



A MISSION
MERCENARIES
NOVEL

BRIDGES

Burned

MARIE JAMES

Table of Contents

[Bridges Burned](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Other Series in the Same World](#)

[Mission Mercenary Series](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Social Media Links](#)

[OTHER BOOKS FROM MARIE JAMES](#)

Bridges Burned

A Mission Mercenary Novel

Marie James

Copyright

Bridges Burned: A Mission Mercenary Novel

Copyright © 2022 Marie James

Editing by Marie James Betas & Ms. K Edits

EBooks are not transferable. All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded, or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Other Series in the Same World

[Cerberus MC](#)

[Blackbridge Security](#)

[Ravens Ruin MC](#)

[Hale Series](#)

Mission Mercenary Series

[Lessons Learned](#)

[Mistakes Made](#)

[Bridges Burned](#)

[Depravity Delivered](#)

[Redemption Refused](#)

Synopsis

I didn't swear vengeance on the Severino Family after Ellie's death. I was only a child after all.

I didn't swear vengeance when my father, a coward who wasn't man enough to seek justice for her, drank himself into a divorce.

Going after the men that set all of that into motion would be a death sentence.

I chose to live my life in the shadows, seeking revenge for others.

That was until I ran into the very man that took Ellie's life.

I can still smell the smoke clinging to my skin from all the bridges I burned because of that man.

Walking away was no longer an option.

Killing him would be easy, but taking the woman that was promised to him seemed like a better wager.

Exactng retribution through her was the gamble I made.

Surviving her now seems impossible.

Prologue

Hollis

10 Years Old

I angle my head a little to the right, but it doesn't help me hear the television any better.

Closing my eyes only makes the noise louder.

My chin trembles, but I refuse to let the tears fall.

I'm not a little kid anymore. Crying won't help me, but the tears I hear in my mom's voice cut me in a way I can't explain.

"You don't understand," Dad mutters, his words sounding different right now than they used to.

"I do," Mom argues. "I understand what it's like to lose someone. You're right in front of me, but you're already gone."

He huffs, a familiar sound these last couple of years.

Dad changed when Patrick, his partner in the police force, died. Patrick changed when Ellie died.

I miss her, and I think a part of me always will, but I miss my dad, too.

Mom is right. He's here, but he's not.

The man I knew, the one who couldn't get his gun belt off fast enough after his shift to throw a baseball with me, hasn't made it to a game all season.

They don't think I hear the arguments. I can tell they try to keep their voices down, but Dad struggles with his volume after he starts drinking.

"It's not the same!" he yells, and I can picture him raising his arms before letting them fall at his sides. He's always done this when he's upset. "He was like a brother to me! Ellie was like a daughter!"

“And you have a son,” she says as if he needs a reminder, as if he couldn’t remember me himself.

I swallow against the threat of tears. I know I lost a part of Dad the day Patrick was buried beside his daughter. I know Patrick lost a lot of himself the day he got the call about her accident.

Accident.

That’s what everyone says when they speak about it around me, as if I’m a baby that needs protecting. What people don’t realize is I have ears. I listen all the time. What else could I do over the last two years when others around me are spiraling out of control? I heard Mom use the phrase regarding Dad, but I didn’t understand it fully until recently, until the argument about him losing his job due to drinking.

I heard them mention Ellie and her accident a hundred times in front of me, but the conversation is different when I’m listening outside of the room.

Several men hurt Ellie. Men who Dad and Patrick could identify but for some reason couldn’t arrest. Patrick had an accident, too, only a couple of months after Ellie’s “accident”, but it still makes no sense to me. He was a cop. He’d been trained on gun safety. Dad blames the bad men that hurt Ellie, but the whiskey he drinks hasn’t made it any better.

“Do you think Patrick would do this if the tables were turned? Would Patrick drink himself into an early grave if Ellie were still alive?”

Silence follows, but I don’t understand why Dad doesn’t know the answer. Ellie was Patrick’s world. He’d never do anything that would hurt her.

“You know he wouldn’t,” Mom answers for him. “Please, just sign the papers.”

“I’ll do better,” Dad says, sounding like the broken man I’ve become all too familiar with recently.

“It’s too late, Ray. Sign the papers.”

He begs a little longer, but Mom stands her ground.

He's letting the bad guys win, and he can't even see it himself.

I'm losing my dad because he feels helpless. He won't punish the men that hurt Ellie and caused Patrick to hurt himself by accident. When I see a bully being a jerk at school, I punch them in the nose. Dad should do the same thing. He should hurt the people who caused all of this, especially after the lawyers said there was nothing they could do.

If Dad knows who it is, he should solve the problem.

Instead, he's going to lose his family.

One tear slips down my cheek at the sound of my dad's sobs.

As I dash it away with the back of my hand, I vow to never be that weak.

I'll never be the type of person to let an injustice go by without speaking up about it or solving the problem myself.

I don't care what the lawyers say. If someone is guilty of hurting someone else, I'll make sure they get the punishment they deserve.

Chapter 1

Hollis

Present Day

I'm all for playing a trick on someone. It's not often in my isolated world that I get to engage with people I don't have the first inclination to kill, but what happened here tonight is a little out of my comfort zone for several reasons.

First, I want to warn Liam about his woman. Any chick willing to have you kidnapped, hit over the head, tied up, and gagged, is someone to run from, not smile at. But despite Liam looking around the room with an expression that tells me he'd slit all of our throats, he also seems ecstatic to have just experienced what he did. I don't mean the sex he had in that fucking room. His woman, Raya, looks just as love drunk as he does.

I try to disguise the shiver of nausea that runs up my spine by shifting my weight on my feet.

Love. Ack. No thanks. That shit does more harm than good, and I want no part of it.

Even non-sexual relationships and love have the power to utterly destroy people. My dad's connection to Patrick was brotherly, his connection to sixteen-year-old Ellie was fatherly, and yet he still drank himself to death because of their loss.

As far as I'm concerned, attachments to people aren't worth the trouble.

Burned bridges are the way to go, and I've lived my life since my late teens reflecting that.

Any link I have to anyone is fragile at best. Although I may not care much about living or dying, I won't let my end come on the back of someone I've let myself believe I care about. When it happens, I won't have to point my finger at anyone but myself.

I let my eyes track the same thing he does, just considering myself lucky that Angel's woman isn't here.

Lauren Vos scares me more than he does. She has this way of looking right through you as if she can read the deepest, most hidden parts of your soul before you have a chance to open your mouth and introduce yourself.

I have so many questions about what just happened, but I'm not stupid enough to open my mouth and ask them. Questions in our line of work can get you killed, and for the most part, I don't mind being on a need-to-know basis. The details about why Raya wanted Liam abducted and held hostage aren't really my business.

"You fuckers have a lot of nerve," Liam growls as he makes eye contact with each of us.

I nod, knowing I'd feel the same if not angrier if I got smacked over the head and tied to a fucking chair.

I grin at the pair, grateful I'll never have to deal with that sort of shit.

Liam, once a tough badass, visibly melts under Raya's palm as she presses it to his chest.

It's absolutely disgusting to watch a grown man lose himself to love. It will bring his own destruction, that's assured.

"Who the fuck is that?" Liam grunts, pointing at the new guy.

I wanted to ask the same damn thing, but questioning Angel could mean the man doesn't send jobs my way. I need to stay busy more than I need to get paid, although the jobs he contacts me for pay very, very well.

"That's Fox. Don't worry about him," Angel says, a warning in his tone.

I face Liam, not wanting this night to end in a rain of gunfire.

I look over my shoulder, wondering if putting my back to the new guy is the safest thing right now before speaking.

"That guy's a real fucking psycho," I whisper. "Not like you, not like me, certified. I think it has something to do with

his girlfriend being killed.”

The information I relay was told to me by Nash, and although I can't verify the validity of it, he said it in front of Angel, who didn't argue or correct him.

As if agreeing, Fox bares his teeth like a true, uncivilized psycho before turning around and leaving the house.

Liam turns back to Angel. “Lauren didn't bother to come?”

The air grows thicker in the tiny living room, the mention of her name too much.

“She's spitting fucking mad,” Angel says with a shake of his head, as if he's not in fear of his life, like I am by proxy.

It doesn't matter to Lauren that we're in a dangerous part of Mexico, nor that she's so pregnant she could go into labor at any time. I don't know much about the woman, but I know she wants to be in the middle of all of it. I still think their business, Mission Mercenaries, is more hers than his.

“Since you're all fucking here,” Angel says in a way that makes me wonder why he's even here, considering how annoyed he seems with it all. “I have a job and instead of assigning it to any individual, I'm letting you choose.”

“I'll take it,” I say, stepping forward and raising my hand.

Angel shakes his head as if he doesn't want me to have it. “This isn't a normal job. It's more dangerous than any I've encountered. There's a very good chance that whoever takes this job won't make it out alive.”

“I'm busy for the foreseeable future,” Liam says, pulling Raya even tighter against his chest.

We all laugh. Despite Raya being the one to come up with this entire plan, despite the noises we heard coming from the room not long ago, she looks embarrassed at Liam's obvious reference to the sex he's planning on having. She turns and buries her face into his chest.

“I’ll take it,” I repeat, unconcerned about the danger level. “Gotta die someday.”

“The pay is five times higher than normal,” Angel says, his eyes on Nash for some reason.

What am I? Chopped liver?

I look between Angel and Nash. “Wanna go in halves?”

Nash holds his hands up in mock surrender. Fucking coward.

“I know what we do is dangerous,” Nash says. “But guaranteed death, I’m out.”

Fox reenters the house, a cold beer dangling between his fingers by the neck of the bottle.

“Just giving the guys an opportunity to take a job, five times the pay, probably ten times the danger,” Angel says to the crazy guy.

I can’t believe this shit.

“We can go in halves,” I say, offering the same deal I offered to Nash.

“I work alone,” Fox grunts, making me smile as I look back at Angel.

“I guess it’s yours, Hollis,” Angel says, sounding more disappointed than I like. “I’ll email you the details.”

“This is all fun and everything, but I’ve got shit to do,” Liam says, directing Raya toward the front door of the little shotgun house.

We’re not far behind. We aren’t a team. Fox said it best, declaring he works alone. We all do.

I didn’t take the job because I particularly like danger. I’d much rather get in, serve up a little justice, and get paid. I’m not one to drag a job out. That means I get shit done quickly, leaving me bored.

Maybe this next job will take longer.

The threat of death is nothing new to me. I don't particularly want to die, but it's not like there's anyone around to mourn me.

I shut down the thoughts of my dad, Patrick, and Ellie before they can take over as I walk to my truck. That whole situation I experienced as a child may have been the deciding factor of how I live my life, but I never allow it to get inside of me. It's poison, something that could easily eat away at me from the inside until I end up no better than my father.

Chapter 2

Madelene

I draw in a deep breath, knowing that it's early in the morning without even having to pull back the curtains in my room.

I avoid looking outside as much as possible. I know the bars on the window should no longer bother me. It's not like I'd leave this place.

My ties, the things that keep me in this room, in this house, despite hating every person who roams the halls, aren't chains. I'm not held captive here by restraints or even verbal threats of harm.

I'm imprisoned instead by loyalty, with a vow spoken by someone else.

I'm promised to a man who I hate with a passion, but I know better than to run.

My father, another man I'm not sure I love any longer, gave me to Alessio Severino, heir to the Severino family, the largest crime syndicate in Chicago with ties to old Italy, New York, Boston, with whispers of expanding further south.

I chose this life no more than my father did. Growing accustomed to the life I have to live has been a slow process, something I fight internally daily, but would never have the courage to speak out against.

I'm not shocked when the rattle at my door turns into it swinging open rather than a knock and a request to enter.

I frown at Marcello as he walks inside, as if he owns the place. Despite being the second-born son to Mafia leader, Lucian Severino, he acts as though he's the one set to inherit all that surrounds us.

I watch his face, wondering which side of the man I'm going to get today, considering that he may just be the one to rule it all. It would mean killing his father and older brother,

but from the soulless look in his dark brown eyes, it isn't much of a stretch.

The Severinos are known for their brutality, especially this newest generation. Lucian is fair for the most part, yet unafraid to mete out what he considers justice to those deserving. Alessio and Marcello, however, are a different breed. They feed on the blood and brutality.

"Did you need something?" I ask, trying my best to hide the irritation in my voice.

Marcello loves nothing more than a challenge, and if he feels like I'm overstepping, he'll find a way to quickly put me back in my place.

His eyes take a long time to find mine, and I look away immediately when they do. The man makes cold chills run down my arms and legs despite the warmth of the blanket still covering my lower half.

He doesn't speak as his eyes skate down my body. I'm wearing a t-shirt and have my blanket pulled up around my waist, but the way he watches me makes me feel completely naked.

I'm scared of him, and I was long before our families' connection was solidified by my father's mistake and subsequent vow.

We were in the same class in school, and he always had this malevolent air to him. I avoided him at all costs, and now the man has unfettered access to my room and life. It's terrifying.

He shouldn't touch me. He shouldn't think he has a right to threaten me, yet here I sit, shaking, wondering what he's going to do to me today.

Alessio would literally slit the throat of anyone who so much as darted their eyes in my direction, but his little brother isn't concerned about the chance of that happening.

He's Alessio's blood, and to the family, that means everything. I'm an offering, a reward, my inheritance more the gift than me. Alessio might be angry, but Marcello would

never suffer the same fate as one of their men. It's why the younger Severino has had no problems doing what he's done, making me do what he wants.

Their family connection is also what keeps me silent. The threat of trying to come between the two of them is a terrifying warning to keep my mouth shut. I've seen what happens to someone who speaks out against Marcello. It took weeks for the last guy to float back to the surface of Lake Michigan. I know better by example.

"You look sad this morning, caged little bird," Marcello says, his voice sinister rather than concerned.

"I'm fine," I tell him, wondering if he will read it as a challenge.

His smile is soft, something I've learned not to be fooled by.

Marcello is twenty-one, the same age as me, and females have been obsessed with him since grade school. Something I had to witness on numerous occasions. Not much has changed since our transition into adulthood.

I've seen the women respond to both Marcello and Alessio. Their smiles are radiant, their dark eyes bringing a sort of mystery that fools women into thinking they're the type of men they want to get to know better. They wear masks in public, charming enough to draw nearly anyone in. I've seen how quickly those masks change, how skilled they are at luring in prey. Women practically fall over themselves for the opportunity to be in their atmosphere. They have no idea the danger they're in when all they want is the protection of the family.

Those women's smiles have turned to screams of terror, eyes filled with shock as they're hurt.

Alessio and Marcello pick and choose. One week, I could be forced to witness them fucking some girl, having to listen to her beg for more, harder, faster. The next, it's very possible I'll bear witness to her screaming for her life. The silence that comes not long after the cry for help is the hardest

for me. It's when their eyes turn from victory at scoring a Severino for the night to terror at realizing what's going to happen that haunts my dreams.

"We're going on a trip," he says.

"I'll wait anxiously for your return." I know the man doesn't actually believe that I miss him when Alessio and he leave town, but it's what he wants to hear. Not saying it would be just one more challenge I'll have to survive.

"Miss me?" He chuckles, and I hate the humorless sound. "You're coming with us."

My eyes burn with unshed tears, but I've become a professional at keeping those emotions at bay. The man in front of me loves nothing more than my tears.

He inches closer, the fronts of his thighs touching the footboard of my bed.

My vulnerability is apparent, and despite Marcello never taking liberties that far, I know it will happen one day. I know my virginity is still intact because it's one more threat he has over me rather than it being promised to his brother on our wedding night.

"Wh-Where are we going?" I smile at him, hoping he doesn't focus on my stammer.

The trips away from Chicago are the worst. It's as if the distance the younger Severino put between them and their father makes them wilder, crazier, and more likely to take risks.

His gaze runs up my blanket-covered legs, pausing on my chest before lifting all the way to my eyes.

"Mexico," he says, and I know better than to argue.

I know why they're heading that far south. I know their father will not be happy when he finds out about their trip. I also know better than to open my mouth and remind him of any of it.

I hate my father a little more right now, as I do every time I'm forced to travel with them. I have no idea how long

we'll be gone, but the longer it is, the worse it is for me. It gives time for bruises to heal.

I swallow as I nod. "Will we have a chance to go to the beach?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. I'll talk to Alessio about it. You know he likes to make his bride-to-be happy."

His lip twitches with the reference. He's always been bitter about my betrothal to Alessio. It's not that the man in front of me wants me, he just wants what he was promised. I could be anyone, and his hatred for not being promised would still be just as strong.

The second part of his words is the fact that Alessio doesn't give a shit about my past being a promised possession. He doesn't love me or have any concern for me past protecting me for the investment that I am.

"I'll pack a bathing suit just in case," I tell him, knowing full well we'll never see the beach.

We could be in a five-star hotel overlooking the sand and surf, and they'll keep me in the room with the curtains pulled back just to torture me.

I've never done anything to make them hate me. I'm compliant, doing everything they tell me to do, which I know will happen more than once just by the look in Marcello's eyes as he licks his lips.

"I bet we can get some time away while Alessio takes care of business. Bring the red bikini."

A shiver of terror and disgust races down my spine as he walks away. Marcello and Alessio haven't put me on my back the way I've seen them do with countless women, but that doesn't mean they haven't both forced my head into their laps. Alessio, of course, doesn't know what his brother gets up to with me while he's working. I'm not foolish enough to tell him. Marcello likes to use it as a threat where I'm concerned, knowing I'll be the one punished if the older Severino ever finds out.

I swallow down the bile threatening its way up my throat, only climbing out of bed to shower and dress after the door closes fully.

I think of Elio, wanting to curse him but knowing better than thinking of the dead in an ill way.

My brother, Elio, only ten months older than me, died years ago in a car accident less than a year after he was forced to prove his loyalty to the Severino family. I guess I should be grateful that he is unaware of the deal our father made with Lucian Severino after being caught smuggling merchandise from one of the warehouses he was responsible for running for the family.

Instead of ending up in Lake Michigan, a deal was struck, and although it involved my entire life, I wasn't given a choice. My father was too much of a coward to choose death, but had I been given the option, I think I would've chosen differently.

Thinking of Elio makes me miss my mother. I blame my brother's carelessness for her death. Dying of a broken heart at his loss was a year-long illness, but she's in a much better place, despite me knowing she'd never stand up against the Severino family any more than I have.

Instead of thinking of the past I can't change, I consider what traveling to Mexico means.

Although Lucian Severino is quick to hand out punishment to men that betray him, he stops short of making an example of his sons. They know this. It's why they'll go to Mexico and make deals with the various cartels in order to feed their business with drug money despite their dad being adamantly against it. The boys think their father is too old-school, that he isn't willing to change with the times, and that includes getting involved in drugs because the whorehouse and guns aren't enough to keep them relevant.

They've always been the type to ask their father for forgiveness rather than permission, but I know for a fact this is something Lucian has specifically told them not to do. The

fallout from this could be terrible, and when their father punishes them, it increases the likelihood they'll punish me.

Instead of thinking about what might happen, I let myself drift off to a fantasy land, one where I'm not vowed to a thirty-four-year-old man. One where I won't be walking down the aisle at the young age of twenty-two.

These fantasies tangle with reality even in my head, cutting my shower short because I know the trouble I'll be in if I make any of them wait.

Chapter 3

Hollis

I question my choice of drink for the third time as I lower the glass from my lips. I don't know if the bartender just has a heavy hand or if I've triggered some need for the man to try and get me drunk with a single whiskey and Coke.

Monterrey, Mexico looks gorgeous in travel photos, the mountains a perfect backdrop for the modern-day mecca that it is, but people in the know are well aware of the things that hide in the shadows once the sun goes down.

The front of the bar I'm in is lit with neon signs, a warm welcome to anyone on the street, screaming in invitation. Yet, the bathroom is the place for coke deals and blow jobs performed by hookers after their pimps are handed the money. The back alley no doubt holds the silent secrets of at least one dead body that more than one person has stepped over without reporting.

It's a very public place for such a private meeting, but the players up in the VIP section overlooking the people gyrating on the dance floor don't seem at all concerned about their secrets being spilled. The people here know better than to listen, and the ones that don't are educated very quickly.

I recognize the face tattoos of several of the guards scattered around the club. The Cortez Cartel isn't a group many would fuck with. Not long ago, Cerberus, some motorcycle club out of New Mexico, took out two of the main men and a slew of their lackeys. But like roaches, it didn't take long for them to pop up again. Rumor, according to the people dumb enough to repeat whispers, is that they're involved in trafficking and drugs, but according to the email Angel sent, they aren't my focus.

I pull up the email, knowing I look like any other asshole in here waiting for my international Tinder date to show up. I check the email again.

Apparently, I'm waiting for a group of douchebags to show up, Angel citing that I'll know them when I see them. I should've called for clarification because our idea of a douchebag may be different. But then the atmosphere shifts.

I don't immediately look toward the front door of the club, although I doubt my attention would be noticed, considering the way half the club looks in that direction. I wait for them to pass, taking note of the five men and one woman that walk toward the VIP area.

She's got great legs, ones she no doubt spends a lot of time sticking in the air for the suited guy that has his hand low on her ass. I dismiss her immediately. Angel doesn't exactly take jobs from people that are morally upstanding citizens. I've been sent here to observe and gather intel. She's not meant to be rescued, and with the way she's holding her chin in the air, she's quite fucking content to be exactly where she is.

With his back to me, I log the leader, the one who greets the man acting as a representative of the Cortez Cartel. Three men split off, no doubt bodyguards, while another man moves the woman to a spot several feet away.

I can no better understand what they're saying than someone in the parking lot, but Angel told me of this particular meeting because it's the jumping off point. From here, I'll need to establish where this new group is staying and follow them.

It seems easy enough, a job not exactly like many of the others because it doesn't involve rescuing anyone. It certainly doesn't feel dangerous, warranting the five times the fee.

I'm feeling a little letdown as I watch, lifting my too-strong drink to my lips once again as the man takes a seat beside the cartel rep.

My blood runs cold. I'd recognize that too-tan, smug face anywhere.

I consider my escape options, running my eyes all over the club. The front door would be the obvious choice, and

probably the most dangerous. There has to be at least one exit from the kitchen, and possibly another inside the manager's office, because the head of the house will need a quick escape if any regulatory agency comes to ask questions.

Maybe Angel knows more about me than he ever lets on. Maybe that's why he wanted to hand this job over to anyone but me. Maybe it isn't the job, but what the job means to me, that makes it so fucking dangerous.

Alessio fucking Severino smiles as he smacks a scantily clad waitress on the ass before she has a chance to walk away with his drink order. I've imagined peeling that man's face from his skull as he begs for mercy more times than I'm comfortable admitting.

Alessio Severino, heir to the Severino Mafia, is the one that got away with Ellie's murder.

He's been an aggravation nearly my entire life.

I've considered ridding the world of the man more than once, but he's also a living reminder of why I do what I do. My father never stepped up to take care of the problem, letting the justice system set him free when the evidence that he was guilty was left on her, *in* her.

Knowing he's still alive has always motivated me to work harder, faster, to take out more and more evil. I've never come this close to him. I've avoided Chicago since my mother divorced my dad and moved us away when I was ten.

I dart my eyes to the other man sitting with the woman Alessio was touching as they entered the club. Family resemblance tells me that it's the younger Severino, Marcello.

I've avoided all news of the family, knowing that diving in too deep would put me on their doorstep, seeking vengeance one minute and in a body bag the next. I know going after them would end with my death. It's not the fear of dying that has kept me away, but knowing I can still do some good in this world so long as I'm alive.

Angel's warning is going to prove more truthful than I think he realized when he spoke it. This will end with me six

feet under because there's no way I can face them and not seek the vengeance Ellie deserved. Alessio killed her, and rather than getting justice, her father, Patrick, stuck his service weapon in his mouth. My father, rather than getting retribution, drank himself to death, his own grave only a year old now.

