was nowhere to be found.

"Maybe she's a drunk," Lucas says, poking her, but she doesn't react. "Or drugged?" he suggests.

"I need to get Jerome out of here."

"There is blood on the floor, and it's not coming from this woman." Lucas pokes her again.

I look around. The apartment is bare, apart from the essentials. It's small too.

Lucas pulls out his phone and presses call. Merci's voice comes on straight away.

"It's the middle of the night, Lucas. Your woman is not with me, and I'm tired."

"Yeah, yeah. You know Adora's son, right?"

"Yes, why?" she asks, sounding more awake.

"Okay, good. Can you come to her new apartment and look after him?"

"Why on earth do I need to look after Jerome? Where is Adora? She would never leave him in the middle of the night with you."

"I'm great with kids," Lucas argues.

“Yeah, whatever. I’m leaving now. Where is Joey?”

“Here,” I say loud enough so she can hear.

“You know where she lives?” she asks. “She asked that I not tell you.”

“I always knew where she lived, Merci.”

“Right, okay... not going to delve into that deeper. I am on my way.” The phone disconnects as the woman at the table stirs, groaning and turning her head. When she opens her eyes, she takes one look at Lucas and screams.

“Shit.” He slaps her across the face. “Fuck, lady, you can’t scream. A kid is sleeping down the hall.”

“Lucas...” I groan.

“What? I didn’t bitch-smack her hard enough to knock her out, just enough to knock some sense into her.” The woman now sits there quietly, face buried in her hands.

Lucas starts to pace as I pull a chair out and sit across from her, then I begin tapping my fingers on the table.

“Blood over here too,” he says, pointing to a spot near the door.

“They were standing there when she stabbed him,” the woman says. She’s young, much younger than Adora.

“Who did?”

“His wife,” she answers.

“Adora?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Smart girl,” Lucas adds. “Though, next time, she needs to go for the nuts. Guarantee he won’t be standing after taking a knife to that area.” The girl’s eyes go wide. “How old are you?” Lucas asks her.

“Eighteen.”

“And why are you here, in Adora’s apartment, asleep on her table?”

She looks at the wine glass and nods to it. "I saw him put something in mine and a lot in hers," she replies.

"And you said nothing?" I question, surprised. I get no reply as a knock sounds at the door. Lucas opens it to find Merci, still in her pajamas, on the other side. She steps in and takes a look around.

"Where is the kid?" she asks.

"In his bed."

"I'm going to take him to mine." I stand and throw her my keys.

"Take him to mine... he's familiar with the place." Merci takes the keys with a nod, and Lucas follows her down the hall. They come out with a sleeping Jerome cradled in Lucas's arms and head to Merci's car.

"How did he know where to find her?" I ask the woman.

"An older lady. Adora's sister told him that she was living with her. But when he got there, she wasn't there," she replies, and I clench my hands at my side.

My phone buzzes with a text from Keir, telling me our mother is okay and that she is sleeping and needs rest. He asks if I need him, but I tell him to stay with her.

"And who are you to him?"

"He hired me as a nanny," she answers straight away.

"Did you choose to be his nanny?" I ask, and her eyes cast down. "Do you want to continue to help him?" I rephrase.

"No."

"So why do you?"

"He... he owns me."

"Not anymore, he doesn't," I say, standing. Lucas walks back in. "Where would he have taken her?"

"I'm not from here, but I did hear he bought some land."

"Land?" Lucas asks, confused.

“Yeah, at a construction place.” Lucas strides off, messaging Piper as I continue to talk with the woman. “It was recent. I overheard him on the phone.”

“It doesn’t bother you that he wants Adora?”

She shakes her head.

“He’s nicer to me when she’s around.”

Well, I didn’t think that would have been the case.

“He’s madly in love with her. Would kill anyone for her, even their own son.” Her voice is shaky.

“Would he kill Adora?”

“Yes. If he can’t have her, he won’t let anyone else have her either,” she answers without any consideration. To her, it’s a fact, and it is easy to believe.

“Fuck.”

“I think he is going to kill her. He said on the phone as we pulled up that he has to get it done.” She shrugs, her hands trembling. “I assume the worst with him.”

“You should,” I tell her.

“I have nowhere to go,” she whimpers as we go to leave.

“You can stay here. No one will care,” Lucas says as I turn around to look at her once more.

“Lock the door, and don’t let anyone in,” I order.

“What about you?” she asks.

“Not even me,” I say before I shut the door.

“Guess we get to kill that asshole, after all.”

“Yep.”

“Shit, it’s a few hours’ drive. Do you think he would have taken her there?” He brings up the map of Scott’s land—an old dump site.

“Yes, he would have, for sure.”

“If he is still alive when we get there, can I shoot first?”
Lucas asks. “I’ve wanted to shoot something all week.”

“Sure, but I’m fucking killing him.”

TWENTY-NINE

ADORA

The loud ringing sound of a fired gun echoes through your ears and silences your surroundings. At least ringing is what I always thought it sounded like. When he pulls the trigger, that's all I hear. My eyes go wide and lock on his.

The fucked-up part is that I can see the pain on his face as he's thinking about it, right up to the moment he puts his finger on the trigger.

Scott doesn't want to kill me—not like he did my mother.

She didn't run off because she hated me, as I always believed. Instead, she was taken from me by this monster who claims he loved her. Who claims he loves me.

What things we tell ourselves to get through.

But how was I meant to know any better?

My father didn't even know, and he was considered a smart man.

Scott was hoping I would give in, that I would be his. That, by some miracle, I would accept him as if I wasn't worthy of anything else. When I know for a fact, I am. I discovered that by myself and with the help of Joey. The thought of him puts a smile on my face.

I'm glad to have met him, despite my bitchiness and hesitation at the beginning.

I truly love him, yet I fought it at every turn.

I think my heart always knew.

The rest of me just took longer to catch up.

But the funny part is, I will always choose my son. I could survive a broken heart from losing Joey, no matter how much I love him, but the pain of not having Jerome near me would destroy me.

A pain I would never heal from.

I find it funny whenever I think like that because I never wanted children. Yet I would give my last breath for Jerome and every one of my heartbeats.

It makes me sad that Scott thinks I would have been his. That anyone in this situation would choose to be his. I always knew Scott had issues—most men in this life do. They aren't raised playing in backyards or doing fun school things. They are raised with violence. Pain. Destruction.

This brings me back to Joey.

He isn't innocent. I know this. He is anything but.

But he also isn't like Scott.

Joey gets that I am a bitch and I'm proud of it. Especially considering all my childhood, I was made to feel small and helpless. I needed to stand on my own feet, and I'm glad I finally did.

My hands clench into fists, and I wonder what I will see, how much it will hurt. But when the ringing fades away, I open my eyes to see Scott, his mouth open in shock and his midriff leaking blood. His gun now lying on the ground at his feet.

I'm not dying today.

He looks at me with broken eyes. A part of me wants to feel sorry for him, while another part wants him dead. He coughs up blood as I pick up the gun and raise it to aim at his heart.

"I hate you," I say one last time. "But a part of me has to forgive you because I can't resent our son because of who his father is."

“Adora.” I turn to my right, and Joey’s standing there. Scott reaches out and grips me with his free hand to keep himself upright.

“You came for me,” I say, tears heating my eyes. I’m stunned they found me out here.

“Always.”