Seventeen years ago, Alessio Severino signed his death warrant, and I imagine he had no idea he'd be signing mine with the same date when he did. I'm nothing to him. The man doesn't know me. He definitely doesn't fear me, but all that will change.

Walking up and putting a bullet in his head would be easy, but it doesn't vindicate my own losses. I had a loving father before Alessio picked Ellie. I had a family, connections, and love. He killed all of that the night he decided it would be a fun way to spend two days when he offered Ellie Baker a ride home from school, only to spend the next forty-eight hours raping and torturing her before growing bored and slitting her throat.

I know all there is to find out about the Severino family. I've spent countless hours poring over the limited information I can find online about them. One could say I have a plan for their final destruction, but I've never set it in motion. I know about their guards and Lucian, the current boss. I know they have branches loyal to them, mostly through force and fear than actual allegiance. I know government agents fear them enough to make them damn near untouchable, as evidenced by the district attorney's office throwing out the case despite the piles of evidence they had. I know that case was the last one to be written about, despite the trail of missing and dead people in Chicago related to them. Their power, it seems, even extends to the media. Even my mother wouldn't speak their name after we moved. My father only spoke it when drunk, but despite only seeing him a handful of times after my mother left him, I heard it enough to never be able to forget.

They protected me a lot as a child, and some days, I wished I didn't know now what they knew then. The crime was gruesome. The crime scene photos I scored from a

crooked Chicago cop who needed money more than he had sense were even worse. I've tortured myself with them for years, keeping a copy at my home back in Kansas.

I do my best to formulate a plan in the very limited time that I have. I want to cause the most damage, the most pain, to the Severino family before finally putting every one of them out of their misery.

I look at the girl and back to Alessio. He isn't paying her any mind. He doesn't dart his eyes in her direction, the way I saw Liam do, the way I notice Angel does. Losing her would probably be no more than a minor inconvenience. He might be mad, but it would probably have more to do with having to waste time finding some other bitch to ride his cock.

Killing his men would give me better access to the brothers, but it wouldn't really cause that much of an uproar other than the slap in the face of killing some of their men.

My eyes lock back on Marcello. He's the target. Killing the youngest Severino will bring the most pain because their younger sister is a woman and doesn't count for shit where the mob is concerned, other than being a token possession.

My hands tremble, anxious to get the party started, but I know my chances of reaching either Severino are slim with the muscle surrounding them. I'll have to bide my time, something that was much easier to do with them hundreds of miles away in Chicago than it is with them both across the room.

It doesn't stop the anger from growing as memories of what I had and what I lost because of them come to mind. My father died, his skin as yellow as a flower in a puddle of his own piss last year, waiting for a liver transplant that would never happen, because he never got the courage to face the reality of losing his best friend and partner.

I refuse to think about my mother and what happened to all of us after leaving Chicago. I've considered more than once that living with a sad alcoholic father was better than what we went through after, but I can't focus on that right now. Those losses make me think I can make my way through the crowd with my gun drawn and survive long enough to watch two

pairs of Severino eyes widen the second before I put a bullet through their heads.

I think about the fallout, focusing on how many lives I'll be saving just by these two brutal organizations being prevented from joining forces. Both the Severinos and the Cortez Cartel are brutal and murderous on their own. Together? The death toll surrounding them would skyrocket.

What I'm not is delusional. It can't happen, therefore I have to wait, and it's the longest wait of my life. I know I'll probably die tonight, but I also know that it will be worth it. One final sacrifice in Ellie's honor. It's what she deserves.

Chapter 4

Madelene

It takes every part of me not to cover my ears with my hands. The music is so loud, I have no idea how Alessio and the guy he's sitting with can hear the other speak.

I bounce my shoulders to the music, reminding myself over and over to keep a smile on my face. A punishment would come if I didn't. It's my job to make people think I'm happy, that I'm dedicated to the family I'm going to marry into, that I'm proud to be by Alessio's side. It's my job to act possessive in public when women want to flirt with my fiancé, but to shut up when those same women are brought back to the hotel room. I want them to walk away, but only because I know what their fate may be, not because of real jealousy.

"What about her?" Marcello asks, pointing to a girl that is getting elbowed by her friend, a clear sign that she's being pressured into approaching our group.

"She doesn't look like she'd know what to do," I say, attempting to sound bored with it all.

"I like teaching," he says, his mouth nearly touching my ear so I can hear him.

I hate his closeness. I hate that he's so close the gun under his suit jacket is digging into my side. The second one, the one hanging from his left shoulder, is the one he uses most often. I've considered more than once that he wears two as a warning to me when Alessio passes me off to him to take care of business.

Guns aren't a new thing for me. They aren't even a Severino-family thing. My father has always been armed, and after Elio passed his loyalty test for the Severino family, it wasn't uncommon to see twin pistols strapped to my brother as well.

I log where the guards are spread out around the club—both ours and the ones keeping an eye on the cartel. The man at the bar seems rather interested in us, but I can't tell if he's

being nosy or if he's meant to go unnoticed but ready to jump in if trouble should come to the cartel.

I keep scrolling, never letting my eyes land on the conversation Alessio is having with his prospective business partner. The man he's meeting with was introduced as Fernando Cortez. I knew instantly there would be repercussions because the expectation was a meeting with Raul Cortez, the leader of one of Mexico's most dangerous cartels. I know from experience that Alessio doesn't like being considered not worthy of meeting with the head of a family, despite him not being the head of the Severino family himself. He thinks he deserves more respect than he gives. Although I don't know much about their business, I know that's a dangerous mindset to have.

I try not to think about what his irritation could mean for me or one of the women watching, who doesn't have a clue what she may be getting herself into.

I'm sure the temperature of the club contributes to the sheen of sweat that forms on my skin, but I know it's mainly due to fear of what's going to happen.

I know Alessio isn't happy. No one watching from the outside would know. They see the man smiling and laughing, letting his eyes dart around the room in a flirty way as he watches the women. They have no clue that he's seething inside, that there's a real chance he may pull his gun out and kill Fernando for the disrespect he is no doubt feeling right now.

I imagine that happening. I imagine being the sole survivor of a gunfight between two criminal enterprises. I imagine being able to go back to Chicago, walking up the stairs of my father's home and packing the things I wasn't allowed to take when I was forced to move in with Alessio and Marcello three years ago after my father was caught stealing from the family. A smile makes my lip twitch as I imagine telling my father that I'm out, that I have no interest in his money, my inheritance, or the family business.

“If he catches you looking at him like that, he’ll make you watch while he kills him.”

I snap back to reality, noticing the guy grinning at me from across the club.

I immediately pull my eyes away and look at Marcello. “I was thinking about a joke I heard on the radio earlier.”

The lie comes easily, but I’ve become an expert at covering my ass in recent years.

“Yeah?” He grins in a way that tells me he knows I’m full of shit. “Tell me.”

I swallow, racking my brain for something, anything, to try and make him believe me.

“What do you call a pig that does karate?”

He blinks at me, but I’m committed now as I smile, praying my eyes sparkle with humor.

“A pork chop.” I chuckle, hoping he can see the laughter rather than hear it. He’d know how scared I am right now, not just for me, but the man he thinks I was staring at while imagining the death and destruction of his family.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” he says, but there’s a quick curl of his lip.

If I didn’t know him, I’d think he was trying not to laugh, that he honestly thought I was cute, but he’s in a dangerous situation and can’t appear at all vulnerable. Of course, I know better. I know the kind of monster that he is.

The dead look in his eyes when Alessio grabs his attention makes me wonder about my fate. Eventually, Marcello is going to have enough of being second. Although he smiled and shook Fernando’s hand when he was introduced as the younger Severino brother, he sat beside me simmering, probably thinking of all the ways he could kill Alessio and become the heir. It’s going to happen eventually. I don’t know how soon. I don’t know if Marcello will wait until Lucian dies and take leadership from his brother, or if he will kill the family’s heir and then wait patiently to come into power. I can

only hope that I'll be either married to Alessio by then or already dead. My marriage will guarantee I won't have to spend my life with the younger brother, but I have no doubt my betrothal will move to Marcello if Alessio dies before we say our vows. There's a very good chance that I won't last too much longer after my father, after those words are spoken before God and our families.

They have fun taunting and torturing me now, but it's my mother's money they're after. Until his death, my father has control of it.

I tug at the hem of my slinky dress as Marcello stands up to listen to whatever it is that Alessio is telling him. I make a point not to make eye contact with anyone, knowing Alessio is watching me as he speaks to his brother.

It isn't long before Marcello stalks back to me, and, playing my part, I smile up at him as he towers over me, my heart racing when he jerks me up to stand.

My pulse pounds in my ears because he normally wouldn't let his anger show so easily in public, especially not with it directed at me. I want to look back at Alessio and beg him for help, as Marcello leads me from the VIP area, but I know the man won't help. He doesn't know what Marcello makes me do. He only smiles when he sees his brother's mistreatment of me. Although neither has left lasting scars, it's not uncommon for either of them to strike me in the face or lead me around with a brutal grip like the one Marcello is using on my upper arm as he guides me out of the club.

My dress sticks to me the second we step out into the Monterrey humidity. It's weird to leave a strange place with no one but Marcello. Protocol would have at least one of the other guards staying close, but the man leaving bruises on my skin right now balks protocol regularly. He couldn't have witnesses to what he does. He'd never risk it getting back to Alessio until he's ready to use the confession against his brother.

Despite his grip on my arm, I can already feel his fingers in my hair.

I don't fight him as he opens the door to the SUV and waits for me to climb inside. I watch him as he looks around. He's looking to see if he's being set up by his brother. He doesn't trust the man, and that has more to do with his own betrayals than anything Alessio has done. The older brother is completely blind to the bone-deep hatred Marcello has for him, and Marcello is too damn egotistical to think that anyone other than Alessio will come after him. It also proves that what I'm already thinking will happen is what he's planning.

I could argue and beg, but I've tried that in the past. It only made things worse.

How the man knows where he's going without GPS is beyond me, but he doesn't pull up a map as he drives through the streets of Monterrey. I know better than to get my hopes up about the beach. The city is land-locked, not even close to a beach, but of course that's not the information Marcello provided when he came into my bedroom uninvited this morning.

It's less than a handful of turns, no more than ten minutes from the club, before Marcello is pulling into a dark alley.

I swallow down the fear and push away the emotion. Getting upset won't prevent this from happening, but straight-forward compliance doesn't guarantee making it out unharmed either. Sometimes he wants me to fight, only because he wants to punish me when I do.

My hands are trembling, the urgency to scratch at his skin making me anxious as he reaches for his belt buckle.

"God, I've been waiting for this for weeks," he says as he unzips. "Come on, baby. Get that mouth on me. We don't have very long."

I'm doing my best to swallow down the threatening bile as I lean forward.

I jerk back at the sound of glass shattering, my hands coming up to cover my face as a spray of glass fills the inside of the SUV.

By the time the glass settles and I look up, a man has a gun pressed against Marcello's left temple.

"Do you remember Ellie Baker?" the man growls.

He's familiar—the man watching us from the bar—but I never imagined his voice would be so deep. I know it's a strange thing to think about, considering I'm going to be dead soon, but I have no control over where my mind wanders.

A slow sinister smile spreads across Marcello's face. I've seen it before and it never ends well for the person it's aimed at.

"Ellie. Baker," the guy says, pressing the muzzle of his gun against Marcello's head with each syllable.

I've heard the name before. The guys always brag about their conquests and crimes, but very few come with names, mostly because they don't take the time to ask or even remember if they did. Ellie was important to Alessio. She was his first.

I don't know if they tell me about what they've done to scare me or because they know I'd never tell anyone else.

Marcello chuckles, a sinister sound that sometimes haunts my nightmares. He's always had more balls than brains, but from the look on the guy's face pointing the gun at him, there's no real chance he'll get away with this.

"If you think Ellie Baker got it bad, you should've seen what I did with my first."

Tears, both due to fear and pain at his reference to Maya, begin to streak down my cheeks. I have an urgency to wash them away, to rid my face of the weakness, but I also know better than to make any sudden moves when someone is pointing a gun.

I wouldn't call Maya my best friend, because forming those types of connection with the way I was raised aren't smart, but she was the closest person besides my mom that I had. Maya was mine and Marcello's age. Despite not wanting to see it back then, I think she only befriended me because she had this not-so-secret crush on my brother. By sixteen though,

Elio was already deeper in with the Severino family than my parents liked and had no time for anything that wasn't sanctioned by Lucian. The head of the family concerned himself more with training and making soldiers. He had no interest in the love lives of teens.

It ate at Marcello that Maya watched Elio rather than watching him, despite Elio and Marcello being best friends. I see the same look in his eyes when he watches me that I noticed when he watched her.

Marcello claims that Maya was his first kill. She was his test, the proof he had to provide to his family that he was loyal. I was a witness to what he did to her, and it didn't look like a first.

"What do you think the Severino family will think of your death?" the man asks, showing no fear. There isn't a tremble in his hand as he presses the gun to Marcello's head. There isn't hesitation in his voice.

"They will burn the world down, seeking vengeance for me," Marcello snarls, and I believe the truth in his warning.

"That's what I'm hoping for."

The spray of warm blood registers on my skin before the sound of the gun firing hits my ears.

Chapter 5

Hollis

I don't know why I expected to hear her scream. The woman is with the Severino family. She has to be just as evil as they are.

She turns her head, her face covered in blood and parts of Marcello's skull, as she looks at his slumped body.

She remains silent even as the echo of the gunshot fades.

"You have no idea what you've done," she whispers, her chin trembling even though I see no new tears springing to her eyes.

I lift the muzzle of my gun and point it in her direction.

Confusion hits me hard when I see the corner of her mouth pull up as she looks down at the body once more. She schools her face quickly. Maybe I'm delusional or imagining it, but I was certain she almost smiled at seeing her companion turning ashen gray.

"What do you know about Ellie Baker?" I snap.

She looks from the body to the tip of my gun and then back to my eyes.

"They spoke of her," she says, her voice sounding as distant as I imagine her memories are. "Alessio bragged about hurting her."

"Were you involved?" I growl.

She looks confused for a second before she shakes her head. "I was in kindergarten when it happened."

I know she's no better than the others. Her link to the family, the way Alessio put his hand at her back as they entered the club, tell me she's valuable to him on some level. But as much as I'd like to, I can't kill her right now. I want his pain to be drawn out. I want him to reel from the loss of his brother, and then maybe I'll start picking them off one by one

before putting a bullet in his head. Quick and painless isn't the level of vengeance and retribution that Ellie deserves.

I holster my gun as I take a step back, memorizing her face and the pattern the blood makes on her skin. The shadows begin to move. I cover my head with the hood of my jacket before turning and disappearing down the alleyway.

I may not have to worry about her after all as I watch several men approach the car. There's a very real chance that she'll go missing, either sold or taken away to be used by the men closing in on the SUV.

This isn't the type of town that produces witnesses, no matter what someone saw. They're more likely to call a friend to get help picking apart the car and selling it for parts than they are to call the police and report a crime.

Marcello Severino, second-born son to kingpin mob boss, Lucian Severino, will be rolled out of that vehicle and tossed to the side like the garbage that he is. His connection to the Mafia don't mean shit on the streets of Mexico.

The woman is no longer my concern. There's a real chance that she'll take her last breath before the sun rises.

I try not to feel bad about that as I climb back into my vehicle and drive away. Her connection makes her guilty, and that's all that matters. Women are no less deserving of retribution than men are, and if she listens to them brag and does nothing to stop them or seek justice for their victims, that's as good as playing a role herself as far as I'm concerned.

I head back to the club, my real concern still there. I don't want to lose Alessio Severino while he's still in Mexico.

Killing him right now isn't part of the plan, but I don't want to miss the fallout from what I just did.

I pay cover for the second time, having changed my shirt in my truck. I don't draw any more attention from the bouncer than I did the first time. I'm just one of a hundred gringos in the place, wanting to have a little fun in Mexico.

I'm inching toward the bar, planning to go to a different bartender than I did the first time when I dart my eyes in the

direction of the VIP area.

I stop in my tracks, noticing the empty space that no less than thirty minutes ago held the second-in-command of two very dangerous organizations.

My jaw ticks as I start walking again.

It will draw unwanted attention if I turn right around and head out. The goal is always to blend in, to be unremarkable. I should look just like every other guy in their twenties that's in here.

I'm five feet from the front door as I pat my pockets, looking at the ground.

"Did you see a wallet?" I ask the bouncer, making sure to keep my face angled down.

"No English," he says, even though I heard him flirting with the women that entered right in front of me in perfect English, not five minutes ago.

I keep up the charade for a minute longer as I retrace my steps back to my truck.

I hate to think I'll have to head to Chicago for the second damn part of my plan. I never wanted to step back into that city again. It holds too many ghosts. It also more than triples my chance of death because of the stronghold the Severino family has there. I just happened to get lucky tonight. If Marcello was paying attention, rather than concerning himself with getting his dick sucked by his brother's girl, then the man might have gotten the jump on me. I won't get that lucky a second time, especially after Alessio's guard goes up with the news of his brother's death.

I circle the block, confused at my luck, when I notice an SUV, looking exactly like the one Marcello drove away from the club in, passes me by. The image in my rearview shows me the same specialty tag I know to be an elite car rental place.

I take my time turning around, having a feeling I know exactly where the vehicle is heading.

The three guards have to be in there with Alessio, and I know there's very little chance that I'll be able to kill him tonight, not that I want to.

I parallel park several blocks away, knowing I'll die if I try to get a look at him walking up to the SUV holding his brother's dead body.

There's always a chance that the vehicle is gone since it's been ten minutes or more since I left. The street guys around there could've easily had it moved in that time, but something tells me my luck is going to run out if Alessio already knows about Marcello's murder. It makes me less confident in my ability to walk away right now. I was concerned that the woman would describe me, and Alessio would send his guys out hunting for me. If she can describe me, so can the people in the shadows I walked past after killing him.

My mind is racing with all sorts of scenarios as I wait, my gun ready to shoot anyone who approaches. What I won't do is run. I set a plan into motion, and I have to see it through.

It shouldn't have been so easy to kill the man. The license plates made me think I was on a suicide mission because there's no reason my first gunshot should've been able to break the driver's side window. The company is known for its armored cars, providing a much-needed service considering the number of criminals that funnel through the city.

It wouldn't surprise me if the Severino family doesn't put every man connected to the car rental place in the ground, but I refuse to feel guilty about that either. Complacency and secondhand association is just as bad as them being the men who deal guns and drugs to kids, as well as the traffickers who steal and rape men, women, and children.

I wait for nearly an hour in the dark, but no one approaches. It doesn't mean I'm safe. I know how this will end. I know Alessio will more than likely smile down at my bleeding body, much the same way I was smiling when I pulled the trigger and ended his brother. It still feels like half

of a victory, and before seeing them in the club tonight, that's fifty percent more than I thought I'd ever get.

Chapter 6

Madelene

I register the shift in the air as someone pulls open my car door, but I can't seem to pull my eyes from Marcello.

It has to be a dream. The monsters in my nightmares are never slain.

I'm jostled, blinking and opening my eyes to an irate Alessio.

"What the fuck happened?"

I blink again but this monster doesn't disappear.

I don't know how long it's been since the man came out of the shadows before disappearing back into them just as quickly, after his task was done.

"Madelene! Fucking look at me. Who fucking killed my brother?"

I shake my head. "I don't know."

Alessio, with his hands still holding me by the shoulders with a punishing grip, looks around as if someone knows the answers to all his questions.

I watch his face and the stages of anger as he tries to process what's going on, crying out before I can stop myself when he pinches my face roughly at my cheeks, forcing me to look right at him.

"Who did this?"

"I don't know," I repeat, but the scowl on his face tells me my answer isn't enough. "I didn't recognize him."

"What did he look like?"

"Blond hair," I lie. "Bl-blue eyes. American."

"What did he say?" Alessio snaps. "Did he say why?"

"He didn't say anything."

“Then how the fuck do you know he’s American?” he growls, making my pulse pound harder than the gunshot did.

“H-His watch. He demanded his w-watch,” I stammer, unsure why I’m lying. It isn’t my fault Marcello is dead, but I don’t think it will be received very well if I told him his only brother is dead because of a girl he killed while he was in high school.

“He’s still wearing his watch, boss,” one of the guys says from the other side of the vehicle.

Alessio’s cheek twitches as he looks at me harder.

“I think he got scared when the gun went off. I don’t think he meant to hurt him.”

Alessio’s grip grows more painful, but then he shoves me away, into the hands of one of the guards.

He doesn’t speak to me again. Before the guard can turn me away, I watch as the man I’m set to marry leans into the SUV on my side, with his arms on the top of the doorframe. He’s pissed, but he doesn’t seem sad. Did I get it wrong? Is he somehow involved? Did he come to Mexico against his father’s direction because it would be easier for someone to kill Marcello? Does he know exactly what the killer looks like and now he knows I’m lying?

I hear no sirens as the guard shoves me roughly into the back of a different SUV. I’m not surprised the police haven’t been alerted. I have no doubt they are on the cartel’s payroll. With the meeting tonight, that indirectly puts them on the Severino payroll now that the connection has been made. There will be no official investigation, but Marcello was right. The Severinos will burn the world down seeking justice. It’s only a matter of time before some of the blame lands on me. Any other day I’m called weak and worthless, but tonight, somehow, it would be expected of me to stop an armed man before Marcello was shot, even if it meant diving across the vehicle and putting myself in harm’s way. I don’t matter to the family in the long run, but Marcello did. Alessio will hate me more now than he did before, and that’s saying something. The man despises me.

It seems like both seconds and years before the SUV stops. I have to consider that I'm in shock with the loss of time, but it doesn't make sense. Marcello's death isn't the first I've seen, and I'm certain it won't be the last, unless Alessio loses his temper more than usual tonight.

"Madelene?"

I turn my face, looking into the familiar eyes of Julio Scovi. He has worked for the Severino family for as long as I can remember. He's older, past his years of having to prove himself to anyone who might be watching, like Marcello and Alessio, but he's no less dangerous, no less brutal when he has to be. He's as bad as the rest of them. He's never mistreated me, but he's never gone out of his way to stop anyone else's mistreatment either.

I frown up at the man. "What?"

He sweeps his hand to the side, and only now do I realize that we're at the hotel and he's standing on the curb in the open passenger side door.

"Sorry," I mutter as I climb out. "The service entrance?"

I nearly gag when he points to the glass door, my reflection making me look like an extra in a horror film. I swallow against the threat of vomit at the sight of Marcello's blood coating my body.

"You'll need a shower. This may be Mexico, but we can't just walk you through the lobby looking like that."

I nod my understanding, following behind him. His strides have always been long, but for some reason tonight, I feel as if I need to practically jog to keep up with him.

I don't know what will happen. I don't know how Lucian will react to the news of his son's death. I've been instructed on a lot of things. I've been told of my expectations and how I'm supposed to act, but this was never on the list of possibilities. The family has always seen themselves as indestructible. This was never something they had to plan for.

"Shower," Julio grunts the second he opens the door to the suite.

It's been possibly the longest day of my life. Between the travel, it being so late, and Marcello's death, I can't help but look longingly at the sofa as I pass by it toward the room designated for me. The guards take turns being on duty, but their room is next door. This three-bedroom suite is for Marcello, Alessio, and me. The privacy provided isn't for my comfort but because the guys get tired of looking at me, or that's the reason they give anytime we travel. I'm just grateful to have a little space.

My throat seizes as I reach in to turn the water on for my shower. It's been a long time since I thought about Maya. The callous way Marcello taunted that man with her memory tonight doesn't surprise me. The younger Severino would never consider that he was in real danger, that maybe he should beg for mercy rather than provoke a man with his finger on the trigger of a gun. His family has always protected him, made sure he was as safe as they could make him. They've covered up and cleaned up behind him so many times that he had to have expected to be saved.

This has to be a dream. There's no way the monster is dead. My luck just doesn't work out that way. Maybe I'm not looking at this from the angle I should be. It's not very lucky of me if Alessio comes back and takes his loss and grief out on me. I still have to consider that this was a setup, that Alessio got wind of Marcello's hatred, and somehow my lies have botched the older Severino's plans.