I smile and look back at Scott. Leaning over him, I place my lips on Scott’s cheek, giving him a soft kiss. Then I whisper close to his ear, “I’m not her, Scott, and never will be,” before I shoot him. He falls backward, blood splatters across my face, and I wonder what on earth I just did as I gape down at his body.

It’s been a while since I took someone’s life—my father’s my first, and I was hoping my last. *But the nanny...*

Scott lies there, unmoving, as Lucas walks up behind him.

“Didn’t think you had it in you,” he remarks.

I ignore him and focus on Joey. “Jerome?” I ask, wiping the blood from my face.

“Safe,” is all he gives me, and my heart beats again.

“Your mother?” I ask.

“Also safe.”

I drop the gun from my fingers with relief, and it falls like a stone to the ground. “I would like to see her,” I tell him in a desperate plea.

“You’re covered in blood.”

“I need to see her. Please,” I plead with him again.

He nods and walks over, then pulls his shirt from his body and hands it to me. “Take yours off and wipe your face. Then put this on.”

I nod, reaching for my shirt. “Lucas, look the fuck away.”

“What? Like I haven’t seen tits before.” He huffs but turns around.

I pull it off, and Joey gently helps me clean my face.

“You’re bleeding.” He scans my body. The pain of my wounds is mostly gone, but that could be from the adrenaline overload coursing through my veins. “I heard you got him as well.” I look past Joey to Scott’s body.

A part of me hurts for Jerome.

What am I meant to tell him? That I killed his father?

Will he grow up hating me the same way Abigail did?

A tear falls free from my eye and slides down my cheek.

“You didn’t do it, I did. Let me take the blame.” Joey’s hands cup my face and turn me to look at him.

“I had to do it,” I whisper.

“You did.” His hands are so soft and warm. “And so did I.”

“I have to go,” I tell him more urgently. “I *need* to go.”

“Here.” He hands me his shirt, and my eyes can’t help but rake over him as he stands in front of me.

“You really are beautiful,” I say, looking up at him again.

“As are you.”

I pull the shirt over my head, and he turns, walking back the way they came. I follow him, unsure of where I am. “How far out are we?” I ask Joey as we get to the car. Lucas has the music blaring but turns it down as we walk to the car.

“A few hours.”

“My head hurts,” I tell him, rubbing my temples. It pounds as he opens the back door and tells me to get in. He follows right behind me, then Lucas takes off. Joey pulls out a first-aid kit and reaches for me, and I let him do what he needs. He is gentle with every single touch. First, cleaning the nick on my ear, then the wound on my back, where Scott knifed me, then he bandages the wound and drops the shirt back down.

“Rest,” he says, pulling me, and my head drops to his lap.

Lucas turns the music back up.

“Can you call Jerome?” I ask Joey.

He nods and grabs his phone, putting it on speaker.

Merci's voice comes through. "Jerome is still asleep, and your dog is annoying."

"Merci, is he okay?"

"Adora! Oh God, it's good to hear your voice. And yes, he's fine. When we got to Joey's, we had some ice cream, then watched a movie. And he's been asleep since."

"Let me know when he wakes."

"Will do. We stayed up late watching movies, so he may be asleep for a while."

"Thank you," I manage to say before my eyes become heavy.

Joey starts talking, and the last thing I hear him saying is to feed the dog.

"ADORA."

Someone is gently shaking me.

I wake up and scream, my hands hitting whatever is close, simply trying to escape this nightmare.

"Adora, calm down. Breathe. You're safe." Joey pulls me to him, and my head falls to his chest. I inhale, and the smell of everything safe comes back to me.

Joey.

Safety.

He's my home.

Who would have thought that a mafia brother would be safe? He should be anything but.

"We're at the hospital," he says into my hair as I curl closer to him. "We can stay here for as long as it takes."

"Everything hurts," I say into his chest.

“You took a beating,” he whispers, kissing the top of my head, which is probably covered in dirt and God knows what else. “But you’re strong... the strongest woman I know.”

“That’s your mother,” I correct him. “She’s remarkable.”

“It’s why I love you. You remind me of her. Both such strong women.”

I push away from him, and he gives me the softest smile imaginable.

“How are you going to go in without a shirt?” I ask.

“Lucas,” he yells, and Lucas walks back to the car. “I need a shirt.”

“Do I look like Macy’s?” Lucas bites back.

“Give me your fucking jacket.”

“You couldn’t afford this jacket. It’s expensive,” Lucas argues.

“Lucas!” Joey growls at him.

“Fucking hell, you owe me.” He removes his jacket and hands it to Joey, giving him a death stare as he pulls it on. When we’re both out of the car, I rub my hands down my jeans, unsure what is about to happen or what I’m about to walk into. Joey shows me the way, and I follow him to the room. Keir is sitting slumped in a chair, half asleep, when we get there. Bianca is awake, watching something on the television, and offers us a smile when she sees us.

“I knew he would find you,” are her first words.

When I look at her, I want to cry. One eye is swollen shut, and her face is bruised.

This is all my fault.

“It isn’t your fault. I can see that thought written all over your face. You didn’t get a choice to be born into this family. Do not blame yourself. I would have done the same for any of the girls.”

“But I’m not married to your son,” I remind her.

“No, you are not.” This comes from Keir, who looks at Joey and then eyes me. I turn away from his gaze, feeling guilt I can’t seem to get rid of.

“That doesn’t matter. You are a part of this family. We all accept that. Again, I don’t blame you, and neither does anyone in this room.” I don’t have the courage to look behind me where I know Joey will be standing. “You should see a doctor while you’re here. You don’t look well.”

“I’ll be fine. I just wanted to check on you before I go and see Jerome.”

“He’s with Merci,” Joey informs his mother.

She nods and closes her one good eye. “Okay, well, now everyone is safe, I think I might sleep for a bit.”

“That’s your cue to leave,” Keir says, staring at me.

I nod and turn without argument.

“Let me take you home.”

“I need a minute,” I tell him, then walk to the nearest bathroom. As soon as I know I’m alone, the tears I’ve held back fall without my permission. And they don’t seem to want to stop. *Why can’t I make them stop?* I wipe my eyes furiously, but they keep coming. My face is covered in dirt, my hair is a mess, and I can see all the marks that asshole left behind as reminders of him. I feel as bad as I look.

Turning on the water and splashing my face, I try to get rid of some of the dirt before I go to see Jerome. I don’t want him to think anything bad. I’m not even sure I want him to know what an awful man his father was. It was hard enough for me to deal with, so I don’t want to put that pressure on him until he is old enough to understand.

After managing to get the dirt from my face and from under my nails, I decide to put my whole head under the running water. I scrub as much dirt out of my hair as possible, then put my head under the hand dryer.

A knock sounds at the door, followed by Joey’s voice. “Can I come in?”

I reach for the door and unlock it, then put my head back under the dryer, so I don't have to look at him. I hear the door lock, and when I turn my head slightly, I see his shoes rooted near the door.

"I had to get rid of the dirt," I say over the noise of the dryer.

"Okay."

"I couldn't go home to him like that."

"I know."

I lift my head from under the dryer, and the noise stops. Joey walks over to me and pulls a hairband from his wrist, smiling as he hands it to me. "It's probably Chanel's, so don't tell Lucas."

Taking it, I put my hair up and check the mirror. Now that the dirt is gone from my face, I see my lip is starting to swell. My hair looks a little bit cleaner, but I still need to wash it properly.

My stomach hurts, but that can wait.

What I need is my son.

THIRTY

JOEY

I fell in love with her strength before I fell in love with anything else about her.

You may ask how that is possible. I'm not sure, but that's how it happened. It was her resilience and her no-bullshit attitude that turned me on the most.

Most women in my world are either willing or run for the hill, and she was neither. However, I think sometimes, with that attitude, she wanted to run for the hills.

I go to touch her as we sit in the car, but she turns her body away from me and looks out the window, indicating she wants no physical contact. Did he do something else to her that I'm unaware of? I wish I could have been the one to kill him, but I'm glad Adora was able to do it. She needed to with all the shit he has put her through. I don't know how she has put up with it for so long.

Lucas looks back a few times, and I can tell words are itching to come out of his mouth, but I simply shake my head at him in the rearview mirror.

When the car stops out front of my place, she doesn't automatically go to get out. Her leg starts bouncing, and her hand grips the door handle as she looks toward the front door.

"Take your time," I tell her gently.

She looks over her shoulder at me. "What if Jerome asks?" she says in a weak voice. "I don't want to tell him."

“So don’t. He’s a child, and you are his parent. You decide what he needs to know.”

“You’re right. But...” She looks back to the front door, taking a breath. “There was a girl.” Her voice is stronger now.

“She is at Lucas’ bar until we decide what to do with her.”

“I think he controlled her as well. Actually, I know he did.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” I say.

She turns, giving me a soft smile. “You are a good man, Joey Rossi.”

Lucas laughs, making Adora crack an even bigger smile. And I don’t even want to hit him for his lack of respect because that smile made my heart skip a beat.

“So are you, Lucas,” she says, finally opening the door.

“The women I have buried probably disagree with you,” Lucas throws out.

Adora doesn’t say anything in return as she locks eyes with the front door again as if it’s going to bite her. I get out, walk around, and offer her my hand. She glances down and shakes her head before she takes the few remaining steps to the front door. She knocks, even though it’s my house and I have a key. It isn’t long until Merci pulls the door open, her worried eyes quickly taking in Adora before she reaches forward and embraces her in a big hug. Adora makes a grunting noise, and Merci lets go, pulling back.

“Shit, are you hurt?” she asks, worried.

“A little. Is he awake?”

“He is. Been asking for you all morning but is currently playing with that needy dog.”

“He’s okay, though?” Adora inquires.

“Of course. We cooked pancakes, watched some shows. We’ve had a ball. That’s a good kid you’ve got there.” Adora smiles before she steps in and heads straight for the living room where Jerome is watching television. As soon as he

hears us, he turns, smiles brightly, and runs for his mother. His little arms wrap her in a hug, and she tries not to make a noise as he does it.

She bends down and kisses his cheek. “Are you ready to go home?” she asks, holding him tight.

“Is Daddy going to be there?”

I watch as her eyes go wide.

“Nope, but I can come over and bring pizzas,” I tell him.

Adora’s gaze fixes on the floor as Jerome looks at me.

“And the dog? You can bring the dog?”

“Yes, of course. If that’s okay with your mother.”

“I want to sleep and just be us two. We can order pizzas in, and Joey can visit another day with the doggy,” Adora says.

When I look up, Merci is biting her lip and looking away.

“But I like Joey,” Jerome says.

“I like you too, kid, but your mother is right. You probably need to spend some time with her, and you can look after her when she needs to rest.” Even though I want to look after her, I know she doesn’t want me there.

“Yes, like a doctor,” he says happily.

“I can drive you,” Merci offers.

Adora nods her head, accepting.

“Let me.” I reach for her, but she pulls away, so I can’t touch her.

“No, Merci can take me. Thank you, though.” She grabs Jerome’s hand. “I’ll wash your shirt and bring it back to you.”

“I can help,” I tell her, growing frustrated that she’s pushing me away like this.

“I don’t need any help, Joey. I’m fine.”

“Fine? Really? That’s what we’re going for?” I almost laugh but refrain.

Merci grabs Jerome's hand and asks him to get his things. He runs off with her, leaving the two of us standing here.

"If I poked you right now, do you think you could stand it?"

She narrows her eyes stubbornly, and I know her answer before she opens her mouth. "Yes."

So I reach out and poke her stomach—not hard, just enough to make a point—and she swears and moves backward at my touch.

"You aren't fine. Stop ignoring my help." I go to reach for her, but she steps back.

"Why?" she asks. "Why the fuck do you want to help me? You want to fuck me, but you don't want to be with me. You want to help me, but you don't want me?"

"I want you." I know I do. It's always been her.

"Yeah, okay. Sure..." She doesn't roll her eyes, but I can feel that's what she wants to do. "I'm tired, and the last thing I want to do is stand here with you, arguing."

"So let me take you home." I push again.

"Are you deaf? No."

"Why?" I ask one last time.

"Because if you come, you will stay. And my heart can't keep playing games with you, Joey. So back the fuck off."

I put my hands in the air. I'll give her what she wants, for now, at least.

"Do you need money?"

She huffs before she answers, "No, I still have money, Joey." I hand her a card, and she looks at it before she reads her name on it. "What is this?"

"It's an account with your name on it and Jerome's. It has your money in it."

"What money?" Her gaze meets mine again, confused.

"The money you tried giving me."

“I was paying you back, Joey. I didn’t ask you to start a savings for me when I am capable of doing that myself.” She huffs, swallowing hard.

“I would have paid with my life to get you back. I didn’t want payment.”

“I owed you, so you can consider us even.” She heads for the door.

“No.”

She stops at my voice, her hand on the doorknob. Merci and Jerome halt at the top of the stairs.

“I get to call us even or not, and this is not even. There was never an even to begin with.”

“I really despise you, Joey,” she says, not giving me her eyes. “And I also really love you.”

“I love you too.”

I hear her intake of breath before she finally moves. I reach for her, but she shakes my hand off, walks to Merci’s car, and gets in, not looking back my way again. I smile for the small victory—hate can be fucked away, but love is permanent. Just as we are.

“So, are we planning to fix the problem we have at my bar?” Lucas asks as he waits for me by his car. “Because I don’t want a little underage blonde in my bar. It’s above board, that place.”

“We killed someone in there last week,” I remind him.

“Tomato-tomahto,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Did you learn that from your girlfriend?” I ask, locking the door and making my way toward the car.

“Nah, from yours.” He smirks, tapping my back. “Too soon?” he teases, raising a brow. “Probably, considering she doesn’t want you. Poor, Joey boy, no pussy for him. I’m sure you could persuade that ex of yours you used to fuck to jump on your dick if you’re desperate.”

“Do you *ever* shut the fuck up?”

“No, now give me my damn jacket back before I blow up your house.”

“So dramatic.”

THIRTY-ONE

ADORA

“Are you mad at him?” Merci asks when we get back to my apartment. I notice the blood has been cleaned up, and you can’t even tell anything happened here. The dishes are clean, and there are no wine glasses on the table.

“No, I’m just tired of it,” I reply. “He knows I want him and only him. I would have married him in a heartbeat if he had asked me a few weeks ago, but I would never be with someone and only half be with them. He doesn’t want kids, and I have a kid.”

“He likes Jerome, though.”

I offer her a smile. “I know he does. He loves his niece and nephew as well, but that doesn’t mean he wants any of his own.”