My entire body feels like it's in spasm as I step into the shower. I want to be brave. I want to face whatever Alessio may have planned for me with my chin held high, but I've seen what the man can do. I know he takes as much pleasure in the screams as he does in the finale.

I think of Elio, and consider not for the first time that wherever he is in the afterlife is better than what I'll be facing tonight.

The clothes I couldn't be bothered to take off cling to me more now than they did with the humidity when we stepped out of the club. I know I won't be able to take the

dress off without tearing it, but it's not like I'll ever wear it again. It will always be a reminder of what happened tonight.

My stomach turns at the thought of not having the opportunity to wear it again.

Will Alessio leave me naked when he dumps my body like he does with all the others?

I barely make it to my knees before I get sick in the corner of the shower, grateful for only having had two drinks at the club tonight.

I try to convince myself that I'm brave, that I can face whatever Alessio has planned, but my tears still mix with the water running down my face. Being dead isn't my concern. It's the path and time I know he'll take to get me there.

Chapter 7

Hollis

I should feel better than I do as I sit in my truck outside of the hotel I followed Alessio Severino and his men to last night. It isn't the exhaustion making me twitchy, but the barely controlled anger making my skin tingle.

It took years and countless mistakes before I was able to get control of my temper. It took focus to learn how to channel it rather than letting it have authority over my actions. Right now, I'm having a very hard time reminding myself that I'm more helpful to people alive than going out in a blaze of glory that wouldn't even make the news.

I doubt anyone will report on Marcello's death, not even in Chicago where the family reigns supreme. I wouldn't be surprised if Lucian didn't pay media outlets for airtime, making his youngest son look like an angel rather than the psychotic man he was.

My head dips, heavy on my shoulders, but sleep right now isn't an option. I'm already regretting that I didn't get out of the truck and try to sneak up and see Alessio's face as he stood over his brother's dead body. The windows of the SUV were too tinted to see anything in the darkness last night, and I only saw him in profile for the briefest of seconds when they returned to the hotel in the early hours of the morning.

That's what has to be wrong. Not seeing him break down, not seeing him beg God to take him rather than his little brother is why I don't feel even partially vindicated. One-third of the Severinos' monsters has been wiped from the face of the earth, and I should feel relief or something akin to justice, but I don't.

The beast inside of me doesn't feel at all satisfied.

That woman's reminder last night that she was only a child when Ellie was tortured, raped, and murdered, has to be why. I know there's a twelve-year age difference between Alessio and Marcello. Unless the family is even more fucked

up than I thought, Marcello would've been safe at home, probably watching cartoons when his older brother sealed his fate.

I'm twitchy, fighting the urge to storm into the hotel and take all the bastards out. Ending Marcello has done nothing more than let some of those demons I've fought for years fly freely. Killing one piece of shit doesn't serve the justice Ellie deserves. As much as I've tried to fight thinking of her more than just in passing, I can't keep from picturing her bringing her finger to her lips, a reminder this was a secret when she'd sneak me an extra cookie when she was babysitting. I remember her brave face despite the tears in her eyes when she told me all boys except me were stupid. I realize now that was after a breakup and her feelings were hurt.

There aren't many people that die the way she did that were deserving of it, so saying she didn't deserve what happened to her would be fruitless. Marcello's death was earned, and honestly, he probably should've suffered. If I stopped to think about what I was doing, I might have done things differently, but I still have the chance with Alessio. There's still an opportunity there. I pray that after I'm done with him, I can finally lay Ellie to rest in my head.

I can't change the past. I can't go back in time and intervene by telling Ellie not to accept a ride home from school from her classmate. I can't stop Patrick from putting his gun in his mouth. I can't prevent my father from dying of cirrhosis of the liver because he drank his pain away. I certainly can't let it go. I guess we all deal with her death in our own ways. Those men were weak, too moral to seek vengeance. It's lucky Ellie had me.

I perk up, my hands clenching the steering wheel when I see Alessio in a fresh suit come out of the hotel. Other than looking a little tired with more shadows around his eyes than I saw in the club last night, he looks fine. His jaw twitches as he glances around, never looking in the direction of my truck. His head is held high, a cocky, indignant look on his face. I picture it shattering into a million pieces with a shotgun blast despite not having a shotgun with me on this trip.

I pull my hands from the steering wheel, the off chance that he'll get away before I can do something coming to life inside of me. One hand is on my gun, the other on the door handle because I have to do something. I want to take him, torture him, have him beg for his life before killing him, but I'm outnumbered. I'm logical most of the time, and I know that it's very unlikely that I can kill all his men and get him to a place where I can live out all my sinister dreams as I cut away pieces of him. Killing him quickly wouldn't offer the same thrill, but it will have the same conclusion.

Then I see her.

She's no longer covered in pieces of Marcello. She's no longer wide-eyed and shocked.

Her head is held just as high, revealing the smooth column of her throat. Her dress today is less revealing than the one she was wearing last night, but the way it clings to her breasts is no different. She's vulnerable right now. Her body on display would make it easy to strike out and hurt her too. Her makeup is perfect, her eyes bright and shining, lipstick as flawless as her skin.

It's a slap in the face, both her air of indifference and Alessio's freshly pressed suit. It tells me both of them were less affected by what happened last night than I'd hoped. I wanted to watch the Severino family crumple with the loss of their youngest male, but it seems it's business as usual.

I realize I've lost my chance to go after him by simmering in my hatred, as he climbs into the back of the SUV after the woman enters. I have no doubt they verified the safety of Alessio's armored vehicle after I so easily broke the window on the other one last night. Getting to him the same way I did his brother would be impossible.

For some reason, I can't stop picturing her face when they pull away from the hotel.

I have no clue who the woman is, but she walked in with Alessio last night and walked out with Marcello. She has to be important to them in some way. I doubt Alessio would keep a whore around after the death of his brother. If anything,

they would close ranks and only allow those closest to his family around.

Yet, she had Alessio's hand on her back at the club, but she was getting ready to suck Marcello off in the alley. Sexual kink and perversion wouldn't surprise me. It's her presence after tragedy struck the family that's confusing.

I keep back some distance as I follow them, grateful for the heavier traffic in downtown that helps me stay off their radar. The SUV pulls up to a restaurant as I drive past them, circling the block before finding a parking spot of my own.

It's a stupid choice, one that may land me in water hotter than I can get out of, but I climb out of my truck and head into the restaurant. The hostess at the front frowns at my jeans and t-shirt. It's very clear that I don't fit in with the unspoken dress code. Another mistake is drawing attention to myself.

"Trabajo," I tell her, asking for work.

She nods, waving me toward the kitchen without a word. I'm fluent in Spanish, something I worked hard on after deciding to enter into this line of work, but I don't want this woman to know that I speak the language. People say a lot of shit they shouldn't when they think they're in the presence of people who can't understand what they're saying. It's as if it thrills them to spill secrets in front of unknowing witnesses.

Our trip to the kitchen doesn't put me directly in Alessio's line of sight, but I'm still able to track them to the far corner of the restaurant. I slow my steps as I watch him shake hands with Raul Cortez, leader of the same cartel he met with at the club last night. I want to flip the nearest fucking table at witnessing Alessio's business-as-usual behavior only twelve hours after I blew his brother's brains out.

I flinch as something is pressed into my chest, and it's troubling that I'm losing focus and getting sloppy. I look down and see the hostess that escorted me back in this direction.

"Siéntate ahí," she says, pointing to a booth off to the side. Sit there.

I grip the paper pressed against my chest as she takes a step back, knowing it's a job application. I mimic writing, asking for a pen.

She pulls one from the waist apron she's wearing as she rolls her eyes. They must be really hard up for help. Normally I'd be turned away for looking unpresentable and not coming in prepared.

"Gracias," I tell her, drawing another frown to her face as I accept the pen and take a seat in the booth.

I don't know how my luck keeps holding out, but I can see Alessio in his spot across the restaurant.

I only look up a few times, making sure I'm not drawing attention to myself as I fill in the lines on the application with fake information. I don't put anything off the wall because I don't want to be memorable.

Alessio's meeting with Raul doesn't last very long, and I have no doubt that the terms of whatever contract they're working on have already been ironed out and this is just the official final agreement.

Raul stands, his cartel guards shifting, as he shakes hands with Alessio before walking away. Severino doesn't even show enough respect to stand as this happens. Although I can't see his face from my angle, I imagine that Raul isn't very impressed with the hint of disrespect.

The Mafia leader is less eager to leave as he scoots further into the booth, and then she's there—the woman who has seen so much, she didn't even bother to scream as she was covered in her lover's blood.

Her eyes dart to the side, but never look directly over at me. She nods as he speaks to her, and I take a moment to really look at her, trying to just see rather than let my feelings about the bitch take over.

Her right leg bounces, jostling the tablecloth. Her hands are twisted together in her lap, and despite her back being as straight as a board—something that tells me she's not only trained but cultured—there's still a tension in her shoulders

that tells me she's not exactly comfortable right now. I don't know if it's grief or fear that's making her give off these subtle clues, but something is going on with her.

I follow her eyes across the restaurant when she looks up, watching as another man approaches the table. He hands a stack of papers to Alessio, and I hate that I can't see what it is from my vantage point. Alessio tilts the papers in her direction, and she shakes her head at what she sees. Satisfied, Alessio distributes the papers to the men surrounding him, keeping one before handing the remainder to the man that provided them to him.

Alessio stares down at the sheet in his hands before ripping it in half.

Whatever he sees enrages him, the tips of his ears turning bright red even though his face remains a mask of calmness.

I spend the next half hour working through the application and tracking them as they sit and have a drink. I don't know if it's in response to what has happened or if Alessio would normally drink whiskey before noon. I'm too busy trying to keep my eyes off the woman to pick apart his actions.

When she slides out of the booth, Alessio standing up after her, I drop my head.

I know I have a little time to stick around, too curious about what was on the paper, because they didn't leave the hotel with their luggage. It tells me that they don't intend to check out today.

I wait until the efficient busboy clears the table before slipping him a twenty on his way back to the kitchen as I pull the ripped paper from his tray.

He shakes his head like I'm insane, but he tucks the money into his pocket before darting away.

The rough drawing I'm staring at makes no sense.

I watched her approve this image, but I'm not staring down at a crude drawing of my face. The guy in the picture

looks nothing like me, and there's no mistaking her lie because off to the right are the words *blond hair, blue eyes, American*.

My hair is nearly black, my eyes only one shade lighter, so damned dark most days you can't tell the difference in pupil versus iris. The only part she got right was American.

There was no reason for her to lie. It's not like I'm trying to get away with what I did. Someone who feels guilty wants that. Someone who wants to remain anonymous wants that. I want the Severino family to know what I did before they come to the same end. I want them to be well aware of exactly why I'm seeking justice and that even seventeen years later, they aren't safe from the evils they've participated in.

It doesn't make me happy that if Alessio's men spot me they'll look right past me because she lied about my description. This bitch is going to get some poor guy, matching this description, killed. She's just as damned evil as the rest of them.

Does she get her thrills this way? Does it turn her on to watch destruction in her wake?

My jaw flexes, annoyance and anger threatening to bubble over as I shove the fucking paper in my pocket and leave the restaurant.

Chapter 8

Madelene

“That’s not the point,” I hear Alessio growl into the phone.

I deduced very quickly that the call is from his father, and the man isn’t happy about this entire situation. The yelling I catch every once in a while from the other end tells me he’s not an emotional wreck over the news of his son’s death. Maybe the family has seen and taken part in so many deaths that even the loss of one closest to them doesn’t register the same way it does with normal people.

Alessio’s face turns a variety of shades of red as the call continues. More than once, I’ve felt his eyes on me as I sit on the couch. It’s where he pointed when we got back from his meeting with Raul Cortez. If I had to guess, Lucian is more livid about the boys going against his direct orders about building a relationship with the cartel than anything else.

Even Alessio seems angrier about the audacity someone had in killing his brother than lost to grief over it happening.

Last night went nothing like I expected. The door to my room didn’t open once. I know this because I stayed awake all night, fearful of Alessio’s return to the hotel.

The man has barely said a word to me. Although it’s not unusual for him to ignore me, he’s definitely looking at me more often than usual.

I feel the suspicion in his eyes, feel the blame. His anger hasn’t been directed at me in any other way, but I know it’s only a matter of time.

Alessio speaks of revenge and retribution, of disrespect and how this will look for people back home as he raises and lowers his voice to a growl, speaking with his father. I hear him confirm his need for reinforcements from Chicago, requesting men from New York and Boston as well.

I'm honestly surprised that Lucian hasn't demanded that he come home. I know the blame for this will be placed on Alessio's shoulders. His father is a brutal man. He thinks all the bad that happens is Alessio's fault. He's second-in-command and shit rolls downhill. If something happens that Lucian feels could've been avoided, even if it would require being a mind reader or predicting the future, the fault lands on his oldest son.

Alessio speaks of family and respect as the call continues. By the time it ends, he seems more upset than he was last night when he pulled me out of the SUV covered in parts of his brother.

He grips his phone, leaning his head back as he stares up at the ceiling. A calm, controlled Alessio is a terrifying thing. Anyone can rant and rave to get their point across. When the world is in utter chaos and someone stays calm, that's when you know they're a threat.

I swallow as I watch him pace, longing for my phone as I watch him put his in the pocket of his slacks. My phone was in my purse in the vehicle last night. I didn't even consider grabbing it before leaving the scene. I know better than to ask for it, despite having daily contact with my father being one of the conditions of this fucked-up arrangement our families have. It wouldn't surprise me if Alessio wasn't planning to text my father, pretending to be me. It wouldn't be the first time I was punished this way.

My fingers grow extremely interesting as one of the men enters the living area of the suite. I sense more than see him approach Alessio. The conversation they have is spoken much too low for me to decipher.

I happen to look up at the same second Alessio looks over at me, but I've learned not to dart my eyes away. Playing stupid never works out in my favor. It's a fine line between not acting afraid and being scared just enough that the man doesn't see it as a challenge, but I know my time is limited in that regard.

“Leave,” Alessio says, his upper lip twitching in barely caged rage.

I stand immediately, walking toward the front of the room.

Before last night, it wouldn't be unheard of for me to take a walk outside even when traveling. The Severinos know I'd never walk away from them. It would guarantee my father's death, something I've been diligent to avoid triggering.

The guard standing there stiffens when I approach, and the action hits me like a ton of bricks. I wasn't crazy, thinking I was being looked at with suspicion. What kept me with Alessio and Marcello was loyalty to my family. My father spoke of it often, told me on numerous occasions that he and I are the only ones left. With our deaths, our entire family dies. It's the ultimate insult for us, and the biggest victory for those wiping us from the face of the earth. Maybe it's pride and the sense of family instilled in me by my mother that has kept me standing strong rather than giving in to the same urges that took my brother away.

I look up at Julio, but his eyes are over my shoulder, across the room in Alessio's direction.

He doesn't have to tell me that it's more than a vow that's now holding me prisoner.

Instead of pressing an issue I know I'll never win, I turn back in the other direction, avoiding eye contact with Alessio, and step inside the bedroom designated to me. I close the door softly, wondering if it will trigger the beast in Alessio. I don't know if he'll translate it to mean I'm giving him privacy or demanding some of my own. He could take it either way. It wouldn't be the first time I've closed the door and been accused of hiding things. Leaving it open could also bring on accusations of being nosy. I've been called my father's spy more times than I can count.

I can literally do nothing right because they'll twist my behaviors to suit their moods.

I sit on the bed, waiting for the door to swing open, but it never does.

I spend the first couple of hours terrified about what will happen, and although I calm some after that, I never settle into a false sense of security.

Adrenaline keeps me awake until the early hours of the evening, but eventually the exhaustion carries me into sleep.

I spend the next two days in that room, my meals being brought to me wordlessly by Julio.

I don't know what to think of Alessio's absence, but I know better than to think that it means he's given up whatever assumptions he's made about me.

From inside the room, I can tell from chatter and the rise and fall of voices that reinforcements have arrived from the States.

It's the morning of the second day when my door opens, but Julio doesn't have a tray from room service in his hands as he steps inside uninvited.

My jaw clenches, a threat I doubt would be valid now on the tip of my tongue. He wouldn't test Alessio in this way, stepping into my space, if he didn't feel like it was allowed, as if I've lost all protection.

My skin pebbles with gooseflesh as I watch his eyes scan the room.

“You need to pack your things.”

“Are we going home?”

I don't have the illusion that I'm safe in either location.

Instead of answering, he simply turns around and walks out, leaving the door standing open for the first time in two days.

I consider that maybe this was Alessio's goal the entire time as I try to pack my things with shaking hands. My nerves are tattered, my thoughts racing as I zip up my small suitcase. We've already been here longer than I expected, meaning I'm

running dangerously low on clothes. I know better than to bring up such a trivial thing at a time like this. If we were back home, I'd place an order online and not a single eye would be batted at things being delivered. I'm supposed to look the part of a spoiled Mafia princess. Buying things has never once been a complaint of theirs, but I don't even have access to do that here. My phone still hasn't been returned, but its absence is more of an inconvenience than anything else. I would never message or call anyone I wasn't allowed to. I've seen too often them following through with their threats to take that chance.

I see nothing but Alessio's back as I leave the room, pulling my suitcase behind me. I know I'm going to be forced to face him eventually, so I know better than to feel grateful with the reprieve right now.

Chapter 9

Hollis

“Care to explain your email?”

Angel sighs on the other end of the line at my question. I don't know if he's upset with what he has to tell me or if it's because I called him rather than responding in email like I normally would. I don't have time for him to check his computer. I need fucking answers right now.

“What started as an intel gathering gig has now been changed.”

“I got that from the email,” I say, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice. “Any idea why?”

“I guess some shit went down, and the customer wants a woman pulled from the group rather than it being just a watch-and-gather job.”

I remain silent, hoping that it will make Angel divulge more information, but he plays this game better than I do.

I press the speaker button and pull the phone from my ear, switching from the call app back to the email.

I stare down at the picture of her. It's a few years old, and it makes me wonder who the person is requesting her rescue if they don't have anything more recent than her high school graduation picture.

“Some shit went down?” I repeat.

Angel sighs once again. “I should've told you from the start, but you weren't concerned then. The customer is Madelene Lombardi's father. The men she's with are Alessio and Marcello Severino. From what I gather, she's Alessio's fiancée, but her father feels like his daughter is no longer safe with them.”

“He didn't think to just call them and tell them to bring her home?” I ask, not hinting that I know one of them is lying dead on a concrete slab somewhere.

“I don’t have all the details, but I don’t think she’s exactly willing to be there. I get a family feud, servitude vibe from the man. He isn’t exactly rushing to give me all the details. He did say the job will pay double what the first offer is.”

“That’s a lot of fucking money,” I mutter.

“I made him pay half down because he honestly didn’t sound like he could back up his offer, but the money came through with no problem.”

“I’ve seen her with them,” I say. “She doesn’t look nor act like a fucking prisoner.”

“It’s up to you. Hold on.”

Rustling comes over the line, but it doesn’t completely silence his next words.

“Do it, Lauren, and I’ll fuck your ass until you beg me to stop.”

“Try and see what happens, asshole,” she growls back.

I’m scared *for* the man. Lauren isn’t the type to be fucked with.

“Take it or don’t,” Angel says, irritation clear in his voice. “Gotta go.”

The call goes dead.

I can’t pull my eyes from her picture, no more than I felt the urge to tell Angel that I’m the one who caused the problems for his customer down here in Mexico several days ago. I don’t care if the woman was offered up as some kind of consolation prize by her family. It’s clear in her behavior that she took to it like a pig to shit because she’s just as stoic and unaffected by murder as I imagine Alessio would be.

Things aren’t going to plan. I haven’t seen the Severino family men scouring the streets looking for Marcello’s murderer. I have noticed them nearly doubling forces over the last two days as I’ve sat in my truck and watched the hotel.

Other than the guards making regular patrols around the building, I haven't seen much action.

I'm on edge, the lack of sleep over the last three days making me feel insane. I slept from two thirty to five this morning, but the limited sleep just isn't enough. I know how dangerous it is, but I'm operating under the premise that I can sleep when I'm dead. Considering my goals with this entire situation, I won't have to wait much longer.

She seems like an illusion when she emerges from the front of the hotel. Alessio walks ahead of her, keeping his distance, which is in contrast to the way he guided her in the club.

He looks no worse for wear than he did the morning after Marcello's death. His suit is pressed to perfection. His hair is perfectly slicked back with gel or hairspray.

To my surprise, she gets into a car, riding in the front seat with one of the guards rather than climbing into the back of one of the armored SUVs with Alessio.

It feels like a trap as the vehicles are loaded with their luggage, but it doesn't stop me from following the girl when the other SUVs split off in a different direction.

I follow the car. It doesn't take long to realize we're heading toward the small airstrip in the south part of the city. They're sending her home, but I doubt the father placed that call and these men are listening to what he has to say. I've done plenty of research on the Severino family to feed my lust for their deaths. Not once has a Lombardi been mentioned in anything I've read. That alone tells me that the man wanting his daughter back has no control over this family.

I made a choice, following this car rather than Alessio's, but as the vehicle pulls up to a red light, I still haven't decided exactly how any of this will pan out.

I throw my truck in drive behind them and rush out. The single shot I fire into the vehicle draws the attention of every other person at the intersection, but I don't pause to concern myself with what they could be capturing with the cameras on

their phones. I don't care if authorities will watch the video footage from the red-light cameras and identify me. There's no way I can grab her if she makes it past the gates at the airfield.

It all seems to move in slow motion—the firing of my gun, the way the guard slumps forward, his hand inside his coat jacket because he saw me coming but was a little too slow in trying to get to his own weapon. I reach into the car from her side, using the interior handle to open it before swinging it wide and grabbing her.

She fights me, but her resistance doesn't even begin to match my strength.

“I'll shoot you in the fucking head if you move,” I growl, throwing her inside my truck from the driver's side.

It takes less than a minute, but I know people saw what happened.

My tires squeal as I pull through the red light, narrowly missing a city bus as it was turning through the intersection. I feel her eyes burning through the side of my head as I drive.

After watching for several miles in my rearview mirror and being satisfied that no one is following me, I pull over and face her.

Unlike the other night, her chin is trembling. Her hands are shaking in her lap.

She pulls them up to protect her face when I shift closer to her.

I shove down the memories, refuse to think about the way her reaction to me makes me feel. She isn't any less guilty for her role in what the Severinos have done. I don't give a shit about excuses. Complacency is just as bad as if she would actively participate in the brutality the family has committed.

She looks terrified, but I can't let it affect me. I'm sure she's had years to perfect her reactions and lies.

She shrinks into the seat when I reach past her into the glove box, and I hate the thrill that zings through my body

when she gasps at the sight of the rope, gag, and dark cloth bag I plan to put over her head.

She whimpers, her body shaking so hard as I tie her hands behind her back that I almost believe she's as frightened as she's pretending to be, but then I remember that I blew a man's brains out right in front of her and all that she could do was issue a warning. The joke's on her.

I know exactly what I've done.

I know the lengths that the Severinos will go through to seek justice for their dead.

It will be fun to get a little vengeance of my own while I wait.

Chapter 10

Madelene

Most people can't say they've ever experienced a gag in their mouth, a hood over their head, while their hands were tied behind their backs. I don't know of anyone who has had to experience it more than once, but this isn't exactly a new situation for me.

The Severino boys are sick fucks. Sensory games are one of their favorite pastimes. The difference is, with experience, I know what to expect from them. I know the lengths they'll go to, and I know what they won't do, which honestly isn't much, but it's one thing I'm very afraid will happen now.

I don't know when I become the girl that who considered at least it won't be that, but it feels silly now as I imagine this man will do whatever the hell he pleases.