“Well, when you put it like that...” She goes to the kitchen and washes her hands. “Let me stay and help.”

“I think I just want a quiet day, what’s left of it anyway. Can you run the store tomorrow? I know it’s late notice, but we didn’t open today, so...”

“Of course. I was actually going to offer.”

“What did he say when you handed him the money?” I ask.

“He grunted and mumbled something about an account.” She shrugs. “Why?”

“He put it in an account for me and told me it’s mine and Jerome’s.”

“You mean the kid he doesn’t want?” She raises a brow.

“Yeah.” I look to my feet, biting my lip at the thought. “Isn’t that odd? I mean, it’s not a small amount I owed him.”

“Those men and their money. They work for it, they kill over it, and yet for their woman, they happily would give them every last cent,” she gushes. “I mean, I’m happy in my relationship, but, gosh, maybe in my next life, I’ll find me one of those men.”

“I would say don’t. Too much heartache and fuckery.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “Fuckery, I like that word.” I shrug, huffing a laugh. “So, I don’t want to ask, but...”

“What?”

“Your sister. I checked the cameras today for the shop, and she was there.”

“What?”

“Yep, looking through the window after she stood there knocking for ages.”

“I haven’t heard from her.” I don’t even know where my phone is, so I get up and go to my room to find it on the floor. I put it on the charger, as it’s dead, and as soon as it turns on, I have missed calls from her, Joey, and Merci. Going through the messages, she is asking where I am. Telling me that she needs to get in contact.

“I would suggest you let her be for a bit,” Merci says from the door. “I get she’s your sister, but she’s caused you a lot of trouble. If she wants to try to mend things, make her work for it. Don’t just give in because of who she is to you.”

“You’re right.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I usually am.” She smirks.

Jerome comes running in, and Merci picks him up, which I am thankful for because I’m too sore.

“Let’s get you bathed. Then I’ll shower, and we can pick some movies and order pizza.” I clap my hands.

“And is Daddy coming?” he asks, his eyes wide and hopeful.

“Not tonight,” I tell him, trying to force a smile, but it’s quite difficult.

“But I will be back tomorrow, and maybe we can get ice cream.” Merci claps, tickling him and carrying him to the bathroom. “Let’s get your stinky bum in the bath, mister.”

“I’m not stinky.”

She leans and smells his shirt. “Pewww, the stinkiest,” she says, scrunching up her face, and he throws his head back and laughs.

I don’t know how to take this.

How to take having such a great support system, Joey included. Thanks to him, I have all these new friends. Friends willing to help me and even get themselves hurt for me. I’ve never had anyone like that in my life.

It’s nice and never something I dreamed of having. It was never on my radar. I guess people who grow up without it aren’t expecting it. Or hoping for it, either.

I did neither.

I always thought I could do everything by myself.

How wrong I was.

Now I know the support of those you least expect means the most.

I’m not sure where my life is heading, and I’m absolutely not sure about Joey. But I think he will always be in my life.

It’s simply a matter of figuring out in what capacity.

SHE'S STANDING out front of my shop, a cigarette in her hand and a sour expression on her face as she leans against the building. It's been three days of staying inside and not dealing with the outside world, but it was time for me to get back to living. I own a shop now, and Jerome needs to return to school.

I had turned my phone off and told Merci I was doing so and that if she needed me to pop around as I don't live far from the shop. She didn't come by, though. She had everything under control. I told her not to come in today and enjoy her day off, but I plan to pay her because she does so much for me.

My sister's eyes go wide when she spots me. She puts the cigarette out on the ground and offers me a fake smile as she walks toward me. I stay rooted to my spot, not sure how to take her.

I was hoping for a good day—I didn't expect to find her here.

“Adora.” She says my name as if we're friends, as if she hasn't betrayed me and caused me so much pain, especially when all I have done all her life is try to help her. To save her from this thing my father called a life. The one I was suckered into. I didn't want her to suffer the same fate as me.

She says my name again, and I would walk away from her if I could. I don't want to deal with any more drama than I have to. She stands in front of my doorway, blocking my entrance.

When I ask her to move, she gives me a sad smile.

It makes me sick.

“I just want to talk.”

“Talk? Don't you think you've done enough of that?” I bark at her. She takes a step back, and I manage to get to the door and unlock it.

“I've just been so fucked-up.”

“You’re telling me.” I huff. “Fucked-up is a damn understatement.”

“I wanted to believe him, to believe he was an okay person. I wanted to believe he loved his kid more than you. That it was the reason he was here.”

I laugh at her, and it’s as fake as the fictional stories I read.

Opening the door, I walk in and shut it behind me, but that doesn’t stop her. She pushes it open and follows me straight in without an invitation, despite it saying ‘closed’ on the sign.

“He wanted you, not his son.”

“Correct,” I say, struggling to keep my voice steady. “Now, if that is all, I really do need to work.”

“Can I have a job?” she asks.

Ha. She’s unbelievable.

“No,” I say incredulously.

“I really want to try.”

“You have deceived me, hurt me, and lied to me. I don’t want you working for me, Abigail. Maybe you were right before when you said we should go our separate ways.”

“I don’t want to. I want to stay with you. I want to try. I promise it’s not a lie. I know I’ve fucked up badly. The day after, I was coming down from some heavy drugs that Scott had given me, and I could barely make out what we spoke about. But I knew it was about you. I knew I had given him the address he was after. I didn’t want that. I don’t want to hurt you anymore. I want to move on, which is hard to do. But I get it... I’m a spoiled princess who doesn’t know any better.”

I take a deep breath to settle myself before I respond. I don’t want her to work here, but I can’t leave her high and dry. “The coffee shop across the road is looking for people. Go and apply there, but not dressed like that.” I wave my hand up and down her body, indicating at what she’s wearing.

“It’s bad?” she asks, her brows furrowing.

“You’re dressed in a mini skirt and a shirt that shows all your cleavage. Cover up and don’t wear so much makeup... it doesn’t suit you.”

She touches her face. “I’m prettier with it.”

“You are prettier without it,” I tell her.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” I sigh.

She shrugs, playing with the hem of her skirt. “For helping. I don’t know what he did, but I can see you are hurt. I’ve come here daily, and Merci says you aren’t in. Today is the first day I have been able to reach you because your phone is off. So... I’m sorry.”

“It’s going to take time for me to trust you again, Abigail. But you are the only family I have left. So I won’t disregard you, even though I should,” I say. “But one hint of you being a dick...” I click my fingers, “... and we are done.”

“Thank you.” I wave her off as Sailor walks in. She eyes Abigail but doesn’t say a word. Abigail offers me a wave and walks out, and I don’t know how to feel.

“You get that death stare from your husband?” I ask her, laughing. “You got it down pat. Made her run.”

“Ha-ha, and yes, I did. I use it on Keir when he pisses me off. Gets me whatever I want.” She puts her hands on her hips. “Bianca is home now,” she informs me.

I sent her flowers and chocolates. I wasn’t sure what else to send someone willing to sacrifice their life just to keep my son and me safe. I’m sure that’s what any mother would do, but as we know, I’m not familiar with that concept. So I did the only thing I could think of and sent flowers. I plan to see her later today, especially now that she’s home. I’ll even take Jerome because I know that will cheer her up.

“How is she?”

“She’s good. Bossing people around and up and walking,” Sailor says as she checks the shelves. “I need the spiciest book

you have so I can test all my moves on Keir and show him up.”