More so now than ever before, the situation makes me think back to the first time this happened, but Elio isn't here to assure me everything will be okay with the warmth of his body against mine. I tilt my head to the side but it doesn't prevent the memories slamming back into me.

Her screams.

The burn in my eyes.

The way Elio yelled and begged because he wasn't blindfolded like I was.

Despite sitting in a truck as it drives me to God only knows where, it mimics the way Elio wiggled against his restraints as he begged the boy he thought was his best friend to stop hurting Maya. He learned quickly the more he pleaded, the worse it was for her. Eventually he calmed down, the shuddering way he was breathing making it clear he wasn't happy about what he was being forced to witness.

Maya wasn't able to stay quiet, but I don't imagine anyone would be able to go through what Marcello was doing

to her body.

Elio turned seventeen three months prior, and I know he spent his birthday the same way Marcello spent his that night. He never talked about it, never bragged about what was expected of him. He was never the same after that night, and maybe that's why Marcello picked who he did. Maybe he noticed some sort of weakness in my brother. Maybe this was to punish both him and Maya for her obsession with my brother. He didn't want Maya or the attention, but Marcello somehow saw it as a slap in the face for her not to feel that way about him.

The expectation my brother had from the Severino family was too much for him, but he realized it much too late. He idolized Alessio, both he and Marcello following the older Severino brother around every chance they got. Elio committed fully to the physical training expected of him. Although my mom wasn't exactly happy about it, I think she felt a certain kind of confidence in how close her son was to the heirs of the family. She must've thought they provided a certain level of protection. She couldn't have been more wrong.

I have no idea what was going on in Elio's head the night he decided that driving his car off the cliff was his only choice. I don't know if it was threats coming from the Severinos or if it was his own guilt over what he did or what happened to Maya, but he never hit the brakes. Marcello taunted me with that information as often as he could.

"He couldn't wait to leave you alone with us," he said.

It all comes back in rapid succession—the phone call, the way my mother fell to her knees, the single tear falling down my father's cheek, the closed casket memorial, my mother's declining health, the refusal of the bank to give my father access to my mother's inheritance after her death, the way the Severinos kicked in our front door, the promise my father made to save his own life.

"Please," I beg against the gag in my mouth but the word isn't discernible.

I don't know what I'm pleading for. I want to be released. I want these memories to be forgotten. I want my life to be different.

I'd give anything to have been born a different person. I'd give up the laughs I had with Elio just to avoid the pain that came later. I'd give up my smiling mother from my childhood in order to not have to suffer through watching her take her last breath. I'd give up the money and wealth to avoid what will happen at Alessio's hands once this man is done with me.

I know how men assert their power.

I'd be a fool to think the man who abducted me won't utilize that weapon against me.

I should be terrified of it. The threat of it from Marcello sure made me want to curl into a ball, but most of my fear stems from what will happen after I'm returned. Death would be easier, I'm almost certain.

I didn't mention him earlier after the meeting Alessio had with Raul. I nodded and confirmed the crude sketch of the blond man mere seconds after seeing the man who killed Marcello, fifteen feet away, in a different booth, in the restaurant the meeting took place in.

I let myself imagine that he was one of my father's men, that I got it wrong, thinking he was a gun for hire under contract with Alessio.

He's here for vengeance. He made that clear days ago when he killed my tormentor. He's not here to rescue me. He hated me on sight. I concluded that with just the way he looked at me.

Tears tease my cheeks, tickling my face as they fall, but I have no way to wipe them away. It's an unintentional part of this man's torture.

The vehicle travels for a lot longer than I imagined it would. I don't know many people who are brave enough to drive anywhere with someone in the passenger seat with a bag over their head, but it makes me think this man is just as

dangerous, if not more dangerous than Marcello, who was too narcissistic to think he'd ever get into trouble while hurting people. It was proven wrong that he wasn't as indestructible as he lead himself to believe.

My shoulders are screaming out in pain, and I grow more fearful as we travel. The rev of the engine tells me he's driving too fast, and as a captive, he didn't bother putting the seatbelt on me. My breathing grows rapid, the humidity of my breath making sweat drops co-mingle with my tears. I just know we're going to get into a wreck. I'll end up dead after flying through the windshield.

My trembling tells me that no matter how little, there's still an urgency to live inside of me. That will either help me later or complicate things further, but I don't have time to consider which as he slams on the breaks, my worst nightmare coming through. His arm sweeps out, pressing against my chest before I can slam my head on the dash.

He grumbles under his breath a second before his door opens and then almost as quickly slams closed again.

I hear nothing other than my own terrified, ragged breathing.

I try to move away when my door is ripped open, but his hands are too fast. I'm pulled from the truck, my legs buckling under me. He doesn't stop me from falling this time, and I scream out in pain as my knees crash to the ground. I hate Alessio for insisting that I wear dresses. It will do nothing to help slow down this man's attack. Instead of him pushing me to my back, he wrenches me up by my clasped hands, and it hurts so much, I imagine I'd have the ability to walk on water just to get away from him.

I beg once again before I can stop myself, but the words are just as garbled against the gag as they were before. I feel defeated already. I imagined being stronger than this, but I know better. I always ended up begging when Alessio or Marcello were hurting me.

"Walk," he says, shoving at my back.

There are no sirens, no cop cars driving up to rescue me. Once again my breathing is all I can hear as I take a cautious step forward. The heel of my shoe sinks into soft dirt, but the man doesn't care that it's difficult for me to walk as he urges me forward again.

I don't want to anger him though I doubt complying will help me in the long run. I kick off my shoes, wincing at the ground cutting into my feet.

Slowly the sound of water hits my ears, making my stumbling steps even slower. I never once considered drowning as either punishment or the way I'll die. I mean, I fully expected to be found floating in Lake Michigan because that's the Severinos' favorite place to dump their victims, but I never imagined it being the weapon they'd use.

I freeze but have to keep moving as I'm shoved roughly at the back.

"Keep fucking going," he growls, but he prevents me from falling when I twist my ankle on a rock.

I wince at the pain shooting up my leg as I take more steps. My toes sink into soft mud with one step. The next takes me to the water's edge. I'm not a terrible swimmer, but I doubt I could even tread water with my arms behind my back. It never occurred to me to try.

"Swear to fucking God," he hisses with another shove to my back.

Despite my fear of imminent death, the water never gets higher than the middle of my thigh. He keeps me from sinking down once more, and I can't tell if I'm thrilled he doesn't plan to drown me or terrified of all the other things he'd be capable of doing with me alive.

Vegetation and prickly plants scratch at my shins and calves as we make our way on to land once again. It feels like cat claws swiping out at me, and it's a sort of torture on its own.

He's not gentle when he shoves me into the passenger seat of another vehicle. This one is different. The seat doesn't

feel the same under me, and the smell inside, although not unpleasant, isn't the same.

How closer is Monterrey to Texas? Did we just wade across the bordering river? I can't even remember the damn name of it. Geography was never my strong suit, and I'm regretting paying more attention to boys in class than the teacher. Not that it would make any damn difference where he has me right now in the long run.

We don't drive long, not even a fraction of the time we spent in the first vehicle, but I'm a nervous wreck when he slows and turns. I'm shaking when he climbs out. I'm trembling when he pulls open my door. I beg again, but my pleas go unanswered as I'm pulled from the vehicle.

I want to drop my weight to the ground but he shoves me up a few stairs. Is this his house? Is it a warehouse? Is he going to sell me back to the Severinos? Is he going to seek vengeance on me for that Ellie girl?

My worst fears hit me in the chest when I'm shoved forward and I land on soft bedding.

He may kill me. He may return me beaten and battered to Alessio, but the man is going to rape me first.

For some fucked-up reason, that's worse than anything else. If he does do it, I pray he kills me, because it will only be saving Alessio the trouble.

I have no reason to think he won't. He's already gone up against the Severino family. His single bullet started a war. It means he's just as dangerous if not more than the family I was promised to. My value, the family's desire to get me back, has nothing to do with the money promised. At this point, I'm going to be a sign of disrespect.

They'll look for me, but they won't really care what condition they find me in. Their vengeance won't be my vengeance.

I've heard the stories. Marcello and Alessio bragged about what they've done. I've bared witness to their brutality.

This man is hurting from what happened to Ellie Baker. His vengeance is going to be much worse.

Chapter 11

Hollis

I can't even stand to look down at her. I should've put a bullet in her head and left her in the car with the inefficient guard.

I run my hands over the top of my head, turning my back to her, but it doesn't matter that I can no longer see her. The way her dress has flipped up, revealing her panties, is fucking burned into my brain.

I want all the fucking secrets. I want to know the things her dad thought he could use against the Severinos. I want their destruction, but for much different reasons than he does. Is the man bitter? Did his daughter turn against him?

She's too calm and cool when around them to make me think she's actually not okay with who they are. Maybe she eased into their world without a hiccup.

I know she's the key to the entire family, but I also know I didn't exactly take her only for vengeance.

I could've easily gotten the information out of her without driving her three hours to the fucking Texas border, forcing her to cross a low point in the Rio Grande, and bringing her to one of my safe houses in fucking McAllen, Texas.

I could've driven her ten minutes away to a back alley and sliced at her skin until she started talking.

No, she's not here only because of who she is and her connection to the Severino family. This is more than personal vengeance, more than just about Ellie.

I spin back around, facing her once again, but she's frozen on the bed, despite her arms having to be killing her from the way they're tied behind her.

I let my eyes roam, unconcerned about the way it makes me feel, uncaring of the absent shame as I spend a little too long looking between her crossed legs.

It's very possible that I'm just as bad as the Severinos with the temptations running through my mind.

There were hints in the files about Ellie's murder that Patrick believed her death was in retaliation to a traffic stop or some shit, but it didn't make sense. I couldn't ever believe that was possible, that someone would be angry about a ticket and it led to murder. I think Patrick was grasping at straws, trying to understand something so unimaginable happening to his little girl.

Could I hurt her? Could I be just like them? Can I punish someone for something they had no control over?

She has to be guilty of something. There's no way Madelene Lombardi can walk beside a man like Alessio Severino with her head held high and not be just as guilty as him.

Complacency makes me mad enough to spit nails. If I had a way to take them all out, I'd include her fucking father in this as well. Any connection to the family is a bad connection. He's part of the disease.

It makes me want to call Nash, but just thinking of his laughter and the way he'd joke around about this makes me want to track him down as well.

I leave the room because doing what I really want makes me no better than the men I stole her from.

They'll come seeking their little toy. It doesn't matter if she's a captive or an active participant in their twisted way of life, they'd never leave it alone that I had the ability to take her right from under their fucking noses. It's a fucking slap in the face, an insult. It would make every enemy question their strength. They can't let it stand. I'm betting on all of it.

The tiny house doesn't offer much of a reprieve from her. She's silent, unmoving. If it weren't for the rapid rise and fall of her chest before leaving the room, I'd think she was dead. She isn't whimpering or begging to be released against her gag like she did several times before entering the house.

I won't let myself imagine that she's just accepted her fate. Women like her don't ever give up the fight. When she realizes that her compliance won't help her, she'll stop just like she did with the begging.

I haven't been to this house in months, but it looks the same as it always has—sparsely furnished and unassuming. The longer I walk from one end of the house to the other, the angrier I get.

I know I'm pissed at the world, at my dad, at the entire Severino family... at myself.

I shouldn't have this girl here. I shouldn't stoop to their level. God, the way she flinched when I got close to her.

I'm no better than every other monster who puts their fucking hands on women. I can reason that I haven't hit her, that she isn't hurt, but even the scratches on her legs from the brush at the river make me feel like a piece of shit.

I haven't decided whether I'm accepting my destiny as an evil man as I reenter the room or if I'm going to pay penance and ask for forgiveness.

She stiffens further when I enter the room, but she hasn't moved other than that.

She doesn't fight the restraints, doesn't beg and plea against the gag in her mouth.

God, her fucking panties.

She tries to wiggle away, the first real sign of life when I brush her skin as I pull her dress down.

The whimpering sound she makes affects me in all the wrong fucking ways. My dad and Patrick would be turning over in their fucking graves if they saw me right now.

I don't have the integrity they have. I don't sit back and watch as the justice system fails people over and over. I don't have a problem getting my hands dirty like they did.

"Calm the fuck down," I growl. "I'd never risk sticking my dick in a Mafia whore."

I lift her, shoving her back to the headboard with her in a sitting position, leaning her forward long enough to pull the hood from her head and the gag from her mouth.

To my surprise, she doesn't scream for help. Mascara streaks down her face. Her lipstick must be that all-day-wear shit because it's still perfect. The sight of it makes me want to scrub it from her skin. No one's lips should be that fucking enticing, especially not this bitch's.

"What's your fucking name?"

"Mad-Madelene Lombardi," she says, telling me one truth I already know.

"I want to know everything about the Severino family."

She blinks up at me, but I know she understands fucking English. Her silence is her refusal.

"Do you have any idea how badly I could hurt you?" I growl, liking it a little too much when she pulls her head back only an inch. "Tell me."

"They will kill me if I tell you anything," she says, her words calmer than I'd ever expect from someone in her position.

"And I'll kill you if you don't."

She blinks up at me, her red-rimmed eyes puffy from crying while she had the hood over her head.

"Looks like I'm dead either way."

I stare at her. I can't tell if she's acting tough because she's an actual badass or if it's her fear of the Severino family that has earned her silence. I doubt they will see her strength as a good thing. I doubt they would ever expect her to remain silent. Her capture will be viewed as a betrayal all on its own.

I lean in closer, ready to spit another threat I'm not certain I could follow through with, when my phone rings.

I pull it from my pocket, wondering if I'm already fucked when I see Angel's name on the screen. I leave the

room, walking through the kitchen to the back porch before answering.

“Yeah,” I grunt.

“Have you not checked your email?”

“I haven’t.”

“I want an update.”

“On what?” I ask, playing dumb.

“You were supposed to rescue that girl. I haven’t heard shit.”

“I tried,” I say. “She was already gone.”

“You lost her?”

Answering yes implies failure, and it’s something I would normally not allow myself to be associated with, but this isn’t exactly normal.

“I went to take a shower and get a couple hours sleep,” I lie easily. “By the time I got back on their trail, she was already gone. I don’t know if they stashed her somewhere or sent her home.”

“So you’re still tracking them?”

“I gave up. Those guys are boring as hell. I figure getting intel was no longer part of the deal. Besides, I can’t get fucking close enough to hear them say shit.”

“Gave up?” He grunts like a father disappointed in me rather than some quasi-boss that only sends us information on jobs because he collects part of the fee. “Guess I can see if Nash wants it.”

“Whatever, man,” I say, trying to keep the nonchalant air I’ve always had with the man. “Tell him the last time I saw the group, they were heading south out of town.”

It’s the complete opposite of where I abducted Madelene. I’m praying the cops and any witnesses are on the cartel’s payroll, and that the new bond the Severinos have with

the Cortezes will keep that information from leaking out past the paid men who will be hunting me down.

“I’ll let him know. Fuck, the goddamned new guy is here early.”

“Hey, I think I need a break for a while. I’ll email when I’m ready to get back to work.”

The line goes dead. I don’t even know if the man heard me. He has the phone manners of a fucking distracted toddler.

It isn’t until I walk back into the house and back toward the bedroom that it occurs to me that she didn’t scream. Most people would cry out for help, either to the person on the phone or because they hope someone walking by might hear their cries for help.

She’s different from any woman I’ve ever seen in captivity. There’s no hope in her eyes as I enter the room. It’s as if she’s resigned herself to her fate, like she knows how this ends and she has no power to change it, so why waste the energy?

I know better than to think that makes her an ally. She’s likely to kill me the second she gets the chance.

But as I inch closer to her on the bed, I just can’t bring myself to follow through with any of my threats. I know it would be different if she was a man. I didn’t think twice about putting a bullet in that guard’s head. I won’t fucking lose sleep over it either.

Hurting her seems counterproductive to everything I’ve done, and I have to wonder if that would even change if I had proof that she helped the Severinos hurt others. Normally the complacency would be enough to move me into action, but there’s just something about this bitch that’s keeping me from crossing that line.

It makes her fucking dangerous, possibly more dangerous than Alessio Severino himself.

That should be reason enough to kill her.

Chapter 12

Madelene

He doesn't seem impressed as he stares down at me.

I've felt helpless many times in my life. It's literally a daily occurrence living with the Severinos.

Somehow, with him looking down at me, that feeling is tenfold.

I'm vulnerable, incapable of defending myself with my hands tied behind my back. My chin trembles as I lock eyes with him, refusing to let any more tears fall.

I don't want to appear weak, although I'm not fooling anyone here, but I also don't want to appear overly confident.

His eyes narrow as I manage to tilt my chin up just a little higher. His eyes trace the movement of my throat as I swallow, the corner of his mouth twitching.

He knows I'm terrified. He's reading me like an open book, the same way Marcello and Alessio have always had the ability to do. I'm not brave. The trepidation running through my body doesn't even allow me to fake it very well.

I know I'm dead. I know how this ends. If I'm set free, the Severinos will kill me, but I think that was always their plan, eventually. This guy doesn't seem much better, but there is a fraction of hope that he won't linger over my ending. Where Alessio will prolong my suffering, this guy seems like the get-it-done-and-over-with type.

Although he wanted information from Marcello before pulling the trigger, he didn't hesitate with Julio. The man protecting me wasn't his concern. He was there for me, and he made that happen as quickly as possible.

I do my best not to think of Julio as I wait to see what this guy has planned for me. Julio was the only guard who didn't get in on the taunting and threats. He frowned at the other guards when they started to feed off what the Severinos were so quick to do. I'm not exactly sad. The man has done

horrible things. I just wasn't someone he felt the need to belittle or hurt.

The man standing at the end of the bed seems a lot like Julio. Someone who has hurt and killed but didn't take pleasure in it. As far as choosing how to leave this world, he seems like the best bet.

"Are you her brother?" I ask.

He straightens, his upper lip curling in disgust.

"Were you her boyfriend?" He doesn't seem much older than me, but maybe the lines present around Alessio's eyes are more about how he's lived his life rather than his age.

"Who the fuck are you talking about?"

I didn't take him for the type to play stupid.

"Ellie."

His jaw flexes, his irritation more than a little evident in the darkness in his eyes and the twitch in his fingers, making me think he'd shoot me now if he were holding his gun.

"I was eight when Ellie was murdered," he explains, surprising me that he'd give me any details, seeing as he's the one demanding information. "What do you know about her murder?"

I confessed I was only a child when this happened, that I'd only heard about it from Alessio, but maybe he was too high on adrenaline to hear me the night he killed Marcello

"I was only a kid."

"You said that piece of shit told you about it. Tell me what he told you and maybe explain why he feels so comfortable sharing shit with you that could land him on death row."

"Illinois doesn't have the death penalty," I remind him, making me think we are in Texas like I wondered earlier. Texas is one of the states that seems to have an express process for the punishment.

He leans in closer, his hand reaching out and gripping my jaw faster than I can pull my head back.

“Answer the fucking questions.”

I open my mouth to speak but his hold on my face makes it too painful to do so.

He releases me, taking a step back when I whimper. I know better than to think he's no less capable of hurting me than Alessio would be just because of the reprieve.

“Speak,” he growls.

In my mind, I tell him to fuck off, to not speak to me like I'm a fucking dog, but I'd never say those words out loud. I've always been braver in my head than I've ever managed to be in real life.

He's agitated. There's no denying it, and I don't know how far away he is from really losing control.

“What will you do with the information?”

“I'm going to burn their entire fucking world to the ground,” he growls, surprising me a second time. Angry men make statements like his often. They consider themselves invincible. I can't count how many times I heard Marcello speak of world domination, and it only took a single bullet to stop him.

If I thought this man or anyone could take down the Severino family, I'd spill every secret I've ever heard. Even if it meant my eventual death, if telling him meant no one past me was hurt by them, I'd tell him everything.

However, I know better.

I know that even with Alessio's death there will be someone else willing to step up and take over the family. I can't imagine anyone being as evil as my betrothed, but I imagine there's always a chance that a crueler person exists.

My father, a man I haven't felt much connection to my entire life, flashes in my head. He's selfish, much like every other man I've met in my life, but he's still family, blood, and with that comes a certain level of loyalty. Allegiance to blood

is paramount, and it was drilled into my head as a child from both parents. I can't figure out how trading me off to the Severinos makes him loyal to me, but I guess none of that matters now.

“Tell me about Ellie.”

I take a deep breath, figuring he already knows about her and the Severino connection to her death, so it's not exactly like I'm spilling any secrets.

“She was in Alessio's class at school,” I begin, my mouth snapping closed when he leans in close again.

“I already know that shit.”

Frustration grows inside of me, but I push it down as much as I can.

“I don't know what you know and what you don't.”

His jaw ticks, but he backs up a foot or so. He's still close enough that he could strike me if he lashes out, but I guess the fraction of distance is better than him being right in my face.

“She was his first kill, his loyalty test. He's a Severino, heir to the family, but he still had to prove his loyalty, had to do something horrendous to prove that he was willing to obey orders.”

“Lucian ordered her death?”

I shake my head, hating the memories of Alessio bragging often about Ellie.

“He got to pick.”

“Why her?”

I lift my eyes to his, wishing the answer held more meaning. “He said ‘just because.’”

“Because what?” he growls.

“Because he wanted to.”

“Because,” he says, as if turning the word over in his head will make it make sense at some point.

“He’s a bad man,” I explain, even though I know he’s well aware of it. “She could’ve wronged him on some extreme level or accidentally stepped on his shoe in the hallway while going to class. It would make no difference to Alessio.”

He nods as if he suspected this already. “What did he do to her?”

“He hurt her, r-raped her.” I swallow when emotions threaten to bubble up out of my throat. “Tortured her. Killed her.”

I turn my head to try and use my shoulder to wipe away a tear slowly making its way down my cheek, but the pain from having my hands tied behind my back for so long keeps me from following through with it.

“Your fake tears don’t mean shit to me,” he snaps, and all I can do is nod in understanding, another tear cresting and falling.

I’ve tried not to cry. I do well when it’s Alessio and Marcello hurting me. They love my tears, pushing me to cry as often as they can. I fight the tears out of pride and stubbornness, knowing that I’ll be hurt more if I don’t give them what they want. They eventually get it, always. They have no boundaries. They’re soulless and feed on the pain of others.

This man seems different. He’s hurting with my recollection of what Alessio has said to me about Ellie. He cared for her.

I don’t think Alessio nor Marcello ever cared about anyone but themselves. There might have been a small part of Alessio that cared for his younger brother but then again, that could’ve only gone as deep as the mandatory loyalty for family went.

He was angry with his death. He wanted answers, but I never saw a tear shed. I doubt the man got emotional and cried at his loss when he was in private, no more than he did in front of his men while commanding them to find the blond-haired blue-eyed boy I lied about killing him.

This man could easily see me as an extension of the Severino family. He seems smart, which means he has to know just how dangerous and untouchable they are. He may be keeping some distance now, but he could snap at any moment. He killed Marcello just for being Alessio's brother, in retribution for Ellie Baker. I'm his fiancée. In his mind, he probably thinks the older Severino loves me, that we're happy or some other messed-up shit. I could die hating the man at the hands of another man who has the entire story wrong.

"I need the bathroom," I say instead of explaining who I am and what I mean to the Severino family.

He looks me up and down one more time, but instead of untying my hands and directing me to the bathroom, he turns around and leaves the room.

I could possibly escape, but I stay on the bed, merely looking toward the single window in the room. Where would I go even if I managed to get away?

My life is a sad state when I consider staying here tied up is better than risking falling back into the hands of the Severino family any time soon.

Chapter 13

Hollis

I'm not very big on focusing on mistakes, but this is a very hard one to ignore, considering the thing I never should've done is sitting on the fucking bed in the other room.

I never should've taken her. I should've followed the other vehicles, waited until Alessio got out, and emptied my magazine into him. I think dying today would be easier to deal with than her fake fucking tears.

I hate when women cry. I used to seethe inside when my mother would do it. I would want to destroy anything and everything that would cause her pain. It took years to understand she did it because she was weak.

My hands tremble, but flexing my fingers into closed fists and reopening them in rapid succession doesn't make the shaking stop.

I've paced. I've sat on the love seat, the only piece of living room furniture other than a small side table, for hours trying to figure out what I should do. Hurting her the way Alessio hurt Ellie was the first thing that came to mind, but fuck if that doesn't make my stomach churn the way it does when I pore over the case file from her murder.

I haven't heard a sound from the room, not with the setting sun, not with the long hours of the night. The sun is starting to peek through the curtains and still nothing from the room.

I grind my back molars together, knowing it's too fucking late, that worrying about what I've done won't make it go away. Standing, I take a look at the door leading to my truck in the garage, but leaving her here tied up really isn't an option.

I head in that direction, a sinister smile, something in complete contradiction to the recent thoughts in my head, taking over my face when she jerks her head up.

She hasn't scooted down in the bed. Other than her head having been lulled to the side, she's still in the exact position I put her in.

"How often do they hurt you?" I ask, not sure I want to know the answer.

She's been too compliant, too accustomed to threats to be the righthand of an evil man like Alessio. What I thought I saw with her raised head in public, even her smiles, have to have been because it's what's expected of her. If she was as defiant as I imagined she would be, then she would've gotten as comfortable on the bed as she could manage. She'd yell at me from the darkness and threaten my life with her lover's vengeance. I've gotten none of that since I took her. The only thing she said was that she's as good as dead, that they'll kill her if she talks. She honestly seems resigned, maybe even a little relieved that was her destiny. As if dying is better than facing another day of what she's been enduring.

It could be a ploy. The tears could've been as fake as I considered them being, but the sight of her, exhausted and weak on the bed makes me reconsider all of my earlier assumptions.

"How often?" I growl when she doesn't speak.

"Anytime they got a chance," she says, her words scratchy, making it clear her throat is dry.

She flinches when I step in closer. I have no doubt if her arms weren't tied behind her back, she would've instinctively brought them up to cover her face the way she did in my truck.

I know all too well the signs of an abused woman.

"Motherfucker," I grumble as I lean her forward and pull at the rope on her wrists.

I didn't allow her to go to the bathroom, but it looks like she still managed not to soil herself. I didn't offer her anything to drink or eat. It's the only form of fucking torture I can manage.

I point to the bathroom door off to the left, feeling like a complete piece of shit when she stumbles off the bed, her

pretty face marked with pain as she rolls her shoulders. I hate her. I don't feel like she deserves any sympathy, but I still can't stop looking at the lipstick marking her very dry lips.

I consider my next move, but I already know what it is.

I don't stick around in the bedroom when she closes the bathroom door.

I head out of the room and open the front door because I know it's in the direct line of sight from inside the bedroom. I take a seat at the dining table and wait.

She's going to escape. Any person with a lick of sense would. I know she's weak. I know she knows she's weak, but she won't be able to resist the temptation. She'll be closer to the open front door than I will be to her, and she'll be willing to risk it. In her mind, I might be able to catch up with her. I know she'll think she can draw enough attention to herself to be rescued. She's willing to take the chance that I'd kill her for her attempt, and deep down, I think a part of her is hoping it ends that way.

I'm dead either way.

The woman has lost all hope. It takes a lot for someone to get to that point. I don't know how I didn't see it before. Was it my anger at the Severino family that blinded me to it? Was I so hell-bent on seeking vengeance for Ellie that I couldn't see them hurting this woman in plain sight?

The house is so small I can hear just about everything—the flush of the toilet, the water running in the bathroom sink. It goes longer than needed to wash her hands, and I imagine her bending over and drinking from the faucet. The door opens even though I can't see it, but she never flashes by me. She's considering the likelihood that I'm setting a trap.

Instead of leaving the bedroom in a full sprint, I watch as she slowly comes into view. She isn't looking around, trying to determine where danger is going to jump out from.

She walks with purpose to the front door, and my jaw hangs open as I watch her not only close the front door, but

she locks it before turning around to face me, as if she knew exactly where I was the entire time.

“It isn’t going to happen that way,” she says.

“I’m not going to keep you here,” I tell her. “You’re free.”

She doesn’t look the slightest amount relieved with my words. Her pretty face is now void of makeup, her lips red from scrubbing, but no longer covered in lipstick.

“I’m not leaving.”

I have to be too tired to understand, because what person would stick around even half a second longer when they’re told they can leave?

“I’m not playing a trick on you, Madelene. You need to go.”

She shakes her head, sadness in her eyes.

“I will hurt you if you don’t go.”

She pulls out the only other chair at the tiny kitchen table, sitting right across from me.

“You said you’d hurt me if I didn’t talk.”

“You need to leave,” I growl.

“I can’t leave like this,” she says, leaning back and swiping her hands down her body.

“Are you fucking kidding me? You’re such a fucking princess that you’re expecting me to what? Buy you a new fucking outfit?”

She scoffs, her pretty lips once again turning down into a deep frown.

“You sure have formulated some opinions about me,” she says, and the disappointment in her voice hits me in a way I don’t even want to analyze right now. “I need you to hurt me.”

I shake my head immediately. “I’m not interested in your fucking kinks or whatever you and Alessio do.”

“Kinks? Not even close. There’s already a very good chance they’re going to kill me. I might be able to survive if you hurt me. Going back completely unharmed will bring too much suspicion. You took me. You have to hurt me.”

I stare at her in disbelief. Why would she think she has to go back? Freedom doesn’t mean just being free from me but being able to escape them as well. She could go anywhere. Why would she even consider going back to Chicago?

“You like it there, don’t you? Maybe, I was wrong about you. Maybe, you aren’t as abused as I—”

“Are you hard of hearing?” she snaps, interrupting me. She curls into herself a little a second later, regret snapping in her eyes.

I like the little spark of fire, and I hate the Severino family a little more, if that’s even possible, at the fear in her eyes right now.

“You’ll need to hurt me bad enough that I’m hospitalized,” she continues when I don’t get up from the table and punish her like I imagine she expected me to.

“That’s not going to happen.”

Chapter 14

Madelene

I didn't think he'd agree to my demand, but his refusal isn't exactly a relief either.

It's not that I want to be hurt, I just know that anything less than being put into a coma will end with me dead at Alessio's hands. I think the man has been itching to end me since the first time he set eyes on me as a child.

I sat on that bed last night, thinking of the way Alessio looked at me after Marcello's death. Despite doing a lot of talking around me the last couple of years, he demanded I leave the room before speaking another word. I no longer think that he hired this man to kill his brother because it's obvious this is personal for him, and Alessio was still very suspicious of me after it happened. Returning after Julio was killed with nothing more than a few scratches on my calves would make every alarm bell go off for him. Surviving his suspicions wouldn't happen. I shudder, thinking about the ways he'd entice me to tell him everything I know. The man sitting across from me may have threatened harm, but Alessio will meet it out without hesitation.

He doesn't say a word, and he doesn't break eye contact with me either. I don't mistake his silence for consideration. He's just not the type, no matter how quickly he pulled the trigger on Marcello and Julio.

"I don't want to go back. That would never be my intention, but he will find me. I can run to the end of the earth and he would be waiting for me when I arrive." I swallow down the threat of tears, knowing they make no more of a difference to this man than they did to my father the day I begged him not to sign the contract with Lucian, promising me to a monster.

"You'd rather be beaten than taking the chance of staying hidden?"

“I don’t want to be hurt,” I explain. “It may not even help, but my destiny is with him.”

“Why?”

It’s a simple question with a million complicated answers.

“He sees me as a possession. He’ll never rest until he finds me.”

“Because he loves you?” Even as he asks, it doesn’t sound like he believes it.

“Because he’ll never let the disrespect of me being taken stand. His search for me isn’t about me, but the brazenness someone had to go against him. There is no level of love, on either side of this, between us. He hates me to my core, and I despise him just as much.”

“But you’re scared of him.”

“Terrified,” I answer without hesitation. “I know what he’s capable of.”

“Yet you have no problem making demands of me. Maybe, you’re mistaken, thinking you’re safe here.”

I lean back when he stands, the small table making it very easy for him to instantly be standing directly over me. His eyes sweep down my body, and it’s as if he can see me naked despite my clothes and the table covering my lap. His eyes lock on my chest, the heave of it erratic with my fearful breaths. I have no doubt this man can be brutal, but I’m a good judge of people. I think he does it when he has to or like he’s acted more recently, when he’s seeking revenge for someone he cares about.

“Beating the shit out of you isn’t how I’d hurt you.”

The implication is clear, and despite my refusal to leave, he still feels like my captor.

“I won’t have sex with you,” I say, the words tumbling out as if he’s made an offer not a threat. “You can beat me, but I’m as sure as dead if you take that part from me.”

“That part?” He scoffs, standing up but only giving me a few inches of distance between our faces. “You were ready to suck Marcello off in the car. You may be a great actress but there’s nothing that will convince me that you’re still a fucking virgin.”

“The first time I refused what Marcello was demanding of me, I ended up with a broken arm,” I say. “I learned fast to weigh my options. Giving him a blow job when he demanded it was easier than the pain he inflicted if I didn’t.”

“And Alessio isn’t bothered that his brother has been making you do that?”

I swallow, my eyes leaving his. I shouldn’t feel shame, but there’s just something about being a victim in that way that eats away at the center of me.

“Alessio didn’t know. He would’ve been pissed. But at the end of the day, I’d be blamed. He would expect me to choose the broken arm every time.”

“Sick fucks,” the man says as he takes another step back and stands to his full height.

The sweep of his eyes down my body a final time before he turns around doesn’t go unnoticed.

I’m in some level of limbo as he walks across to the small living room. He stands in front of the single window facing the street, his arms crossed over his chest.

I don’t even know his name, but for some reason, I feel safer here with him than I ever did with anyone else. Maybe it’s the mystery of him that makes him seem innocuous. Maybe he’s to be feared as much as the men he stole me from, and I’m just wanting to find security where there’s none to be found.

I don’t speak, unwilling to disturb whatever he’s trying to work through in his head.

I know he won’t hurt me, but I know he may not go out of his way to protect me either. I’m not his burden, and I could easily tell by the look in his eyes that although he may be reluctant to hurt me, he’s not happy I’ve refused to leave.

Chapter 15

Hollis

A fucking virgin.

I don't know why my thoughts have locked on that fact, especially after she told me what has happened to her with the Severino brothers.

Her explaining what was going to happen in that SUV with Marcello is proof that things aren't always what they appear. I want details. I want to know how many times they forced her to do shit like that. I want to pull the bullet from Marcello's brain just so I can kill him all over again. I consider my own thoughts, thinking maybe I should turn my gun on myself. Knowing that about her turns me on, and it fucking shouldn't.

I shouldn't consider it mine. I shouldn't look at it as something to take from them, the Severinos, as compensation for all that they have taken from me. I stare at the window, trying to remind myself that it's a part of her, and she owes me nothing.

I'm not that type of man. If someone were comparing me with Marcello or Alessio, and they knew nothing of the three of us but a list of our crimes, someone could conclude that we were all equally bad. I've murdered without hesitation. I've stolen things that don't belong to me, present company included. I've lied to keep myself safe. Hell, I've lied just for the hell of it, but I don't hurt women. I don't take advantage of them or use my cock as a weapon against them. My entire career, if you can call it that, has been in defense of women that have been taken advantage of.

I've spent my adult years doing what my father and Patrick couldn't bring themselves to do. They were more afraid of becoming a part of the criminal justice system opposite of what they started. They couldn't see themselves going to prison even if it was for the right reason. They left Ellie unavenged, and it ate away at me as a child. By the time I

was an adult, I couldn't help but be the opposite of them. I can't let injustice stand. If punishing bad people for hurting others lands me in prison or an early grave, I'll do either with a smile on my face, knowing I helped someone, saved someone from becoming a victim.

She shifts on the chair behind me, the old wood creaking under her weight, and all the thoughts I just had fade away. I hate how my mind hyper focuses on things. She never should've mentioned her virginity. Now it's going to be the elephant in the room.

"How old are you?" I ask, keeping my back to her.

Looking at her would mean watching her mouth, and fuck if my mind wouldn't conjure up a million things that part of her can do.

"Twenty-one," she says, having to clear her throat on the last syllable. "Twenty-two in a few months. That's when I'm supposed to marry Alessio."

She shifts again, the noise the chair's making drawing my attention once more.

My thoughts swim, my mind imagining her body under mine, but it isn't sinking inside of her, being the first person to be there, that makes my cock jerk in my jeans. Her begging me to stop, asking me not to do this to her, brings that reaction. I grind my teeth because that's never been my thing. I'd never do something like that, but fuck if I can't stop thinking about it. I crave it from her like a psychopath.

I spin around to face her, liking it a little too much when she jerks back from my sudden movement. She doesn't trust me, and that's a good thing. I don't trust myself right now either.

I open my mouth to yell, to tell her to get the fuck out. The temptation of her will be the death of me, or at least will be the end of whatever morality I've held all these years.

I clench my fists, my mind trying to convince me that she deserves pain. She has sat by idly for years while the Severino brothers have hurt people.

I scan her body, wondering which bone Marcello broke when she refused to suck his cock. I simmer with rage, but deep down I know it's just as much because he's had her mouth and I haven't, as it is that he forced her to do something like that in the first place.

"I want you to tell me everything about the Severino family," I say, my voice low and full of warning, a sort of threat that says she better not deny me this time. "If you're going to stay, you're going to be useful."

"I don't know where to start," she says after a long pause.

She nods, her weight shifting once again as if she has to physically prepare herself to speak of them.

"Can you sit?" She points to the chair across from her. "You're really intimidating, standing there like that."

The fact that I'm unnerving to her turns me on even further, but I sit. Not because she wants me to, but because standing there any longer runs the risk of her noticing the way she turns me on. It gives her more power than I'm willing to let her know she has.

"There was always talk that I'd marry into the Severino family. I remember my mother mentioning it when I was still a child. My mother would mention Marcello taking care of me one day, and I remember wanting to tell her that wouldn't happen. Marcello couldn't even take care of his toys much less another person. He was always mean and spiteful, even as a child."

"I don't give a shit about your childhood," I spit.

Her jaw flexes as she grinds her teeth, and I fully expect her to get sassy with me, but she looks down, pulling her hands from the tabletop and placing them into her lap.

"I was trying to explain how I ended up with them," she whispers, and it feels like a punch to the gut.

How can I want to grip her by the hair, bend her over this table, and fuck her until she screams, but at the same time, want to wrap her in a hug and tell her that she's safe now?

“Continue,” I grunt instead of issuing the apology that almost threatens to escape my mouth.

“Maybe it would be better if you ask questions, and I answer,” she offers. “That way you only get the information you need.”

She doesn’t say it in a way that sounds disrespectful, but I can still see the sting of being chastised in her eyes.

“How did you end up engaged to Alessio if you were promised to Marcello?”

“I wasn’t exactly promised to Marcello. I think my mother just assumed that with my age being closer to Marcello’s, that we’d end up together.”

“Why the marriage? What benefit is it for you marrying a Severino?”

“My mother’s family was once very powerful in Italy. The needs and expectations changed over the generations as many migrated to the United States. Her family had to fight for what they had. They had to defend their rights and their families.”

“That’s a very narrowed viewpoint on why the Mafia was created,” I grunt.

She frowns at me but doesn’t defend herself before continuing. “Lucian’s great-grandfather and my mother’s great-grandfather were once best friends, but as things progressed, they each wanted more than half of the pie. Well, my ancestor didn’t so much want the power and money as much as he wanted the other man’s wife. There was a feud. Hundreds of men died because of one man’s greed.”

“Who got the girl?”

She shakes her head as if picturing it all playing out in a memory, despite it occurring long before her birth.

“Severino slit her throat when she confessed she wanted to leave him for the other man. The families were at each other’s throats for years. They instilled their hatred into their children, but my mother wanted no part of it. She inherited all

of her family's money after her father died, but she never took on the other baggage. Connecting the two families was her way of ending the feud. My mother fell in love with a man that worked for Lucian."

"Your father?"

She nods her answer. "He always wanted to be a bigger part of that family, and with his marriage to my mother he was given more power. He ran one of the warehouses for Lucian."

"And that's how you were promised to one of the sons?"

She shakes her head. "I had an older brother. Elio was close to the boys. He was loyal to the family because that's how my father raised him. He trained with Marcello and Alessio. He was excited to join them in everything, but then he had to be tested. He passed his test, but it changed him. He killed himself a year later. I think my mother blamed herself for not listening to her own family when they told her how toxic the Severino family was. She died a year after Elio did."

Pain laces her words, but she's strong, somehow preventing tears from falling at disclosing what happened to her mother and brother.

"Before her death," she continues, "my mother changed her will. My father was no longer set to get her family's money. She left it all to me. I have access to every penny when I turn—"

"Twenty-two," I predict.

"Yeah. My mother made no provisions in the case of her death for my father. I don't know if she stopped trusting him or if she knew him well enough to know that he was desperate his entire life to be a part of the Severino family, that he would give Lucian whatever he wanted. She didn't take into account the income needed to maintain the household, and that our lavish lifestyle couldn't be sustained with the income my father made working at the warehouse."

I nod because I can guess where this is going.

"My father felt betrayed by her. I don't doubt they loved each other, but I think my father loved the aristocratic lifestyle

more. Eventually, he ran out of money and started to steal from the warehouse. It didn't take long for Lucian to figure it out. They keep surprisingly accurate books for such a large criminal organization. Lucian was going to kill him, but—"

"Your father offered him *you* in trade for his life."

"I'm simply part of the transaction. Alessio is set to run the family after Lucian steps down, but I think being promised to him instead of Marcello had more to do with the fact that I don't think Lucian or Alessio fully trusted the younger Severino. He was a lit fuse, unpredictable."

I think about what she's told me. "Your father will be dead before the ink dries on the marriage certificate."

She doesn't look surprised by my words. She doesn't look sad or concerned.

"I know. I think that's why my father insisted that I don't marry until I have access to the money. He's been trying to get back in their good graces, but once you betray them—"

"You're as good as dead," I interrupt, knowing this is how she sees herself.

I took her, ensuring that she's going to be another one of their victims.

"How long do you think you'll survive after your marriage?"

Her lips form a flat line, but I can tell this is a question she's asked herself. She doesn't seem surprised by it. She has known for a while that she isn't going to last forever with them.

"Even if Marcello wasn't killed, I think Alessio would've spent a while torturing me. As long as I could manage tears, I think they would keep me alive. They'd kill me when they were done with me. They'd probably pass me around to their men, and after being tainted by them, I'd be useless."

She gives me a weak smile, as if thinking of her own death is an everyday occurrence for her.

I'm grateful for the distraction this conversation with her has given me, but I hate the way my gut turns at thinking of her ending up with Alessio. Even if it was a marriage that was sustained over the years and he never laid another finger on her, I hate the image that it brings to my head.

Chapter 16

Madelene

He grew silent after I told him how I ended up with the Severino family. I think he'd slit my father's throat if he were given the chance, but I can't let his anger at my abuse muddle my head. The man is a killer just like the men he stole me from. His moral compass may be a little more finely tuned, but that doesn't negate the fact that he could kill me as easily as they could. Hell, he could demand my hand in marriage in an effort to steal my family's money for himself. This little house doesn't exactly scream that he's rolling in cash.

I look around the tiny shower I'm standing in, wishing the water would get just a little warmer, as if the heat will ease the ache still in my shoulders from being tied up for so long.

He grew silent after I explained, and he didn't ask me further questions about the family, but I know it will be a short-lived reprieve. He wants to know all of it, and surprisingly, I plan to answer every single question he asks. I have no hope of survival if I end up back with Alessio. Maybe this man is crazy enough to cause enough of a disturbance that I can disappear forever.

He seemed reluctant to allow me in here, as if imagining me getting comfortable in his space made his skin crawl, but eventually he nodded after I asked him if I could shower.

The door is locked, but it's a false sense of security. I know that he could easily open the door by simply ramming his shoulder against it.

I know what all men are capable of. The look in some of the Severino guards' eyes told me that the only thing keeping them from raping me was the threat Alessio was to them. This man has no such loyalty to the family. There's nothing stopping him but his own principles, and I'm not so sure the man has any.

I use the three-in-one shampoo, conditioner, and body gel, making a point to scrub every inch of my body. I got most

of Julio's blood that I could off me when I came in here first thing this morning, but I still felt sticky with it. It took hours of sitting at the tiny table before I managed to gather the courage to ask him to shower. The day dragged by with me waiting for his next move and him seemingly lost in thought as he stared out the window, as if the view had the power to answer his questions and solve his problems.

We didn't talk much. We didn't eat. He didn't open the front door and tell me to leave again. I didn't cross the room to open it myself. The silence was awkward, somehow expectant without either of us speaking.

I fought the urge to ask him about his life, my curiosity only held at bay because I figured he'd physically shove me out of the house if I spoke in a way that wasn't answering his questions.

When darkness fell, the shadows cast on his face made him seem even more dangerous and that was a feat, considering I've witnessed him kill two men without a moment's hesitation.

Unsurprisingly, the water runs cold long before I'm ready to get out. I do one final rinse, making sure the soap is gone before turning it off and peeking around the shower curtain. I didn't hear him enter, but he seems like the type that could be stealthy when he needed to be. The bathroom is empty, the mirror not even fogged because the water never really got warm enough for it despite the small confines of the room.

The towel hanging on the bar is disheveled as if he'd used it at some point before bringing me here, but my look around the room for a clean one leaves me empty-handed. Although wrinkled, it's completely dry as I pull it against my chest. There's no fluffiness to it as it nearly scratches my skin as I dry my body. I look toward my pile of laundry, folded neatly but still covered in Julio's blood. I gag at the thought of putting them back on, feeling childish at my instinctual reaction.

Everything in this house seems functional, but there are no real amenities.

I know I was given many more luxuries than a lot of people have in their lives. Even with the Severino family, I had more than many people could ever hope for. They needed my money, but they also have money of their own. My money meant more power, the ability to expand further. It's not like they were in the soup line without it. I learned long ago that greedy people always want more no matter how much they have. Marcello lived every day that way, and I have no doubt that being promised to Alessio was the only reason he focused on me at all. It wasn't that he wanted me. It was that Alessio was given something, and he wasn't. His selfishness wouldn't allow him to just look the other way. He had to taint and destroy anything that wasn't his. He had to ruin it for everyone else.

I had to behave a certain way, hold my head up despite my pain. I was expected to act as if I was treated like a princess rather than let anyone know the truth about the men others respected. I wonder if they would've held them in such reverence if those people knew the truth. I know there are people connected to the family who would be appalled with what happened at their house daily, but no one would be brave enough to go against them. Just the rumors of their brutality to their enemies kept most people under their bloody thumbs. I don't know that they'd act any differently if they were made aware of how the brothers treated me. Maybe many of them were raised to hate my mother's family the way many of my ancestors were raised to hate the Severinos. Maybe they want to hurt me the way Alessio and Marcello got the chance to.

I press the towel to my face as the tears start to fall. I feel weaker than I ever have. I know better than to think I've escaped them. I wasn't lying when I told that man that Alessio will find me. I believe it in my soul that I'm meant to die at his hands. Thinking any differently will only bring on false hope. It will make the crash that much worse.

It doesn't take long to get my emotions under control. I've been doing it for a very long time because Alessio and

Marcello liked my tears too much. It was never a sign to stop but the jumping off point for them.

I glance back at my clothes, knowing I can't put them on. I make up my mind to use the washer and dryer I saw in the corner of the kitchen to get them clean. I could easily run out there, pop them in the washer and come back in here and wait until it was time to switch them into the dryer.

I tuck the towel around myself before gathering the clothes in my hands, doing my best not to let them touch my clean body.

The bedroom is dark and silent when I pull open the bathroom door, but there's no mistaking the large lump on the far side of the bed. He didn't enter the room last night, but it seems my reprieve is over.