“You sound like Chanel, except it’s Lucas that I hear it from,” I say, smiling.

“Yeah, I know. It’s what gave me the idea. When she drinks, she likes to tell me how he makes her call him Daddy. Which, let’s be honest, she secretly likes.”

“Lucas is... *interesting*.”

“Yeah, he speaks highly of you. Well, from however highly Lucas can speak.”

“Is there another reason you’re here?” I ask. She keeps on touching things as if she’s nervous.

“I wanted to know what’s happening with you and Joey. He won’t talk to any of us about it. Keir asked me if I’d spoken to you. So I was curious. Lucas said you two looked cuddly, and that’s it.” She shrugs, her eyes searching my face. “I mean... what I am trying to say is, I hope you two work it out. I liked having you as a sister-in-law, and I would enjoy that again if it happens in the near future.”

“I’m not sure of anything right now,” I reply honestly. “Let alone Joey. We are so up in the air that I just kind of want to leave it up there to dry.”

“Like, not be together again?” she questions.

I take a minute to walk to the back of the store, pick a book from the erotica section, and give it to her before I answer, “Like I said, I don’t know.” I nod to the book. “In this one, he ties her by her hands to the ceiling and tortures her with his mouth. It’s dark, so be prepared. It starts sweet, then bang!”

“The ceiling?” Her eyes go wide, and I nod in reply. “*Love Drunk*. I like the title.” I smile. “I’ll be at Bianca’s later if you want to come around.”

“I will. Can I bring Jerome?”

“Of course. She’s already been asking about him. I swear she likes him more than her own grandkids.” She laughs. “Are you okay with everything? I really want to make sure you are.”

Your sister too?" She looks behind her at the door. "She's young. Hopefully, she starts making the right choices sooner rather than later."

"Yeah, that's the hope."

THIRTY-TWO

JOEY

“She can’t stay here any longer. This shit is not how it works,” Lucas complains, throwing his hands up.

“It is how it works because I said so,” I inform him.

“This is my bar.”

“And I am your boss,” I remind him. “You always seem to forget that, Lucas.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbles. “But seriously. Get her out. I don’t want her in here.”

“That’s a no.”

“Fucking hell.” He picks up his phone and storms out. I open the storage door to find Magina lying on the bed, reading a book.

She looks up when I enter. “He doesn’t like me very much,” she says quietly.

“He doesn’t like anyone. That’s just Lucas.”

“He’s always telling me to fuck off.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“I don’t want to go back. I want to stay here.”

My hand scrubs down my face. “I’m seeing what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

“Yeah.” I turn to leave, but she gets up from her bed and grabs my hand. “I can help you, just so you know.”

“Help?” I ask her, confused, and she holds on to my hand tighter.

“I didn’t enjoy doing it for Scott, but for you...”

The door opens to reveal Adora. Her eyes lock on to Magina’s hand holding mine. I pull free from her grasp as Adora’s eyes go wide.

“Are you fucking the help already, Joey?” she asks, the venom in her voice potent. Her eyes leave mine and go back to Magina.

“You need to leave. Stop mooching, get your shit, and get out.”

Magina reaches for her shoes and slides them on. She looks to me for help, but one glance at Adora, and I know I need to keep my mouth shut.

“Lucas rang you?” I question.

“Damn right he did. He told me you needed me. Seems you don’t, though.” She turns to leave, but I reach for her wrist and pull her to me.

“Remove your hand, Joey.”

“No.” I hold her arm so she can’t escape. She turns, and within seconds, she knees me where the sun doesn’t shine. It’s not hard enough to make me cry, but hard enough for me to buckle over.

“Told you to remove your hand. That’s what happens to men who don’t listen.”

Magina pushes past us and walks out.

Smiling, Adora flips her long hair over her shoulder before she follows Magina, but not before I grab for her again and protect my junk with my other hand, kicking the door shut and closing us in.

“Joey,” she warns. “Do you want to lose your cock? We both know how useful it is.”

“You’re jealous,” I state, backing her up against the wall and caging her in at her sides.

“No, I’m not. I just don’t see why you had to step into a room with a woman who only knows how to give sex as a thank you.”

“I was helping her.”

“Did you want to help her with your cock as well?”

Oh, she bites.

Hard.

I fucking love this woman.

“Jealousy looks good on you.” I move my hand from my cock but don’t let her go.

“I look good on you, but we don’t all get what we want.”

I can’t help the smile that leaves my lips at her words. “You do look good on me. Hurt dick and all, I still want you to touch it.”

Her eyes fall to my pants, and she sucks in a breath. “I didn’t come here for this.”

“What did you come for?” I ask, pressing against her. “To yell at me?”

She opens her mouth to speak, but my lips slam onto hers before she can say another word. I kiss the fuck out of her, and to my surprise, she doesn’t push me away. Instead, her hands wrap around my neck, and she kisses me back.

Oh, how I have missed her kisses.

Gripping her hips, my hands slide up her body, but she pulls back.

“Shit, sorry.” Dammit! I forgot about her back.

“It’s fine,” she says. “I need to go. And this...” she waves a finger between us, “... cannot keep happening.”

“But it can.”

“Can’t,” she insists, her tone firm, but her eyes don’t agree. “I’ll take Magina with me.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will.”

“No, I mean, you can’t.” Her eyes go wide. “This isn’t your world. She knows too much. Keir wanted her dead, but I needed to see what information she had.”

“She’s innocent.”

“That means nothing. She knows things, and it’s only a matter of time before she speaks.” We hear a rustling on the other side of the door, and I step past Adora to open it. Lucas stands there, holding Magina by her hair as she kneels on the floor.

“Seems someone likes to eavesdrop.”

“I wasn’t, Joey, I swear.”

“Just because you think he’s the nice one, it doesn’t mean you are any good at lying.” Lucas pulls her hair again, and she winces.

“Lucas, stop,” Adora says.

A phone dings, and we all look at each other. It’s then I realize it’s coming from the room we were just in. I step back into the room, find the phone stuffed under the mattress, and open it. The message reads...

REPORT back about how they run everything ASAP.

I STEP BACK OUT and look at Magina.

She sees the phone in my hand, and her eyes go wide.

“It isn’t—” I don’t even wait for her to finish before I raise my gun and shoot her straight between the eyes.

“Fuck, give some notice next time. I would have let her go and backed up a bit,” Lucas gripes, stepping back. “I got my

good suit on, and now it's covered in blood and gore.”

“You have another suit exactly like it,” I remind him.

“Which is good, you fuck,” he swears, walking away with a groan. I turn back to look at Adora, where her eyes are locked on Magina's dead body.

“You killed her.”

“Yes, betrayal is not an option.”

Her whiskey-colored eyes, the ones I dream about, stare back at me.

“I betrayed you.”

“That's different.” I shake my head because the thought of hurting her sickens me.

“Why?” she asks, then holds up her hands. “Don't answer that.”

“Because I don't love Magina. But I do love you,” I tell her honestly.

“But you don't want me.”

“I do. I very much want you,” I tell her.

“Not just for sex, Joey. You don't want all of me, which includes a child.”

“I...”

“That's what I thought. You can't even say with certainty you do. I think it's time we stop this merry-go-round and start with a clean slate.”

“What?” I'm sure I didn't hear her correctly.

“No more contact. We can be exes. I'm going to visit your mother again and tell her I can't come around anymore. I don't want to risk running into you anywhere. I ask that you never come to my bookstore either.”