"I don't have anything to wear," I say, not even sure the man is awake.

I'm met with silence, but it's not like I expected him to offer me something to wear. I'm not exactly a guest here.

I leave the room, heading out to put my clothes in the washer. The powdered laundry detergent doesn't even have a scent, and all I can do is pray the stains come out as I close the lid and turn it on.

I debate staying in the living room while I wait for my clothes to wash, but the front door seems ominous. I don't think the man would protect me exactly, but if someone breaks in, he'll at least defend himself, and that would be a benefit to me.

I creep back into the bedroom, standing near the bed as I try to listen to him breathe. It takes a while for my heart to calm enough that I can hear anything over the pounding of it in my ears. Eventually, his soft, steady breaths can be heard.

Considering that he's asleep, I glance from the bathroom door back to him. The house lacks so many things, but the bed was surprisingly comfortable last night, despite the way I was trussed up.

I know it's probably a huge mistake, but as slowly and quietly as I can, I lie down on the bed next to him, freezing more than once in my journey to make sure I don't wake him up. I tell myself I'll nap, knowing I'll hear the washing machine stop because of how loud it must be and how small the house is. I let my eyes flutter closed, wondering how long I'll lie here awake because I doubt I'll be able to fall asleep.

My eyes grow increasingly harder to keep open, my blinks slowing until I find it impossible to open my eyes at all. I lick at my dry lips, chastising myself for not getting a drink of water as my body grows heavier and heavier.

A noise makes me jerk my eyes open, but I'm not met with the darkness I closed them to. Instead, I'm staring into the very angry eyes of a very wet and naked man.

I keep my eyes locked on him because looking down wouldn't be wise. I can see in my periphery that he's hard, his manhood the closest part of his body to mine.

I swallow, wanting to scream for help when he reaches for me. Staying here was the biggest mistake of my life. I knew it would come to this. All men are the same. They're controlled by their cocks, convincing themselves that everything in the world is theirs for the taking regardless of whether they were given permission or not.

I know better than to swat at his hand as he extends it in my direction. I made that mistake with Alessio once, and the result was extremely painful.

The man reaches for the towel, nearly rolling me onto the floor when he rips it away from my body. He just stares down at me with it hanging from his fingers. I don't attempt to cover myself, another thing I learned by experience while living with the Severino family. They may not have raped me, but they made it very clear, very early on, that they'd do just about anything else.

He doesn't take it further. He doesn't command me to suck him off. He doesn't reach for me or touch me.

He doesn't back away either as he continues to stare down at me as he dries himself off. His erection never flags, and I swear he strokes it more than dries it when he gets to that part of his body.

I wait for the splatter, wait for him to shame me by coating me with his cum, knowing this man is no better than Alessio or Marcello, but it doesn't happen.

When I look up at his face, he seems disgusted, like he could read my mind and hated the thoughts he saw there.

"Get real," he grumbles as he finally takes a step back. "Don't hog the fucking towel."

He doesn't go back in the bathroom, but he does turn his back in my direction as he finishes drying off before pulling clothes from the tiny closet, leaving the towel in a wet pile on the floor like a savage.

"Don't forget to put your clothes in the dryer," he snaps before leaving the room.

I stare at his shadow from the bed as he moves around the kitchen.

I don't hesitate to climb out of the bed and re-wrap myself in the towel, hating the cool dampness against my skin. It takes me a little longer to leave the room.

He didn't apologize for the way he treated me, but it's not like I should expect him to. He may not have hurt me the way I thought he was going to when I woke up to him standing over me with his erection not far from my face, but that doesn't mean he isn't planning on it, or that he's fighting a battle against doing it that he will soon lose.

I slowly creep out of the bedroom, finding his eyes on mine the second I come into his view.

I don't smile at him although it seems natural to do it. It's a reaction beat into my brain. The Severino brothers wanted me to appear excited and happy to see them. They wanted me to be like the beaten dog that still wags its tail when its owner comes out to feed it with the hopes that it will be met with kindness rather than a kick to the ribs. Sometimes

I think the psychological abuse was much harder to deal with than the physical abuse.

I can feel his eyes on me the entire time it takes me to cross the small room, one hand still clutching the towel at my chest. I know not to trust in the safety of the threadbare fabric as I open the washing machine and pull my clothes from it and put them in the dryer.

His back is to me now, but I know he's still very aware of my every move. I clear the lint catch, surprised to find hardly anything in it before closing the door and turning the machine on.

He hasn't paused in eating his bowl of cereal, and the man honestly looks a little childlike over his bowl of Frosted Flakes.

I don't ask for permission when I go to the fridge and pull out the milk before heading to the cabinet to get a bowl. Like the bathroom towel, it seems there's only one, and he's using it.

He glares at me as I pull the only cup down and pour cereal into it before topping it off with milk and grabbing the lone fork from the dish drainer.

He lives alone. That's very clear. He isn't a man that depends on material things. He either lives a very simple life or this isn't his only house.

He keeps his eyes locked on me as I take a seat across from him, wondering why he has two chairs at the table but only one of everything else. I know better than to open my mouth to ask him, opting to stuff it full of sugary cereal instead.

Chapter 17

Hollis

I can't help but stare at her as she takes her seat across from me. I never would've expected a Mafia princess to be creative enough to pour cereal into a cup and eat it with a fork. I hate being surprised by her.

"This isn't going to work," I tell her with a mouth full of food, waiting for her to cringe at my lack of manners.

She scoops a forkful into her mouth, chewing as milk drips from her chin. I almost grin at her, but her ability to make me react in any way annoys the shit out of me.

"You're going to have to earn your keep."

She looks a little disappointed in me at the same time her eyes widen in fear. It's as if she's somehow not surprised but also saddened at the change of pace.

"You'll have to cook," I say, trying to put her mind at ease. I have no idea why her emotional state is even a consideration of mine.

Her frown deepens as she places the cup of cereal on the table. "I can't cook. I never learned."

I scoff. It doesn't surprise me that she had servants all her life, but a hint of disappointment washes over me. I was really looking forward to eating something I didn't have to make myself. It's been a very long time since someone cooked for me.

"Figures, princess," I spit as I stand and take my cereal bowl to the sink.

"It wasn't like that," she counters.

"You know how to do laundry but not cook?"

I turn to face her, wondering if she's actually lying to me.

“Alessio didn’t hurt me in front of the staff. He had an image to keep.”

I consider her words, and they seem true, especially with what I’ve observed. The way she held her head high in the club as if she had almost as much power as the man who rested his hand on her back. But also the way she flinched instinctively in the truck like she fully expected me to hit her, a trained response.

“So, you had to clean the blood from your clothes?”

“Yes,” she answers before picking up her cup of cereal and taking another bite.

It wasn’t until I woke up starving that I realized neither of us ate at all yesterday. She never asked, and I was too lost in my own thoughts yesterday to eat.

“The families who had servants had them because those people were working off some sort of debt. They didn’t get paid. The people in my house were working off debts owed to my grandfather.”

“How long has your grandfather been dead?”

She narrows her eyes at me before answering and I thrive on that spark of fire in her eyes.

“Fifteen years.”

“So your mother was willing to give up the generations-long family feud, but she wasn’t willing to give up her servants?”

“I never said she was perfect,” she spits, angry enough to growl at me for speaking ill of her dead mother.

When I cock an eyebrow at her reaction, she seems to shrink in on herself a little. I’m torn between liking the look of subservience and hating the way she shrivels up at the thought that maybe she displeased me enough for me to act like one of those Severino bastards. Honestly, I’m more annoyed than anything that I’m having any sort of reaction to her at all.

“My point is,” she says, her voice a little lower than before. “I wasn’t allowed to tell them no when they offered to

do something for me. Cooking was one of the things they did. I was barely allowed in the kitchen.”

“You’re Italian,” I say as if she wasn’t aware. “Aren’t all of you really great cooks?”

Her frown deepens. “Way to stereotype an entire nationality.”

I cough to cover the laughter that brings, just one more thing that agitates the shit out of me.

“You can earn it in the kitchen or you can earn it on your back,” I tell her, needing to get control of this conversation once again.

It would be easier if she just left.

Her face transforms, her irritation with my generalization of her culture turning first into a scowl before transitioning into real fear that I may force something like that on her.

This woman has faced so many monsters in her life, that I doubt I’d even be able to take things that far with her. But I learned long ago that I should never say never because fate has a way of stepping in, making the impossible come true.

I never thought I’d run into a Severino so long as I stayed out of Chicago, but look where that led me this week.

I’ve never crossed that line with a woman, never even been tempted to. Doing what was done to Ellie has always been abhorrent to me, and I have no idea why I’m questioning my ability to control myself now.

Am I imagining her eyes dropping to my mouth?

Is the way she shifts in her seat as if needing to squeeze her thighs together a figment of my imagination?

Am I creating things in my head that make me believe she desires my threats as much as she fears them?

Is the electrical current I feel when I’m close to her something she can feel as well?

I straighten from leaning against the sink when she stands.

Wickedness washes over me as I reach for her towel, watching with little guilt as her chin quivers.

“You’ll earn everything you’re given. Do the dishes, and maybe you’ll earn the towel back.”

She’s frozen in place, her body responding to either fear or the coolness in the air. I watch, my eyes locked on her breasts as her nipples harden, forming two hard points the same color as her lips. The soft thatch of hair between her legs is a couple of shades darker than the mop of hair on her head.

I wonder for an instant how she would react if I teased any part of her body with the tips of my fingers.

Would she claw at me and tell me to leave her alone?

Would she whimper and beg me to stop?

Would she remain silent and stoic like I imagine she did when one of the Severino assholes touched her?

I know exactly which one I will get when I meet her eyes once again and she lifts that stubborn little chin of hers a fraction higher.

I’ll get number three, and I hate that she’ll treat me exactly like she did them.

I step away from the sink, taking the towel with me.

She doesn’t hesitate to step up to the counter and turn on the water.

I don’t leave the room because I can’t pull my eyes from her heart-shaped ass as she reaches for the sponge on the back of the sink.

A slew of ideas come to mind as my eyes trail down the curve of her spine, my sight getting lost in the tangle of her messy hair. I imagine pulling it, wrapping it around my fist, as she lowers her mouth to my cock. I imagine it tickling my thighs as she sucks me off.

I have to take an additional step back, but it doesn't stop the fantasies. The minimal distance doesn't keep my body from trying to convince my head that she's mine for the taking, that I can have anything I want whether she offers it or not.

I head to the bedroom, having no doubt that she'll pull her clothes from the dryer and walk right out the front door.

I don't know how long I've been standing at the window, my eyes locked on a clump of dirt in the neighbor's yard, when I sense her enter the room.

I glance over my shoulder, unsurprised that she's now dressed.

I took the towel because I own it. I'll have to think of other ways to get her naked.

My best bet is to run her off, make leaving her choice, despite being the one to make that option more appealing than what it means she'll have to do if she stays.

I turn toward the window when she disappears into the bathroom, wondering how unethical it would be to be retroactive. She used the shower, ate cereal, and used the washer and dryer. Could I make her stay naked for an entire day to repay that debt she owes me?

She seems fine when speaking of her family allowing others to cater to them in return for paying off a debt. If it's okay for them, it should be okay for me as well.

A sinister smile crosses my face as I imagine all the things I should be paid back for and wondering how far I can push her until she leaves.

Chapter 18

Madelene

I can't help the growl that rumbles out of my throat.

My mother always warned me to get better control of my attitude. She told me countless times it would get me in more trouble than I could handle.

"You can't be serious," I say, my eyes darting from his to the bag of food on the table.

He shrugs. "You have a choice."

My mouth waters as I watch him pull the burgers and fries from the bag.

He left the house, and for some reason, I stayed here. I could've easily walked right out the front door, but this isn't exactly a normal kidnapping if any kidnapping could be called normal. I don't have a family out looking for me because they care for me. There are no pleas broadcasted for my safe return. I want to stay hidden from those searching for me as much as they want to find me.

"It's not much of a choice," I argue.

"But it is a choice.

"Get naked or don't eat?"

"See?" he says, a grin that doesn't reach his eyes spreading across his face. "Two choices."

I cross my arms over my chest, but he seems more interested in the food than me as I stand there staring at him.

"Are you hungry?"

The scent of greasy food meets my nose when he unwraps one of the burgers. My mouth waters at the sight of the cheese clinging to the wrapper.

"Are you serious?"

"You can suck me off or stay dressed."

His eyes lift to mine, and I know better than to question if he's joking again.

His offer is to either get naked and eat or stay clothed and starve.

If I press too much, he may actually change the terms to something I couldn't live with.

"You're a pervert," I mutter, wondering when he'll turn violent like Alessio and Marcello did. I suspect that all men are like that when whittled down to their innermost reactions.

He shrugs, not confirming or denying my accusation.

I shift on my feet, but I know what my response is going to be. I hate that I've been reduced to this, that fear has transformed me into someone willing to get naked for food. I tell myself it's for my survival, that I'm not whoring myself out for a cheeseburger and fries, but I don't feel like I'm being honest with myself as I pull my dress over my head.

Convincing myself that it's the temperature of the air and not some deep, dangerous thrill at the way his pupils dilate at the sight of my naked breasts is just as futile.

I can't convince myself as I drop my dress to the sofa that it's fear or shame making my nipples turn to stone either.

This has been going on for the last three days.

Want a shower? Get naked.

Hungry? Get naked.

I considered being naked when he walked back into the house after telling me he was leaving to go get food, but deep down it thrills me to be commanded to strip.

He turned the tables by offering me a choice.

Yesterday it was, "*I grabbed you something to eat, get naked.*"

He doesn't touch me, but he doesn't dart his eyes away either. He wants me naked, and he uses every second that I am to watch me, letting his own food get cold as I eat.

“Well?” I ask, holding my hand out for my portion. “I’m naked.”

His eyes slowly drift back up to mine, and I wonder how long it will take before I refuse to take my clothes off. If he keeps buying shit like tacos and cheeseburgers, then it won’t take long before I put on so much weight he won’t want to look at me anyway.

“The price went up.”

“Excuse me?”

His eyes drop to the apex of my thighs, and I try my best not to tremble when a cold chill runs up my body. I knew it was a mistake to think that him just looking at me was enough to appease his perverseness.

“You asked for bacon on your burger.”

My jaw clenches at my mistake.

I can see laughter in his eyes as he speaks, but I know better than to think he’s joking right now.

“I’m not sucking you off for bacon,” I say, torn between wanting to take a step back or standing my ground as to not show further weakness.

His laughter washes over me, and I wonder just how much the abuse I’ve suffered in my life has scarred me when the sound of it sort of thrills me. It doesn’t have a sinister edge to it. I’m not comfortable enough however to actually think he’s laughing because he feels joy. The man may not draw blood by striking out at me, but that doesn’t mean he’s safe either.

“Eat with your legs spread,” he says, offering up his demand for the barter.

“Fine,” I say, stepping to the side of the table opposite of him.

He laughs again, but it has a much different edge to it than the first chuckle did.

“We sit on the couch, remember?”

I glance over my shoulder. The couch he's referring to is actually a two-person settee that barely holds the two of us when our legs are closed. It would be impossible to sit beside him with my legs open and not touch him. It makes me too vulnerable. It would make him draw more conclusions than I care to explain right now, things I don't understand myself.

"I'll sit here so you have room," he offers, pulling out the chair I usually sit in because it gives him a better view into the living room.

"Fine." I huff, taking the burger and fries from his hand when he offers them to me.

My hands are trembling as I cross the room.

"Forgetting something?" he asks when I sit down and immediately start opening the wrapper on my burger.

I spread my legs a mere few inches, grateful for the single lamp he has in the room. I can see that it's casting shadows on my body, making it virtually impossible to get a good look at what he desires.

I clamp my legs closed when he stands and walks into the living room.

He doesn't reference or reach for his erection on his prowl in my direction, but I still jolt when he reaches for the lamp, jumping in fear when he pulls the shade from the top.

He has a victorious look in his eyes when he positions it a mere foot from my leg.

"Spread them," he commands, that growl in his voice making my body respond in the most confusing way. "Better yet. Lift your feet and rest them on the edge."

It's almost enough to make me throw the burger and fries at his face, but that feels too much like defeat.

I lock eyes with him, challenging him, but he doesn't mind losing that tiny battle as I lift my legs and his eyes drift down my body.

Cool air hits my sensitive skin, making it very clear, incredibly quickly, that my body is responding in a way I don't

understand to his commands.

I know it's a way to condition me. I know just looking eventually won't be enough. It's proven by him making me do this when just this morning for breakfast, sitting naked was enough. Things are escalating. His commands will grow more perverse, and although him telling me that I could stay dressed if I sucked him off was a mere suggestive challenge, I know eventually it may come to that.

I blame my mouth watering on the burger I'm lifting to it rather than the thought of his fingers tangled in my hair as he forces me down on his dick.

The food is absolutely delicious, the bacon crispy and perfect, the fries salty and fresh.

It takes me a long moment after my food is gone to realize my legs are still pulled up and spread for him to see. I drop my legs, and he doesn't start to eat until I do.

I watch him take a bite.

I watch him lick ketchup from his fingers.

I watch him from the living room as he eats his entire meal.

It isn't until he stands and gets rid of his trash that I realize I sat here naked the entire time he did it when normally I'd get dressed the second the barter ended.

The glint of victory in his eyes as I pass by him to grab my dress tells me he's well aware of it as well.

Chapter 19

Hollis

I grunt through my orgasm, my fist brutal as I draw all the cum from my balls. Painting the shower floor isn't exactly how I wanted to do this every fucking day, but the woman is driving me fucking insane.

I swear my cock threatens to refill with blood at the memory of her legs spread on the couch. I tilt my head to the ceiling, staring at the stains there, trying to forget the way her pussy glistened with her own arousal.

For days I've convinced myself that she hates me, that there's no way she's turned on while she's naked. There's no chance she's asking for more stuff just so I can require more "debt" to be paid. Maybe she doesn't even realize she's doing it. Maybe reality and my fantasies are starting to mix together. I usually like to stay busy to keep my mind from wandering, but we've been here for days. My only escape is when I leave to get us something to eat, and for some reason, I rush back each and every time, thinking today will be the day she runs while I'm gone, only to be greeted by her when I open the front door.

It tells me just how terrified she is of the Severino family and what they're capable of.

I jump when I pull the shower curtain back and see her standing in the bathroom door. The fact that she was able to surprise me should be concerning, but I have more pressing matters to deal with—namely trying not to get hard again with her standing so close while I'm completely naked.

I haven't been naked in front of her since that first time when I got out of the shower, only to discover she went to bed wrapped in the only towel I had. I grabbed extras on my first trip out of the house, wondering if I was wasting money because I was certain she'd be gone before I came back.

"Can I eat with my clothes on today since you jacked off in the shower?"

“Guess again,” I tell her, another sinister thought coming to mind as I step over the lip of the tub and reach for the towel. The bathroom is so small the spread of my arms would have my fingertips reaching from side to side in any direction. It puts her dangerously close to me as I begin to run the terrycloth over my skin.

She doesn't back away, but her eyes don't drop from mine either. She seems much more skilled at refusing to satisfy her urges than I am. I can't help but look down when she's naked. I always stare at her nipples, let my eyes roam like a physical touch down her body until I see her glistening slit. Fuck, even her thighs and goddamned calves turn me on.

She takes a step back and I realize that she's at the right height that she can still see my erection growing even while looking at my face.

“How about a deal?” I ask, wrapping the towel around my waist in hopes it makes her a little more comfortable. “Let me watch you get off in the shower and I'll let you stay dressed today and tomorrow.”

“Fuck off,” she snaps quickly, her eyes widening the second she realizes what she just said.

She jerks her hands up to her mouth, a terrified look on her face.

I want to laugh. It would be the exact opposite of what she expects because no doubt her reaction makes her think she's earned some type of punishment.

It makes me want to know who she really is. Does she think that way all the time but answers how she thinks people expect her to?

Instead of reacting in any way, I ignore her cute little outburst, grinning when she backs away when I step closer.

“I understand,” I tell her as I step out of the bathroom and reach toward clean clothes in the closet. “You like stripping for me.”

She scoffs, her cheeks red when I pull on my t-shirt before turning back around to face her.

I know she's grown more comfortable around me this last handful of days. She doesn't curl into herself the way she did the first time I sat beside her on the couch. She doesn't exactly get comfortable with me near, but she's less likely to flinch every time I go to stand without voicing my intention.

I want to taunt her further, but I don't know where it will get me. It says a lot that she's willing to stay here and do what I say in an effort to avoid being sent back to the Severino family. She could walk out of this house at any fucking point. I leave twice a day to go grab food, sometimes three times if she's getting under my skin too much to stick around. I have no doubt she was telling me the truth now about how violent they are, about how her father is dedicated to them despite what it means for her.

I lock eyes with her as I pull the towel from my waist, letting it drop to the floor at my feet. Her eyes follow it down, and it eats at me that she actually watches the thing land at my feet rather than her gaze getting stuck in the middle like I do her.

Yep, she's going to drive me insane.

I pull on a pair of lounge pants before leaving the room, knowing this is part of the routine. I don't know when we decided on taking turns getting the first shower because the hot water heater can't keep up with two people, but she showered first yesterday.

"You're going to let me shower without seeing me get naked?" she calls from the bedroom as I reach out to pull the door of the fridge open.

I won't make the mistake of thinking she wants me in there. I know she's asking because she thinks I'll expect something different if she does it while I'm not witnessing it.

I don't respond to her, but I know she's proceeding because the shower turns on. I wait a minute or two, ensuring she's wet, before walking back that way.

The shower curtain is closed, and I hate that we aren't at my actual house because that place has glass doors. If we were

there, I'd be able to see every fucking inch of her wet body.

"You're sure about declining my offer?" I ask, hating that she doesn't react to my words.

I know she knew I was approaching. It's impossible to move around in this house without the other person knowing. It's why it startled me so much to find her standing in the doorway when I pulled the curtain open earlier. I was distracted by thoughts of her enough for her to be able to approach me without knowing. I doubt she tried to sneak up on me.

"I'm not going to masturbate in front of you," she says, but there's a smile in her voice.

"Last offer," I say, biting my lip to stop from smiling myself.

"I don't play with myself in front of men when I don't even know their name."

My brows draw together. I didn't realize until now that I hadn't told her my name. I demanded it from her that first day, but we weren't really in a place to exchange courtesies.

"Hollis Ford," I say immediately, but not in an effort to tip the barter in my direction.

The edge of the curtain is pulled back, and she must've become accustomed to being naked in front of me because half her body is showing, not just her face, which is what I would expect.

"Hollis?"

I shrug.

"Your real name?"

"That's it."

She narrows her eyes, telling me she doesn't believe me.

"Still a no?"

She shakes her head in a way that says she thinks I'm crazy rather than rejecting my offer. I leave the room anyway.

It's been days of this. Days of her getting naked to eat. Nights of her sleeping naked beside me because a bed is a privilege she must earn. I get the feeling she stays in there instead of the living room because she's honestly afraid of being alone, and that says a lot, considering where she came from.

I can't even look at the bed as I leave the room. God, I live for the nights that I can't sleep. She tosses and turns, as restless a sleeper as I've ever seen, but it leaves the sheets around her waist. I watch her, fighting the temptation to run my finger over her skin.

It makes me only a fraction better than the men I've spent my entire adulthood punishing for the same things. I haven't stuck my dick in her yet. It's the only exception I think at this point.

The day drags on like every other day has since arriving. She doesn't argue when I bring home lunch. She undresses like normal. She does exactly the same thing at dinner time, spreading her legs once again because she asked for an extra side of ranch when I told her I was getting wings for dinner.

I swear I could feel her breath on my balls when she was sucking meat from the damn things, her legs wide open so I could see her secret.

There was no denying her slickness, but I can't contribute it to anything I did or even something she wanted me to do. She didn't look tempted to touch herself or needy in the way I've seen women act before.

I've never been more ready for a day to end than when I climb into the bed.

She heads into the bathroom, not a word spoken between the two of us since I returned home with dinner. It doesn't take long for her to finish in the bathroom, entering the bedroom in the darkness.

The sheet on her side pulls back.

"Are you—"

"I know the rules, Hollis."

I swear to God, her saying my name drops to my nuts, setting them to tingle. Had I known I'd enjoy the sound of it from her lips so much, I might've told her sooner.

The rule is that she's naked when she gets under the covers. I've been sleeping naked too just to keep her on edge. It's the only upper hand I've been able to manage.

She's quiet and still, telling me she has yet to fall asleep. Once she is, she's incredibly restless. It's made me wonder more than once if I wrapped my arms around her if she'd calm down, but crossing that line seems like a violation, more so than all the other transgressions I've made against her so far.

I doze, my body needing the rest from being on edge all damn day, but my repose doesn't last long. I open my eyes to darkness, knowing something woke me. A whimper hits my ears, and I settle some. She's had one other nightmare since I brought her here, but she pulled herself out of it the last time. I wait, my breathing slow and steady as I wait for her to get deep enough into her terror to wake herself up.

The next time she makes a sound, it doesn't resemble a nightmare at all.

It's a whimper of need and I barely stifle the groan of frustration that threatens to slip out of me.

I register the movement on the bed, rhythmic.

I swear my balls double in weight at the realization that she isn't dreaming because she isn't asleep.

She freezes the second I turn over. By the time I turn on the light, she's blinking over at me, her cheeks flushed as she tries to act all fucking innocent.

"Don't stop," I tell her, hating that she's already pulled her hand from between her legs.

"What?"

"Keep going," I urge, trying to sound encouraging rather than issuing a command.

She shakes her head. "I can't."

“The cost of sleeping in the bed has gone up,” I say, my voice only loud enough for her to hear.

I swear she looks fucking relieved at my words. She wants me to make her do this.

I tug the sheet as her hand disappears under it, loving the sight of her dark pink nipples. The yellow light coming from the lamp cast shadows all over the room, giving what she’s doing a dreamlike feel to it.

“I can’t,” she says again, her hand hovering just below her belly button. “I’ve never been able to do it unless I have a toy or a well-aimed showerhead.”

“I can do it for you,” I offer, praying she doesn’t take it as a threat. I don’t mean it that way at all.

Her head shakes, shutting that down immediately. It leaves me bereft, aching in all the wrong spots.

“How about this?” I ask, reaching down and picking up her hand. “You can do what I tell you to.”

I pull her fingers into my mouth, groaning at the tanginess clinging to her fingers from what she was doing that woke me up.

She gasps when I nip the tips of her fingers before pulling them from my mouth.

“Start slow,” I encourage. “Tease the outside.”

I hate when her eyes flutter closed. I swear I’d come without touching my cock if she kept her eyes on me while teasing her pussy lips.

“That’s it. When you’re ready, dip one finger in the crease. Jesus, you’re so fucking wet.”

Her lips part, her breathing growing slightly more erratic.

“Circle it, but don’t press too hard.” She moans, and as the sound drifts away, it takes my restraint with it.

I shove the sheet entirely out of the way, the movement drawing her eyes open. Instead of reaching for her like my

body is demanding, I slide my hand down my abs and grip my cock, my mouth hanging open when she looks down at my hand.

Her fingers move faster.

“Don’t resist that tingle you feel,” I pant. “Let it swim inside of you.”

My hand works my length slowly. It’s very clear with how tight my nuts are that I’m dangerously close to coming already.

“You dirty bitch,” I whisper as she locks eyes on my working hand, her own fingers taking on the same tempo.

I keep slow for my sake, but she seems irritated by it, needing more to take her to the fucking edge.

“You were thinking of me while you were working that pussy in the dark, wanting me to say your name so you can come.”

She whimpers again, and I have to speed up my hand. The urgency to nut turns into my only goal in life.

Her hips jolt, and I growl out a warning when she pulls her hand away.

“Break contact with that pussy again...” I start, refusing to fill in the blank because I know she’s doing it in her mind.

Whatever she wants from me is what she anticipates me saying, and for fuck-all reasons, I don’t want to ruin that for her.

Her arousal grows, her fingers slicker as she now uses two to roll circles around her clit. The sounds she’s making are sloppy and so fucking enticing.

“Want to lick your cum from your fingers, suck that little pink clit into my mouth. Fuck, Mads.”

Her mouth hangs open on a soundless moan, her back arching as she comes. The sight of it is so fucking divine, my balls tense, pulsating the first pulse of my orgasm.

I'm out of breath, my chest heaving like I've had to run ten miles to save my own life, and she can't seem to be capable of looking at me.

Instead of offering me her fingers like I prayed she would, she climbs out of the bed and locks herself in the bathroom.

I wipe myself clean with my t-shirt and roll back over. It only takes seconds before I'm back to sleep.

Chapter 20

Madelene

Crawling back into bed last night after what I did wasn't as hard as I expected it to be. He was snoring softly when I came out of the bathroom, so I didn't have to concern myself that he was going to want more.

Waking up this morning is an incredibly different story. There's some guilt for what I did, what my body demanded of me when I thought he had fallen asleep. I should feel more shameful than I do. Instead, in its place, is a sort of freedom I'm having a hard time explaining. I could blame him. He told me to keep going, somehow knowing I wouldn't be able to do it if he hadn't demanded it of me. I've never felt anything like it before, no matter how many times I've touched myself.

I was less fearful when he turned the light on to watch me than I was upset that I would have to stop. For some reason, the thought that he could hurt me never crossed my mind, not even when he told me to keep going. I never got the sense that he would invade my space or force himself on me if I genuinely refused. There was safety in it, like that bed was a sanctuary if only for the few minutes we were watching each other.

My dreams were almost as troublesome as performing for him. In them, his mouth was everywhere on my body—my neck, my nipples, my lower belly... there.

Every place but my mouth, yet that's where I longed for it to be.

I have no doubt this man is skilled and talented in helping a woman reach orgasm, but even in my dreams, he wasn't considerate enough for kissing. His fantasized touches were harsh, his fingers pinching, leaving marks. As horrible as that sounds now that I'm awake, they were exactly what I demanded of him while asleep.

Before, the thought of having cum in my mouth would make me literally gag. The Severino brothers thought it was

funny, independent of each other because Alessio didn't know about what his brother was forcing me to do.

Last night, however, I yearned for a taste after watching it splatter on his golden skin. My mouth watered for it the same way it does while smelling a cheeseburger, getting undressed to satisfy the rule Hollis has. He didn't even demand I clean his skin with my mouth. With the lack of command came a little disappointment as I walked to the bathroom. I'd never be able to take that step alone. I'd have to be told, but it wouldn't take twisting my arm for it to happen.

The price of sleeping in the bed has gone up.

His words float through my head as I come to full consciousness. The price is always changing. At first, it was nakedness, now, it's watching me touch myself. Before nightfall, he could raise the price yet again. The thought of it shouldn't thrill me. I should be terrified of this man, but I've seen monsters. I lived among them, always scared, terrified, they'd also change the rules and hurt me more than I could recover from.

Hollis wants me to believe he would hurt me. He wants me to see him as this demon who's willing to cross all sorts of lines, but I know better. I have no doubt the man can maim and kill. He's proven that he can, but I'm not his preferred victim. I can't help but think he's a demon slayer, that his goal in life is to clean it of people like Marcello and Alessio Severino. If that's the case, then I need to stay as close to him as possible. He's not my captor but my protector whether he wants to be or not.

I know it's not care or affection he has for me that will protect me but the love he had for Ellie Baker. Either way, I can benefit from it. I pray he's successful in getting his revenge because only then could I truly be free.

I stiffen when I realize I'm probably certifiably, clinically insane. I think back to when he shot Julio, how I was gagged, bound, and had my head covered by a hood. I don't recall hitting my head, but I guess it's possible. I shouldn't feel any level of comfort here. I should've run the first time he left

the front door open. I've had many chances to seek my freedom. I know I've said that Alessio will find me, but does his reach honestly go that far? Would he really expend the energy to send people out for the foreseeable future to look for me? I'm certain he could find a way to access my family's money without me around.

I know all this, yet I stay.

I know all this, yet I still crawl naked into this bed every night.

I know all this, yet I crave the wickedness in Hollis's eyes when I strip down, obeying his commands, making my payment for what he's providing.

It's deprecating and shameful. My skin comes to life at the prospect of doing it for him.

That's where the insanity diagnosis comes in. With everything I've been through, the horrific things I've seen, I should run as fast and as far away as I can manage, but I don't. I wake beside a man most would consider a monster, hoping the game changes just a little from what it was the day before.

I crave his commands, looking forward to what he's going to come up with next.

It makes me just as sick and twisted as the Severino brothers, my longing to be used how he sees fit.

I stiffen when he stirs and starts to roll over, that shame I only felt a little of when I first woke doubling. There's a lot in my life that doesn't make sense. There's a lot I've been through that has no real answers. Asking why was futile and punishable. I know now after years of mistreatment that there never really was an answer. They hurt me because they can, and it explains everything without really explaining anything at all.

Maybe that's the mindset I need to be okay with what's happening.

Because.

It seems good enough. Digging for an answer in my psyche won't get me any further anyway.

I can tell from the sound of his breathing that he's no longer asleep, so it makes no sense for him to be pretending to be that way. Maybe this is how he deals with what he's done. It seems we're both just pretenders, wanting things to go a certain way but being unable to ask for it.

Or maybe he's exactly like Alessio and Marcello because they didn't show their evil side right out of the gate when I arrived to live with them. It took less time than what has passed since Hollis brought me here. I knew better than to trust the way they were acting because what happened with Maya happened long before my dad's contract with Lucian.

I don't pull away from Hollis when he rolls into me, pressing his hot, thick erection into my bare thigh. The thing could literally be considered a weapon. I have no doubt the man would know how to use it as such, although he has yet to threaten me with it.

I bite my lower lip when his hand trails down my shoulder and over the tip of my breast, both hating and loving the zing that runs through my entire body. I tremble as it travels lower.

My thoughts and fears are all jumbled together, one in contrast with the next. I know I'd rather die than be returned to the Severinos, but at the same time, I'm terrified of what could happen if I do so in an impure state. I can't give away nor have that piece of me taken. I have no idea why Alessio has waited, why he hasn't insisted on me giving him that part of me prior to our wedding night. He's had so many opportunities, and I know he isn't waiting for my sake. It's just another tool, another way to instill fear, keeping me wondering when he'll do it and how he'll take it.

Tears burn my eyes because it makes me think of the promise my father made. The man was supposed to love and protect me, yet he hand fed me to the brute in the Severino family. His weakness, his inability to get his comeuppance for stealing from Lucian, will mean my death. He knows how they

are, and yet he doesn't care. My mother would be appalled at how he's behaved, but her telling me since I was a young child who I was going to marry really isn't any better.

She never recanted, never told me I'd have the right to choose who I spend the rest of my life with. Not even after learning of how the boys were. Her vow to end the family feud was also her downfall. Her commitment put Elio in the Severino path, and in turn killed her heir. Grace and forgiveness means nothing when both sides haven't agreed to discard the past.

I want nothing more than the right to choose. Although I'm fighting the urge to arch my back into Hollis's touch, it doesn't necessarily mean I'd choose this. I wouldn't choose Hollis, and I definitely wouldn't choose a Severino.

I want loyalty, a man willing to die protecting me, not a coward who hands me over to the devil, or a man who drove off a cliff in order to avoid the monsters they were leaving me at the mercy of.

Knowing I'll never get what I want, I climb out of the bed, letting Hollis's hand fall to the mattress. I chance a glance over my shoulder before entering the bathroom, only to find him looking right at me.

I do my best to keep my eyes on his despite the way the sheet has pulled away, allowing his body to be on full display.

"Do you know how hard it is not to just take what I want from you?"

He's angry but I don't know if it's because he's feeling like one of the monsters he claims to hate or if it's because I'm not readily offering up what he wants.

Without answering, I walk into the bathroom, pausing in front of the mirror to take a good look at my face. It's easy to see I'm not sleeping well, but I haven't in a very long time. Lying all night in the bed with him isn't some miracle cure, but I don't know if it's because I'm afraid of what he'll do or if it's the terror that Alessio will find me. If I thought for a second that I'd have a quick, easy death, it would be easier to

come to terms with it, but I know better. I know Alessio's methods, how he dispenses punishment for wrongdoings.

Knowing there's nothing I can change, I grab my toothbrush and toothpaste and start brushing my teeth. I hate the cinnamon toothpaste he has, but I'm not in a position to complain. Knowing him, he'd take it all away, and I'd rather my mouth feel like it's on fire than go without.

I'm not surprised when the bathroom door opens. He never asks permission to invade my space. I also don't feel like I have a right to ask. If anyone is invading space, it's me. He asked me to leave, and I refused. He doesn't want me here, and I know he's doing what he's doing, pressing the boundaries, until I finally walk away.

I keep my eyes on him as he walks over to the toilet, flipping the lid, and using the bathroom.

It's personal and uncouth, masculine the way his ass cheeks flex as he takes care of business.

I immediately avert my eyes, bending to spit when he flushes.

I freeze when I feel the warmth of his body against my back. It's a tiny bathroom, but if he were careful, he could get back out without touching me at all. This is intentional.

I don't straighten in fear immediately, rather, I scoop water into my mouth and rinse before straightening to find his eyes on my reflection, his body pressed to mine. The stubble on his chin scrapes along my shoulder, and I do my best not to shiver. He grins, somehow sensing the effort.

"You haven't paid for your toothpaste," he says, taking a step back.

The toothbrush falls into the sink, but I know better than to pull my eyes from his.

"This is your payment." Warm, rough fingers trail down my back, a smile twitching the corner of his mouth when I arch into the touch rather than pull away.

I hate myself for not being able to control my body's reaction to him. I should be terrified, standing here naked, but that isn't what I'm feeling at all. I'm needy, desperate, aching for more, just like I was last night before he woke up. I fed that part of me in the darkness, but I'm not sure I can do the same in broad daylight.

"This is payment for the toothbrush," he whispers, his eyes locking me in place as he lowers his mouth to my skin.

My mouth falls open as parts of my dreams from last night come true.

He licks and bites at my shoulder before crouching lower to taste the skin on my back and down my spine. I'm entranced by this man when I should be bolting from the room.

He stands again, his huge hand circling my waist and spreading across my stomach, my bellybutton in the dip between his index finger and thumb. I watch it, mesmerized by how big his hand is, focusing more on the way it could protect me rather than the terrible things it could be capable of.

"Payment for the water," he whispers, his voice full of gravel and need as his hand travels even lower.

"Not inside," I tell him before he can brush his fingers over my pussy.

Instead of agreeing or even pressing the issue soundlessly, Hollis pulls his hand entirely away.

I meet his angry eyes in the mirror. "What's the fucking difference in me taking it and that bastard taking it?"

"You taking it will get me killed," I answer.

He doesn't flinch. The reminder that I'll be killed doesn't seem to bother him at all, and for some reason, especially now with this level of intimacy, it feels like a slap in the face. Being wanted and irresistible because I'm me is different from being wanted because I'm accessible and convenient.

“Fine,” he growls as he lowers into a crouch. “But you still owe me breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I’m taking payment for all three right now.”

I don’t know what to expect from him, but it certainly isn’t being forcefully bent over the sink until my face is pressed to the mirror with his mouth buried between my legs.

I cry out, unable to control myself at the first fiery hot sweep of his tongue against my clit.

I realize I’ve pushed him too far when he grips both of my ass cheeks, pulling them apart to gain better access. He’s gone from gripping my chin in anger that first day, while insisting I tell him everything, to not touching me at all. Last night, he crossed a boundary by sucking my fingers into his mouth. How we got here so damn quickly I’ll never know other than he’s met his limit.

I don’t know if he’ll cross the line I drew or not, but with the way my body feels and how talented his tongue is against me, I don’t know that I’ll stop him if he tries to press his luck.

It’s magnificent, nothing akin to a punishment or payment at all.

My legs tremble uncontrollably, and a spark of pleasure runs through me with his own grunts and groans as if he’s finding this as pleasurable as I am.

“Hollis,” I gasp, my grip on the sink growing tighter.

He doesn’t pull his face from my pussy to answer me. The sounds he’s making against my flesh are embarrassing, much like the noises he’s pulling from my throat. He’s sloppy and unconcerned about the trails of wetness running down my thighs. His fingers hurt, their grip on my ass bruising, but I don’t make a move to push him away. It’s as much a part of this as his tongue and the occasional nips of his teeth.

Never in my life have I felt something like this. Everything I’ve been forced to endure has been about Marcello’s and Alessio’s pleasure. If they were feeling extra mean and vindictive, they’d grasp at me, hurt me by squeezing

one of my breasts. They'd even cup me between my legs while making threats, but it was always over clothes. They, for some reason, had some boundaries.

Hollis seems to have none other than his fingers staying on my skin rather than pressing into my opening. It doesn't stop his tongue from delving in deeper, however.

"Oh God," I moan, the feeling the most intense thing I've ever felt. "Hollis."

He groans again. When he pulls one hand away, I crave exactly what I told him he couldn't have. I know the danger of it. I know the trouble it could bring, but in this moment, none of that matters.

He doesn't press his finger into me. He rolls the rough tip of one against my clit, and it's enough to make me see stars. His other hand grips me tighter, pressing me into the sink. I'm certain it's the only thing keeping me on my feet as that ache I never seem to be able to reach grows bigger before pulsing deep inside of me.

I scream, the intensity of it too much to keep caged inside.

He makes his own noises. I can feel the vibration of them but it's almost as if I've gone deaf, and I want to live in this place of bliss for eternity. Nothing hurts here. There's no pain or fear. It's absolute perfection.

It doesn't last forever, and all too soon, my senses come back to me, my breathing still erratic, my eyes taking the longest to regain focus.

Chapter 21

Hollis

I'm left panting like I've run ten miles in the desert by the time I make her come, but that's not exactly what's causing my shame. Coming on the floor between her spread legs without so much as a brush of my cock heats my cheeks with embarrassment as if I'm a damned teenage boy that can't control his body.

That's the danger of her. She makes me reckless. I respond to her by instinct rather than using reason.

I stand, avoiding her eyes, trying my damndest not to think about the noises she made and how she just let herself go, assured that I would take her where she needed to be.

Anger takes control of me and I spin her around, pressing into her body, unconcerned if the sink is digging painfully into her back. My mouth is only inches from hers, but she's too blissed out to notice. My cock jerks, threatening to come back to life at the sight of the haziness in her eyes.

"What would you do if I just fucked you right now?" It's more a threat than a question.

Her orgasm-clouded eyes drop to my mouth, and I can't resist wrapping my hand around her throat, her pulse pounding against my palm.

"I'd probably come again," she whispers.

"You want me to fuck you?"

She shakes her head. "It's a death sentence for me."

She isn't exactly saying she doesn't want it, but I don't know of anyone willing to die just to get laid. I hate the tears that form on her lower lashes.

Her eyes flutter closed. "I don't want to want it."

It's a confession if I've ever heard it. I know better now than to make an assumption. I can only imagine the condition

her head is in after years of torment from the Severino boys and now what has happened with me.

“You want him to have it?”

She opens her eyes, causing one tear to roll down her cheek. “I want to have a choice. It’s all I ever wanted.”

“You’re choosing to stay here.”

Sadness fills her features, her chin quivering with emotion she’s almost too strong to let show.

“And it may get my father killed.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t assure her the bastard is safe. I don’t voice my opinion that the man deserves to die for not protecting her. What that man has done is a million times worse than Patrick not seeking vengeance for Ellie. At least the man would never feed his daughter to the wolves the way Madelene’s father did.

“You’re safe here,” I assure her as I take a step back, doing my best to ignore my erection.

I have to be imagining the way she leaned toward me as I created distance between the two of us. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve let my thoughts control what I want to see, making those fantasies seem like reality.

“I’ll never be safe,” she whispers. “As long as Alessio and his men are alive, he’ll keep looking for me.”

The first time she told me this, I wanted to call her a liar. There isn’t a woman alive that would be worth spending a lifetime chasing after, but I can’t help but think that maybe she’s right. I know that if she walked out of this house one day while I was out getting food, my first instinct would be to search for her. Maybe Alessio’s connection to her is deeper than I first realized. It’s very possible she’s more than just a payday to him. Even if it’s vengeance he seeks for me taking her, she could be right about him continuing his search.

I think about finding him first, but my focus has been on her since bringing her here. It’s no longer about finding out about the Severino family. I haven’t asked a question in days. I

haven't thought about killing them in regard to what he did to Ellie in just as long. I still want him dead, still imagine slitting his throat, but I've thought about it most recently when I see her flinch and when she whimpers at night from her nightmares.

I still want revenge, but somehow it's transitioned into retribution for Madelene rather than for Ellie.

She watches my face expectantly, as if she needs me to tell her I'll protect her, that I'm willing to stand in front of flying bullets, willing to take their strikes to my chest in order to prevent them from hitting her.

I'm stuck in her gaze, transfixed, but also wondering if she's been manipulating me this whole time. My distrust isn't just for her. I haven't trusted anyone fully in a long time. It only leads to disappointment. I couldn't trust that my mother left my father in order to protect me because we ended up in a much worse place than the one we left. When I'd had too much and took my destiny into my own hands, she wasn't grateful.

I've burned so many precious bridges in order to live the life I have, in order to stay sane.

I can't let a single woman come in and turn all of that upside down.

The look in her eyes makes me wonder if she's thinking the same thing, that this is some sort of game to me. It almost makes me want to smile. She's a smart woman, intelligent beyond what she wants people to know, for being so distrusting. She may possibly be the mirror image of me, which means she'll never give in to me fully, just like I can't allow that myself.

I know I'm a liar the second the thought sweeps into my head.

Playing her would be a whole lot less complicated than my current situation.

I take another full step away from her, the warmth of her body enough to complicate my thoughts.

I don't drop my eyes to her breasts. I don't lower them even further, although I feel a desperate need to get a look at her swollen clit. I feel like I've offered her more of my power by backing away than I ever intended.

I know it tells her that I'm not the monster I've been pretending to be. It's a confession that I'd never hurt her the way Marcello and Alessio have.

I stop short of declaring I'll seek retribution for the things they did to her before walking out of the bathroom.

Chapter 22

Madelene

Second-guessing my choices isn't a new thing for me. I've spent a lifetime wondering what if, wasted away most of my time since turning eighteen, questioning every move I've made, and it's no different for me right now.

Hollis left to get food, and I wonder why he goes to get prepared meals two to three times a day rather than grabbing quick, easy stuff to make from the grocery store.

Maybe he needs a break from my presence as much as I feel like I need a break from him. It doesn't stop my heart from racing a mile an hour every time he leaves. It doesn't keep me from drawing the curtains tightly closed, fearful Alessio could be outside, waiting until I'm vulnerable to come in and take me. It makes no sense to even think that. Alessio wouldn't waste a second killing Hollis. He sure as hell wouldn't wait to grab me. He's not exactly known for his patience, although he's always been a little more calculating than Marcello, who acted first and rarely thought later.

The man I'm anxiously awaiting to return, literally shot a man in the head and dragged me to his truck before binding and gagging me. Yet, I'm sitting in his living room, hoping he doesn't forget a packet of honey mustard sauce because I've discovered I prefer it over ketchup for my fries.

I'm the definition of clinically insane. I can argue that I'm choosing the lesser of two evils, but after what happened in the bathroom two days ago, I don't consider Hollis to be evil at all.

I've never thought that all killing is wrong. Maybe it's the way I was raised. Maybe it's because it's been drilled into my head that loyalty is everything. It's the betrayal of that loyalty that warrants death that keeps me from lining Hollis right up beside Alessio and his team of villains.

Hollis is avenging a death, making things right in his eyes. If anything, I'm a complication to his mission, but he

hasn't asked me to leave since that first time. I'm not mistaken in thinking he wants me to be here, but at least he hasn't shoved me out the front door and told me to fuck off.