“I can't do that,” I say honestly because that's fucking impossible.

“Why?”

“Because you are *mine*.”

“Eventually, Joey, I will move on. And you won’t be the man in my bed or whose ring is on my finger. I deserve better, and you can’t give me that. So leave me alone.” She pushes past me and rushes out the door.

I don’t chase her.

I’m not even sure I should.

“Well, you sure as shit fucked that up again,” Lucas says, coming out with a new jacket on. “Not even I’m that stupid.” He laughs. “You like the kid, you love the woman, so work it the fuck out.” He looks down at the body on the floor. “Clean this up.”

“You fuckhead!” I growl, storm out, leaving him with the mess I created.

THIRTY-THREE

Being in love isn't all it's cracked up to be, is it?

I never intended to fall in love with Joey, yet I fell anyway despite trying everything humanly possible not to. At the beginning of our marriage, I thought that if we could at least try to get along, it would make everything a whole lot easier. But it didn't. It made it worse. Because I saw him—the real him. And I really, really enjoyed what I saw.

When I walked out of Lucas' club, I didn't think he would follow after I asked him not to, but he did. He's knocking on my door, and I won't answer it. Jerome is asleep, and I don't want to wake him.

Putting my back against my door, I say, "Go away, Joey."

"No, this needs to happen. We need to talk."

"We talk, we kiss, we fuck. I think that's enough."

"It's not enough. Now, open the door so we don't wake Jerome."

He's right. I know he is. But it still takes me a minute to open the door to let him in. When I do, he doesn't try to push his way in. Instead, he stands there casually as if he doesn't have a care in the world while he stares at me with those icy-blue eyes.

I'm not proud of the fact that I am my father's daughter, but a little bit of me feels better knowing that my mother didn't just abandon me. I always had this complex growing up that people just left. That it was a normal thing to do. So when

it came time for me to walk away from my own son, I didn't realize how much I would miss him. It wasn't normal, and I get that now. I've done a lot of growing over the last few years, and Joey even had a part in that. He made me realize I am worth having someone fight for me because, despite all our back and forth, he stood by my side until he could no longer do so.

Even then, he had the choice to kill me, yet I still breathe when I know many others would not have for the same deception. Magina is proof of that. She didn't even get to explain. That's how it works in this world. But he let me explain when he should've shot me directly between the eyes. And I'm so thankful he allowed me to explain everything to him.

"Why are you here?" I ask on a sigh. "I told you to stop."

"I want to go back with you." His words confuse me, and he sees the puzzled look on my face. "I want to go back to Bora Bora with you."

"Um... that's weird. And no."

He shakes his head. "You don't get it. That's where we bonded. Before that, it wasn't the real you. You lied and hid things from me. I want to know the real you, and I want you to bring Jerome."

"Most people ask for dates," I tell him, my heart beating faster.

"We aren't most people."

"I don't know if I can," I say in a small voice. "I don't want to be with someone who isn't sure. I need reassurance in this life. I need dependability."

"And I need *you*." His words, despite them not being exactly what I want to hear, still make my heart miss a beat.

"It's not just me, Joey."

"I get that, and I'm trying. I need to adjust. So let's adjust together."

"I'll think about it."

Troy comes up behind him, and Joey looks over his shoulder and gives him a nod before he turns and walks off without a goodbye.

“Um... did I interrupt?” Troy asks. I’ve hardly had time to catch up with my best friend, and I never wanted him to be brought into anything that has been happening. He was pissed—still is—but I convinced him to come over if I supplied the wine.

So here he is.

“No, he just asked me to go to Bora Bora with him and to bring Jerome.”

Troy’s eyes widen, and his hand goes to his forehead. “You must have some magical pussy because you have that man whipped.”

“I don’t, trust me,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Have him whipped, I mean. My pussy is top-notch, though.” I wink at him as I shut the door and go into the kitchen to open a bottle of wine. “Are you still mad?” I ask while pouring some wine.

“Yes. That’s not something you keep from your best friend.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I kept it from my husband as well.”

“Which one?” he throws back in my face.

“Touché,” I say, handing him the bottle.

“This place is cute. So, tell me, when did you fuck him last? Because that man needs to get laid, and he only has eyes for you.”

“He kissed me earlier,” I admit. “And that’s as far as I let it go.”

“He’s great in bed, though, right?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God, you’re blushing. So tell me, is he the best you’ve ever had?” He holds up his hands. “And remember,

you must tell me whatever I want to know because you owe me.”

TROY IS PASSED out on my couch, and I’m lying in bed, staring at the last message Joey sent me a few hours ago, which I haven’t been able to reply to. I’m not sure what to say. And I’ve had way too much alcohol, so I will probably say something I shouldn’t.

I WANT YOU.

THREE SIMPLE WORDS stare back at me.

So simple yet full of so much power.

I WANT YOU TOO.

FOUR SIMPLE WORDS I send back to him.

It’s late, and he’s hopefully asleep, and my drunk brain won’t have to deal with it.

Why the hell did I send that? It’s just us going back and forth. Back and forth.

Is that what a relationship is? I’m used to being told what to do, not having to deal with anything like this. My only healthy relationship—the one with Becca—was short-lived.

My phone starts ringing, and I throw it across the room.

Nope, not answering that.

Getting up to turn it on silent, so it doesn’t wake everyone up, I see Joey’s name flash on the screen. The call drops, and a text comes through straight away.

I WANT TO COME OVER.

I READ HIS TEXT.

Then read it again.

Then decide that can't happen.

NO.

BUT DO I MEAN IT? I don't even know.

I stare at it. He isn't writing back immediately, so I pick up my glass of wine and take a drink. Just as I fill my mouth, another message pops up.

BUT I WANT DESSERT. **The one between your legs.**

I SPIT my drink out all over the floor.

WE SHOULD TALK.

THAT WENT SERIOUS QUICKLY.

ABOUT US.

I STARE AT THE MESSAGES, unsure about what to say. What else is there to talk about? What else is there to say? I choose not to answer. It's safer that way, right?

Pacing the floor, I decide to clean my room because that will stop me from gripping that phone and contemplating my reply. I put on light music, careful it's not too loud, and reorganize my whole closet.

Why?

Fuck knows.

When I'm done, I look back at the phone.

It hasn't lit up again.

I've been checking.

Finishing the last bit of my bottle of wine, I strip off my clothes and contemplate my life choices as I turn on the shower.

Because, hello, alcohol.

And hello, two marriages, both of which didn't work out.

Fuck, I'm not even thirty.

Is this the way I saw my life going? No.

Not at all.

So how did it end up this way?

The water is boiling when I step under the stream. I prefer it like that. My face is tipped up toward the water when I hear him.

I think I'm dreaming.

I mean, I have to be, right?

This can't be happening.

Maybe I answered my phone without knowing.

No, I'm not that drunk.

I'm somewhere in between tipsy and drunk.

"Are you ignoring me?" His voice is close.

When I turn around, Joey is on the other side of the shower door, looking so fucking good, dressed in black slacks and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, showcasing a few tattoos

scattered on his arms. I have to stop myself from gaping at the sight of him.

“I’m pretending you aren’t there,” I tell him.

He casually leans against the wall directly across from the shower and stares at me. I look away and continue to wash.

“You avoided my text.”

“You asked to have me for dessert.”

“And? If I remember correctly, you like it when I’m between your legs.”

Oh my God.

“You’re blushing.”

“It’s the hot water,” I reply, glancing back at him. “Stop looking at my ass.”

He lifts his eyes to mine and smirks. “But it’s *my* ass. Shouldn’t I be allowed to look at what’s mine?”

I scoff at his words. “Yours?” I question and turn the water off. He grabs a towel and holds it out for me when I push the door open. “I think you are mistaken. Last time I checked, my ass is mine.”

“If you say so.” As I take the towel from him, he makes no move to leave. I dry myself and then wrap the towel around my body before I push past him into my room.

I have clothes all over the bed, ones I intend to donate.

“Cleaning spree?” he asks, nodding to the mess.

“How did you get in?”

“Troy let me in. He told me if we fucked, to make it loud enough so he could hear.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I say, though my body hates me for it.

“Which part, the part where you scream or the fucking?”

“Fucking.”

“So maybe I just kiss your pussy goodnight?”

“Joey,” I mutter, turning to look at him. He’s killing me.

“Yes, darling?”

I hate it when he calls me that!

No, I love it.

“Why are you here?” I push the clothes off the bed, climb under the duvet, and lay my head on the pillow, too lazy to get changed. He comes over, lifts the duvet, and, in one swift movement, pulls the towel from me before he tucks me back in.

“I didn’t realize you’re drunk. I’ll stay, and we can talk in the morning.”

“What is there to talk about?”

“Us, and where we go from here.”

“You go home... I go to sleep.” My eyes start to close, and he leans down and kisses my forehead. “You smell good,” I mumble sleepily.

“I know. Now, go to sleep, and tomorrow we’ll talk.”

“But what about dessert?” I ask, pulling down the duvet. His eyes rake over my body. The heat in his gaze makes me instantly wet, and my hands slide downward along my torso. He bites his lip, reaches down, grips my wrist, and guides my fingers into his mouth, where he sucks on them, tasting me. I feel myself almost vibrating with need between my legs as he does. “Joey?” He pulls my fingers from his mouth, places my hand at my side, and pulls the duvet back over me.

“Yes?”

“Cuddle me?”

He nods and removes his own clothing leaving only boxers on before he climbs into my bed, pushing me over just a fraction to make room. His arm wraps around my belly, and he pulls me to him.

“You are considered the nice brother... did you know that?”

“You think I’m nice?” he asks, kissing the top of my head again and then my cheek.

“See, I thought you were a real asshole, and then I realized you get mad at things you care about. You have strong emotions.”

“Do you think I’m nice, Adora?”

“No, but in the best way possible.”

My eyes grow heavy, but I hear him say, “I’m real nice to your pussy. I’ll show you in the morning.”

THIRTY-FOUR

If you could ask my perfect way to wake up, I would tell you it's with a woman with whiskey-colored eyes climbing on me.

All over me.

Her hands pull at my remaining clothing, and I grip her to stop. She looks up at me, smirking. It's still dark, so that means we've only slept for a short time.

“Adora.”

Her eyes find mine. She is sitting on me now, and I lift her as I stand. She clings to me, naked.

“We still need to talk.”

“Mm-hmm, after,” is all I get out of her.

So I walk over to her small desk, place her ass on it, and then take a step back to admire her. She keeps her legs open, her hands planted on either side as she smiles.

My heart skips a damn beat.

Who would have thought a woman I found with someone else's head between her legs would turn out to be my forever? I just have to convince her of that.

“What would you like me to do?” I ask, keeping my distance as I watch her. Her eyes are dark and stormy right now. She wants—no, *needs*—something that only I can give her.

“I want your mouth between my legs.” She spreads her legs a little wider to give me a better view. I lick my lips as I

step forward. Then, placing a finger between her wet folds, I slide it down, and she lets out a soft moan as I lift it and put it to my lips. Her eyes flare as she watches me hungrily.

Leaning in, I grab her by the chin, gripping her so she can't move, and kiss her. She opens her mouth and lets my tongue glide without hesitation. When she tries to move her hips forward to reach me, I let go of her chin and step back, breaking our kiss.

“Did you taste yourself?” I ask, and she nods as I drop to my knees in front of her. “Do you see why I'm addicted? How good your sweet cunt tastes to me?” She doesn't speak, merely nods her head instead. I slap her pussy, and she yelps before I lean forward and kiss it better. “Words, darling. Use your words.”

“Yes.”

“And how did you taste?” I lean forward and kiss her again, slipping my tongue between her folds, flicking her clit. She moves her hips forward again, trying to reach me, but I stop her and pull away. “Darling, words.”

“As good as you,” she says, her head lolling backward as I reach for her again.

I move closer and push her legs as wide as they will go.

“Do you want my tongue to show you who your fucking husband should be...” I insert a finger, and she moans, “...darling?”

“Yes,” she replies automatically.

So I do just that.

My first taste is everything I missed. The next makes my cock rock fucking hard as I lick every inch because I am obsessed with everything she is.

She groans as I pump my finger into her pussy and lick my way to my very own salvation. It doesn't take long before she pulls on my hair and calls out my name. I'm up as soon as she comes, and my cock is at her entrance. She smiles, and I can't help but kiss her.

“You’ll marry me again,” I tell her, slowly inserting myself into her pussy. “And you will let me fuck you every time your pussy craves me.”

“Yes.” I don’t know which one she agreed to, but I’m taking her answer and rolling with it.

“Fuck, your sweet cunt loves my cock. Feel that, darling. Feel how it milks the shit out of me.” She doesn’t answer, so I grip her chin again and push myself in even deeper, only stopping when I’m fully seated. “Tell me how much you want me.” I make a jerking movement, moving just a fraction as I let her chin go, and she cries into my shoulder, biting it before she speaks, “I want you.”

“Good girl.” I move and stop again.

“Now tell me how fucking much you want me.”

“Fuck. Joey. Fuck! Just fuck me.”

Lifting my hand, I swipe my finger over her bottom lip.

“I would, darling... if you behaved.”

She locks eyes with me and reaches out as if she is going to cuddle me but grips my ass and jerks me toward her, then rocks her hips simultaneously.

Clever girl.

“I want you. And if you don’t fuck me, I’ll find a way to fuck myself.”

“No, that can’t happen. I want to fuck you. I need to get you back in my system. It’s been too long without you.”

“So shut up and fuck me then.”

And I do just that.

Leaning back, I smile before I grip her hips and take control. Rocking back and forth, she sits on the table’s edge, taking me as if she was made only for me.

Just as she is about to come, she reaches for me and pulls herself up my body, so she’s not resting on the table. I’m holding her up by her ass as she starts grinding down on me.

She leans into my ear and whispers, “If you can make me see stars, I’ll marry you tomorrow.”

Ha. That’s a promise she better keep.

Walking her over to the bed, I throw her on it. She laughs as she bounces, and then I climb onto the bed to hover over her.

“You’ll see the fucking moon when I’m done with you.”

“Promises, promises,” she whispers, grinning up at me. “What else are you going to promise?”

“I promise to love you and look after you until my dying breath,” I tell her as I position myself at her entrance. Smiling, I push into heaven. “I promise to make you come as much as humanly possible.”

“Mmm...” She moans, her eyes closing for a second.

“I promise to eat your beautiful pussy for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And dessert.”

“I like the sound of that one.”

“I know how much you like your cunt licked,” I tell her, and she lifts to kiss me. I take my time, slowly pushing in and out. “Then follow it up with my cock having his best day inside you.”

“The best,” she says, smiling, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Fucking amazing,” I whisper.

Then I make her see stars...

... and the moon.

THIRTY-FIVE

I wake feeling... happy.

Joey stayed, even after we fucked into the early morning hours, then passed out. Turning over, I look for him, but he's no longer in my room, and his clothes aren't on the floor.

Getting up, I find a T-shirt and slide it on as my bedroom door opens, and Joey walks in, holding a coffee in his hand. He eyes me, and it's then I realize I slid on one of his old shirts I kept.

"Jerome is awake," he tells me. "Made him breakfast, and he is sitting down watching a movie. He loves *Shrek* right now."

"He does."

"We'll have to take him to Universal Studios."

"We?" I remember everything we said last night, but I figured it was just a high from great sex.

With Joey, it's always great sex.

Amazing.

The best.

"Yes, *we*. Is that a problem?" He walks over to my side of the bed, still shirtless, and hands me the coffee. I take it and look at him warily.

"You don't want kids, and Jerome and I are a package deal. I don't want someone who only wants me when it's not just me they'll be getting."

“I want you. Make no mistake about that,” Joey practically growls. “And I like your kid. And I get that his father is a piece of shit so he will need a father figure in his life. I may not be the best choice, but I want to be *your* choice.”

And my heart skips a beat.

“About last night—”

“We will repeat last night every night.”

I glance down at my coffee, and when I look back up, Joey is down on one knee with a ring in his hand. I grip the coffee mug tight as I gasp, careful not to drop it and burn myself.

“Darling, I want to marry you. Again. For real, this time. This time both of us wanting it, not being forced into it. I look at you, and I see sugar.” I scrunch my nose up at his words, which makes him smile. “You seem sweet, like sugar. But you can also be lethal as sugar is when misused. Scott discovered that. Never abuse something so sweet. It will destroy you. I never want to do that to you.

“I take you, and I take your son as one package. I’ve always liked your son. You know that. I never wanted a child, but with you, it seems I want things I didn’t know I needed.” He pauses, his words sinking in. I glance down at the ring—a ring that’s perfect in every way. It’s simple, yet it’s a statement piece—a large diamond on a simple gold band. Elegant perfection.

“I want to tell you we will take it slow, but I know we can’t do that. I can’t stay away. I try. Fuck, I tried so hard, but I keep finding my way back to you. And I think I will always find my way back to you, Adora. So I want to know, will you marry me? Again?”

I step away so I can place my coffee on the bedside table. As I turn back to him, the door bursts open, and Jerome stands there. He smiles when he sees us and runs straight to Joey, who is holding the ring on one knee.

“Joey! Joey! They’re singing. Aren’t you coming back out?” I smile at Jerome, who does not notice me until Joey looks back at me. “Joey cooked me pancakes, Mummy. With

chocolate. They are so good.” Jerome smiles before he runs back out.

I bite my lip as I look down at Joey. “Joey.”

“Don’t say no. You know that’s not what you want.”

Stepping up to him, I grip his cheeks and look him dead in the eye as I bend over until we’re face-to-face. “I would marry you in this lifetime and the next, Joey Rossi.” I kiss his lips, and he wraps his arms around me, pulling me in. We kiss until I feel tears streaming down my cheek.

He pulls back and asks, “So that’s a yes?”

“That’s a... *hell yes*,” I say, and he smiles.

“So all I need to do is fuck you to get what I want. How about we start now because I need you to move back in with me.” I throw my head back and laugh. He doesn’t laugh, though, because he is dead serious.

“My pussy is sore.”

“I can fix that.” He smirks before those sinful lips land on me once again.

ONE YEAR LATER.

IT’S OUR WEDDING DAY.

Joey tried to get married as soon as possible, holding me to what I said, but I pushed and pushed it back. I needed to make sure this time I wasn’t jumping into anything I didn’t want, and I wanted to make sure Joey was all in as well.

I can hear everyone talking in the front room.

We’re getting married in my bookstore—the very one Joey bought me. Jerome is with Joey, never wanting to leave Joey’s side. They have become the best of friends.

It’s not all about me anymore.

It's him.

He asked that since I am marrying Joey if he could call him Dad.

I didn't know how to answer that question.

So Joey did it for me.

He explained that while Jerome had a father who loved him very much, he would be honored to help fill that role while his father wasn't in the picture.

To which Jerome replied, "So, can I?"

I moved in with him one month later. It probably should have been sooner, considering he was with me every night anyway.

Abigail is doing well. She's gotten herself a boyfriend who owns the coffee shop where she works and is trying to be a decent human, though her selfish ways still peek through often.

"Gosh, you are a vision," Bianca says, taking my hand as the doors open.

I asked her to give me away—she cried and said it would be her honor.

We only have immediate family here, plus Merci. Lucas and Chanel are sitting with Keir and Sailor.

When I walk out, I see Jerome sitting next to Lucas and laughing at him as he pulls funny faces. Chanel looks on with a smile I don't think anyone could break.

But it's when I see my husband-to-be, dressed in all black with a pink tie, that I catch my breath.

He is mine.

And I am his.

My heart may have been disarranged when I met him.

But now we have arranged hearts.

Hearts that beat as one.

And I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Variety GOSSIP

The 'Nice' Brother

Wedding bells, we predicted right.

All the Rossi boys are taken, so who does that leave? I guess
only time will tell.

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FIRST CHAPTER OF UNLIKELY QUEEN

His touch brands my very soul. I can feel it all the way down to the depths of my bones. It's like a fire licking at its victim and being drenched in ice water at the same time. His lips touch mine, branding me, marking my soul so anyone and everyone can see or feel it.

I am his.

In this moment and forever, I belong to him.

It feels like I'm in a daze. I shouldn't know what he's doing, but somehow, I know every single detail. It's like a puzzle in my head, working it out, putting it together piece by piece.

A sweep of his tongue, and the fire smolders.

A bite of my lip, and the fire burns brighter.

My insides are shaking, not understanding but wanting as much as he can give to quench my insatiable need for him.

He pulls back, and in an instant, everything changes. I'm not blind. I can see clearly. His eyes shine brightly into mine, silver and steady. It feels like a drug is clearing from my system, cleansing me of him. I crave his intoxication once more—a hit—that one single touch or a single look can give.

“You feel it, don't you?” My eyes close at the sound of his voice, and I shiver as it takes on an edge. “Now I need you to run... run as if your life depends on it. Because if you don't, I will find you, and I will take you.”

Is it a malicious promise or a delicious threat? What I do know is that it's one I delight in.

“The prophecy?” I ask, and he nods in answer, wings expanding out in all their glory.

And I find myself craving him once more.

“If it comes true...” he continues by way of warning, “... our worlds will intertwine. You will have more power than anyone could ever dream of, and no one will be able to stop you.”

“You won't touch me again?”

I miss it already—his touch, his taste.

“I won't be able to.” His lips meet my cheek, then the same words whisper once more in my ear. “Run, little fighter. Run.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Best Selling Author T.L. Smith loves to write her characters with flaws so beautiful and dark you can't turn away. Her books have been translated into several languages. If you don't catch up with her in her home state of Queensland, Australia you can usually find her travelling the world, either sitting on a beach in Bali or exploring Alcatraz in San Francisco or walking the streets of New York.



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