I think he likes this game we're playing, but I don't imagine he's going to stick to the rules much longer. He's kept his distance the last two days, barely made eye contact with me since walking out of the bathroom after making me come on his mouth.

He hasn't rolled over and touched me in bed, nor has he asked me to get naked, although my payment for food was paid in full the day before.

Eating yesterday was less enjoyable as I could feel the scratch of my clothes the entire time. I ached to get naked, but I didn't.

This entire situation is deranged. The way I feel about all of it is the most complicated thing that has ever clouded my mind. Rather than thinking of a way to survive Alessio if I leave this house, I sit, dreaming up ways to push the boundaries until Hollis acts out the way he did in the bathroom.

Instead of walking away, taking my chances alone, I stay. Hell, I think I want to be here with him. As much as that should terrify me, it doesn't. I couldn't lie to myself even if I tried.

The safety I've convinced myself I have here is tenuous. It rests solely on Hollis's ability to maintain control, and he almost lost it the other day. It's only a matter of time before desire takes precedence over the composure he seemed to be struggling to maintain.

Access to the outside world is limited for me, but that has little to do with Hollis. We have a television, and he has a phone. I've never asked to use it. I don't know that he'd tell me no if I did. He could easily hand it over, but who would I call? I don't doubt my father would turn me right back over to Alessio after giving me a verbal lashing for having the audacity to get abducted in the first place.

I wasn't allowed any friends.

I literally have no one who would be willing to help me. The Severino family made sure of that. Yet, I don't feel helpless despite being exactly that.

I stand from the settee and walk around the small room. There's nothing in this house that doesn't serve a function. There's no décor, no extras, barely basic amenities. This can't possibly be his full-time house. There are no books, no mail, no way to pass the time other than the television. Dishes are minimal although he has brought more home to accommodate the two of us being here.

I know we're in McAllen, Texas, or somewhere very close because it's the town focused on most when we watch the news. According to them, it's a town not far from the Mexico border and full of dangerous people, abductions, and murder. I think he watches it as a way to control me and keep me here. It's his way of saying it's safer here, no matter what happens, than it would be for me out there.

He told me I'm making a choice staying here, but can it really be considered a choice when I'm forced to choose between him and the unknown?

I rush back to the couch when I hear the garage door open. He never steps outside of it until the door closes fully, so I know I won't ever be caught rummaging through his things, not that there's much around to give me any clue who the man really is. I have no idea of his likes or dislikes. I've discovered he's just as quick to pick a cooking show over an action movie, just like he'll pick a thriller over a comedy, only to be the exact opposite the next day. I can't get a proper read on the man, and I don't know if it's because he honestly has such eclectic tastes or if he's purposely trying to keep me guessing.

I watch as he enters in through the door in the kitchen, another bag of fast food in his hand. I haven't once complained about the food he's provided because he could just as easily not bring me anything. I imagine his goodwill can only last so long. There's a part of me I thought he was

desperate to have, but his lack of interest the last two days has me second-guessing even that.

I can't let go of the idea that this is some long con for him, that he's purposely trying to gain my trust just so it hurts more when he betrays it, but he doesn't seem like Alessio at all.

He pulls some sort of sandwich from the bag before walking out the backdoor.

He doesn't offer me what's left in the bag, but I don't hesitate to walk forward and look inside. I don't know if he forgot or didn't get the honey mustard on purpose. It feels like a form of manipulation as I pull the remaining food from the bag.

He doesn't come back into the house. Instead, he opts to sit on the single rocking chair on the back porch. It's his way of avoiding me because he knows I wouldn't step foot out there. The neighbor's house is so close I feel like I can touch it from one of the bedroom windows. The fence is a rusty chain-link, offering no privacy. I can't let anyone know that I'm here, and he knows it.

I eat, waiting for him to come back inside, wondering what I'll say to him when he does. It shouldn't hurt my feelings, his insistence to be alone, but for some reason it does.

I flip through the channels on the television, wondering what he would pick if he were sitting beside me, and jolt at a noise from the street. I'm on edge, once again eyeing the door the same way I do when I consider trying to sleep out here rather than naked and vulnerable beside him. That fear always has me crawling into the bed.

I pause on a show about something the host of the documentary calls capture-bonding, an alternative name for Stockholm's syndrome. They mention a lot of things, but I don't feel like it's describing me.

I don't care for Hollis. I see him as the lesser of two very evil choices, and I know that opinion may change

whenever he decides he's had enough of resisting what he really wants from me.

I don't dislike people who may be looking for me because those who are only want to hurt me worse.

The only thing that strikes a chord is that we may have the same desires. We both want the Severino family destroyed. The problem with that is I know it can never happen to such a powerful organization, and Hollis is delusional, thinking he's going to be the one to cut them off at the knees.

He doesn't come back inside for hours. I can see the top of the rocking chair moving back and forth, back and forth, for a long time. The sun sets, and yet he still remains back there.

I think when he reenters the house, things are going to change, but even two days later, he's still ignoring my existence. I hate the man for it, wondering if his threats and the fear he instills isn't better than being looked through as if I don't exist.

Chapter 23

Hollis

I'm twitchy.

It's nothing new. I hate being around people. I normally avoid it at any cost, but the drive-thru line was backed out to the street. I was mistaken, thinking that coming inside would be faster. I placed my order ten minutes ago, and yet I'm still standing off to the side, right alongside five others waiting for food.

I'm not the type to complain to management, and I wouldn't in this situation if I were. It's clear they're shorthanded and working their asses off. It's jerks like myself that choose to eat here that are causing all of their problems.

"Fred!" the guy behind the counter yells into the microphone.

"Fucking finally," I mutter as I approach him.

He nods at me.

"My drinks?" I ask, wondering why they don't have the fucking machine out here so we can get them ourselves, but this tired fucker doesn't make that decision. He's probably questioning why he got out of bed to come to work today.

"Shit, sorry, man."

He checks the receipt in my hand as if people actually lie about what they got and turns around to make the drinks.

I'm able to clasp one in each hand and still keep a hold on the bag as I walk toward the door.

"Fuck, sorry," I grumble when I nearly run into someone.

I freeze a second too long before I can get myself under control at the sight of Nash standing in front of me. He finishes throwing his trash away, giving me a smile.

“Hey, man,” I say, calm and cool, like I would any other time now that I’ve come to terms with him being right in front of me.

It says a lot about my level of distraction that he’s been in here the entire time, and I never noticed him. He doesn’t seem like he suspects anything. We’re only about ten minutes from the Mission Mercenaries’ office, so it’s not completely out of the realm of possibility for him to be here right now.

He follows me outside.

“I gave up on trying to find that girl. I think the cartel is somehow involved because nobody is fucking talking. Cortez is able to keep everyone silent with just threats these days. It’s not often they have to prove just how powerful and evil they are.”

“I came to the same conclusion,” I say, wishing the guy would just back off.

“Got company?” he asks, staring at the two drinks in my hands.

“This fucking heat,” I say without missing a beat. “Can’t fucking stay hydrated.”

“Saw some pretty fucked-up shit, tracking the Severino family.”

“Tried to do a little research myself,” I say, balancing one cup on the rail edge of my truck so I can open the driver’s side door. “Wasn’t able to find much which says a lot.”

He hums his agreement. “We need to get together sometime. Maybe another guys’ trip to the beach?”

“I doubt Liam would go now that he’s locked away with that woman of his.”

“We could invite Fox.”

I glare at him.

He chuckles as if I’ve told a joke. “Yeah, maybe not. That guy fucking scares me. Maybe the new guy?”

I tilt my head. “I’ve been on vacation from work. Haven’t met the new guy.”

“Come to think of it, he may be crazier than Fox. Soulless fucking eyes, man.”

“Just call me if you come up with a plan. I’m always ready to sink my toes in the sand and drink a beer.”

I wave at him as he backs away, praying the fucker doesn’t really call me. We aren’t exactly friends. We were both acquaintances of Liam and met through him, but I’m not really a person who spends much time with others. I prefer solitude more than anything else, plus, I have an issue waiting back for me at the safe house that can’t be explained easily.

I consider that my luck is changing as I hit every green light on the way back to the house.

The air inside makes me sense a change, and my jaw nearly hits the floor when Madelene walks out of the bedroom completely naked.

I’ve done my best to avoid her since crossing that line in the bathroom days and days ago, but I’ve never not been aware of her.

“Mads,” I breathe, knowing she’s playing some kind of fucking game.

I haven’t asked her to *pay* for a damn thing since eating her delectable pussy.

“You’re the only one that has ever called me that,” she says, leaning her shoulder against the bedroom doorframe. “I’ve always been Madelene. A few kids in elementary school tried to get Madi to stick, but it never happened.”

“You need to get dressed,” I snap, forcing the drinks down so hard on the table I’m surprised it didn’t split the Styrofoam cups. “I’m not playing that game any longer.”

She doesn’t say a word as she walks up, causing me to take a step back. She sifts through the bag, grabbing her food before backing away. She doesn’t find that damn dress of hers, but it’s almost as damn appealing as the sight of her bare flesh

with the way it teases her thighs, the strap falling off her shoulder, reminding me she doesn't have a bra here to wear.

"I have to pay you," she says as she crosses the room. "Is this payment enough?"

She places her drink and food on the side table before sweeping her hand down to indicate her nakedness.

"Is this enough for payment?"

I swallow a lump threatening to form as she takes a seat, immediately pulling her legs up and letting them splay open.

She's red and swollen as if she's been touching herself while I was gone. It both turns me on and angers me that I might have missed watching her.

"Or do you require this for payment?"

Her fingers sweep down her stomach. I swear I open my mouth to tell her she doesn't owe me a damn thing, but no sound comes out. It's not that I feel like she should pay to eat. Despite telling her she had to, I don't think I would've denied her if she flat out refused.

Her eyes sparkle with mirth as her fingers travel lower, and I swear to fucking God, I can feel her skin on the tips of my own fingers even though I'm several feet away.

"Mads," I warn as she begins to tease her clit with one finger, my teeth scraping over my lower lip.

My cock strains in my jeans, but I don't reach for the damn thing.

Her lips part, her breaths coming out in short bursts, her body twitching occasionally when she touches herself in the most perfect way.

Before I know it, I'm standing so close, the warmth of her body can be felt through my clothes.

She's naked, open, so damn pink and slick, my mouth waters to taste her for a second time.

"Is this payment enough?" she asks, reaching up and swiping her arousal-drenched fingers across my lips.

I lick at them immediately, instinct taking over more than anything.

I could blame curiosity for letting her dictate what happens, but I know better. I know it's some form of addiction that allows her to reach up and pull me closer.

"Sit," she whispers, her breath on my cheeks. Like a fully trained puppy, I obey.

I keep my hands at my sides as she shifts to straddle me. I don't know if it's inexperience or her own fear keeping her lower half three frustratingly huge inches away from my cock, but she maintains it. Maybe she's trying to tempt me, trying to force me to act, but I've already given in too much to give her everything she wants.

"Mads," I say again, my hands clenching into fists in an effort to resist touching her.

"Hollis," she whispers, my name carrying a mocking edge to it that should bother the shit out of me.

If it's her intention to annoy me, she's losing. I swear on everything holy, if she rolls her hips even the slightest amount, I'll shoot off in my fucking jeans without being touched just like that day in the bathroom.

"Is this enough?" she asks, her words growing breathier as she presses her perfect fucking tits to my chest before standing on the couch in front of me. "How about this? Does this pay for my lunch?"

I'm supposed to be the one in control. She should fear me, but her taunting and teasing, the way she has her pussy two inches from my mouth, make it very clear who's in control of the situation.

When she lifts her leg, her right knee on my shoulder, I'm certain she's going to put me out of my misery, but then the bitch grabs me by the hair, the sting of it not only making my cock harder but it turns me into a feral fucking monster.

"What about this?" she taunts with my face buried in her hot cunt.

It's impossible not to taste her, so I don't waste a second trying to resist. I lick at her, breathing the scent of her into my body, no longer able to leave my hands at my sides.

I'm ravenous, my tongue swiping at every available part of her.

I don't know how long she's laughing before the sound meets my ears, but the sound grates on my nerves once I'm aware of it. Although interrupted with moans of pleasure, it sounds mocking and contemptuous, as if she's been playing me this entire time, and I've fallen for every trick.

I imagine every word from her fucking mouth has been a lie. That she had more power over the Severino brothers than they ever had over her. The tales about her father, her brother, her mother... all fucking lies. She used Ellie's memory to get under my skin. She used the torture and death of an innocent girl to make me feel sorry for her.

Everyone is capable of manipulation, but not many are able to get the upper hand over me.

Nothing matters to me except setting things right.

I growl my rage at falling for her shit, grabbing her by the hips and pulling her down.

Her eyes widen as if she couldn't believe I'd finally figured her out.

She whimpers, the sound so real, I almost believe that she's a little scared of what's going to happen, but I can't give into that side of me that still wants to trust her.

It's a matter of seconds, less than a handful of breaths, before I have her sprawled out on the floor, one hand in her hair and the other working open my zipper.

I groan when my cock breaks free of its restraints, the tip of me meeting her warm skin.

"Hollis," she pants, her eyes wide and full of emotions I'm not bothering to analyze right now.

She created the monster I've become and no amount of begging will make me stop.

“I’m going to fuck you,” I say, the only warning I’m going to provide. “If you beg me to stop, I’m only going to fuck you harder.”

“Yes.” She pants the only thing she could possibly say to make me pause.

I stare down at her, my cock leaking against her lower belly, the pulse in it matching my erratic heartbeat.

Her lips tempt me, but this is on no level a romantic, passionate occurrence.

Her hips roll upward, her need as evident as my own.

It isn’t fear in her eyes but need.

It’s another manipulation, just one more way for her to control what’s happening. She isn’t pushing me away. Her fingers are curled into my biceps, pulling me toward her.

“So fucked up,” I mutter, wanting desperately to pull away, to not give into any of this shit, but my balls are drawn up tight, my cock controlling me more than it ever has in my life.

I’m a lunatic, a madman, completely deranged as I watch her.

I consider for the briefest of seconds that it’s looking into her eyes that’s fucking me up so badly.

I grind my teeth, wanting to wrap my hand around her throat.

“Turn over,” I growl, moving her before she’s even had a chance to do it herself.

I shove the tiny coffee table out of the way, gripping her hip.

“Ass up.”

She whimpers again but does as I say. Fuck me if it doesn’t put that glistening pussy on display again, her lips dark pink and swollen, her entrance begging to be invaded.

I can't tell if this is still part of the game. If she really believes I won't take it all the way. If that's the case, it's a serious miscalculation on her part.

I grip the base of my cock, swiping it from her ass to her clit, groaning at the warmth of the slickness coating her.

I'm half a breath away from slamming inside of her when I realize just how much I fucked up.

"It'll be the last thing you fucking do." The words hit just as cold steel presses to my temple.

My first instinct is to cover her body with my own. I don't know if it's to protect her as a person or to prevent anyone else from having what I was planning on taking.

It's as if everything happens in slow motion—Madelene looking over her shoulder, her eyes widening. She scrambles away, real fear in her eyes, and I know instantly the difference in the way she looked at me versus what she's seeing now.

I never thought I'd want to protect anyone else after trying to protect my mother didn't work, but that's my first instinct at the terror I see in her eyes.

I know for some fucked-up reason I'm willing to die for her.

"He was going to rape me," she cries, and my world falls apart.

I realize her fear has always been real, and I'm just one more monster she'll have to overcome.

Chapter 24

Madelene

The words taste like putrid acid in my mouth.

I don't recognize the man holding the gun to Hollis's head, but I imagine Alessio hired many new men to look for me.

I scramble away, trying to cover myself as best I can.

I don't think I'll die here today, but the fear of being dragged back to Alessio, this man telling him what he walked in on, make every fiber in my body twitch. My jaw trembles, my teeth clattering together in terror.

I doubt my accusation will stand. I have no idea how long he was watching before he interrupted, but even if it was five minutes, he knows I was as much an active participant in what was going to happen as Hollis was. It ensures my death before the sun sets. It may even anger Alessio so much that he puts a bullet in my head out of anger. It would honestly be the easiest way to go.

My eyes dart toward the door, thinking of running out of here for the very first time since Hollis untied me and left it standing open, but I know I won't get far.

A certain kind of calmness washes over me. I've waited for years for my end to come, and now that it's right around the corner, I feel a certain edge of relief in it. The waiting has been the hard part, and I take solace in knowing the wait is nearly over.

"Get dressed," the man growls, and I rush to obey despite my recent thoughts.

"Nash," Hollis growls. "Put the fucking gun away."

Nash, as Hollis called him, presses the gun harder against Hollis's temple.

"Fucking try me, asshole," the man growls. "Put these on."

I swallow, wondering what he's going to want from me, when Nash steps back and pulls out a pair of handcuffs, tossing them in front of Hollis.

His jeans are still around his thighs, his heavy cock no less impressive even as it rests against his thigh. My first instinct is to reach for him, to pull up his jeans and cover that exposed part of him, and my stomach swims with guilt for my lie. I lock eyes with him, and I'm greeted with a different look from the one he was giving me before this guy came in. Before I thought he really hated me. It fed some deep part of me that may always believe I'm not worthy of anything good. Right now, he looks apologetic, and I can't tell if it's guilt or some level of his own fear. Then it shifts again, as if blinking his eyes made him realize something he never considered before.

Hollis glares at me as if I'm the one responsible for all of this happening as he picks up the cuffs. In a way, he may be right. Had I left when he told me to, he wouldn't have a gun pointed at him.

"Nice fucking try," Nash growls when Hollis attempts to put the cuffs on in the front. "At your back, asshole. I said get some fucking clothes on."

His harsh tone makes me scramble up to standing. I have to leave the room to get my dress, having left it on the bed while Hollis was out getting food.

"How the fuck did you know?" I hear Hollis growl.

"You had two drinks," the man explained. "One was diet. I didn't figure you were watching your caloric intake."

My hands shake uncontrollably as I try to dress, causing me to drop the garment to the floor twice before managing to pull it over my head. I slip my legs into my panties, knowing that the barrier will provide no form of protection once this man gets me back to Alessio.

I look toward the window, wondering how badly I'd be cut if I jumped through the thing. I'd never have enough time to open it and climb out, but a shadow crosses the doorway, and there the man is, his gun now pointed at me.

“Don’t even think about it,” he snaps.

“Nash!” Hollis growls. “Leave her the fuck alone.”

“I don’t know what the fuck is going on,” the man says, his eyes darting from me to Hollis. “But we’re going to get to the end of it. Come on.”

My body moves instinctively, just like it’s done when commanded by anyone connected to the Severino family.

By the time I make it back into the living room, Hollis’s pants are pulled up, and he’s sitting on the couch, hands cuffed behind his back.

“We’ll take your truck,” Nash tells Hollis before turning back to me. “Do you know how to drive?”

I nod, thinking his question is ridiculous. Doesn’t everyone fucking know how to drive?

We’re instructed to climb into the truck, me behind the wheel and Hollis in the passenger seat. Nash climbs into the back seat of the double cab truck, his gun still out and directed at Hollis as if he expects the guy to perform a magic trick and suddenly be out of the handcuffs.

I feel Hollis’s eyes burning on the side of my face, and I hate the look of betrayal in his eyes when I have to look over my shoulder to back out of the garage once the door is fully up.

I’m frozen, locked in his stare.

“Rape?” he snaps, making my chin tremble once again. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“He’s going to kill me,” I whisper.

“He isn’t one of Alessio’s men,” Hollis growls, but it doesn’t make me any less scared of what’s going to happen to me.

I look back at the man who seems as invested in our conversation as the two of us. Tears burn my eyes, and for the first time in as long as I can recall, I don’t fight them.

“Mads,” Hollis whispers, and I’d like to think he’d reach for me, comfort me in some way if he could. “Swear to fucking God, Nash, if you don’t fucking take these cuffs off...”

“Not going to happen,” Nash says. “Let’s fucking go.”

“Where the hell are you taking us?” Hollis demands of the man before turning his eyes back to me. “You’re not in danger, Mads.”

“I’m going to let Angel sort this shit out.”

“Aw, shit. This is worse than I thought,” Hollis mutters.

Chapter 25

Hollis

My thoughts race as Madelene drives toward Angel's office. She seems no less scared even after being told Nash isn't part of Alessio's crew. I can't tell if she thinks I'm lying or if she believes I'm part of whatever the hell is going on right now.

I want to explain, but I don't have any fucking answers either.

I never should've lied to Angel, but honestly, I don't owe him a damn thing. It doesn't mean the man won't be pissed, and fuck if Lauren is there. Then things can really get bad.

Tears streak down her face as she drives, and I fucking hate Nash for scaring her. Her hands are trembling on the steering wheel, and I can see the shake in her leg as she presses the gas pedal.

"Mads," I say, but she keeps her eyes locked on the road in front of her.

I don't know if she believes me about not being in danger. Nash doesn't seem like the type to hurt women, but I can't shove down the idea that maybe he was somehow turned by Alessio Severino. There's always a chance that the guy is just as evil. I don't know him well enough. Anyone working with Angel isn't exactly doing things above board. We all have a price, and Nash is not excluded from that.

I twist in the passenger seat, looking at Nash. His gun is still out although lowered in his lap. He seems more curious about Madelene than concerned about me, and I hate the attention he's giving her.

"Stop fucking looking at her," I hiss, hating the smile it draws to his face.

"I'm so fucking confused right now," he says, his eyes slow to pull from the back of her head to look at me. "Left up

here.”

Mads obeys the man, her tears still flowing as she sniffles.

“You’re fucking scaring her. Tell her she’s safe,” I demand.

As if I’m an exhibit at a circus, Nash looks at me like he just can’t figure me out. He doesn’t say another word until we’re less than a block from Angel and Lauren’s office.

“Park in the front.”

She obeys, her hand shaking wildly as she grabs the gear shift and places the truck in park.

“Get out and walk around to open our doors,” Nash says, pointing his gun at her.

“I’ll fucking kill you,” I threaten. “Don’t point that fucking thing at her.”

Nash chuckles as if my words have proven something to him. Madelene climbs out of the truck and for a second, I wish she would just take off. I doubt Nash or Angel will actually fucking hurt me, but Angel’s client, her father, may be calling the shots. I doubt he has his daughter’s best interest at heart because the man practically bargained his life for hers with the Severino family. His intentions can’t be trusted.

As if she’s been forced to do shit in a situation like this, Madelene opens Nash’s door first without being instructed, helping to maintain his control over the situation. As much as I’d like to be the fucking hero, I’m extremely limited in what I can do. The look in her eyes tells me that she won’t run, even if I knock him over and give her the chance.

I feel a little calmer when I climb out of the truck and notice that Nash has put his gun away. We don’t draw too much attention as Nash ushers me toward the front door of the office.

I imagine people think Mission Mercenaries, which is on the front door along with the skull logo, is some type of bounty hunting agency. It wouldn’t be that big of a shock to

see people in handcuffs being escorted inside. I've only been here twice before and the jobs I've worked through the agency have all ended with people's deaths. We don't exactly drag people back to the office in order to seek justice. We send them to their maker where we find them.

As expected, Nash has to knock on the door. It constantly stays locked because the business is actually just a front for what we really do. I never understood why they have a fucking office anyway, but I imagine it has to do with taxes and laundering money. Who the fuck am I to judge how people get their money? I have an issue with people hurting other people. I don't give two shits about anyone fucking over a government agency.

I'd wrap my arms around her if I could, but I have to settle for her sticking close to my side as we wait for someone inside to open the door.

The click of the lock on the door being opened doesn't bring any sort of relief. Lauren narrows her eyes at me when she pulls the damn thing open. It takes her a long moment to step aside so we can enter, and I wonder if she's really debating leaving us standing out on the sidewalk, drawing attention from the other businesses.

"I found the girl," Nash says after we all walk inside. "Under Hollis in McAllen."

I'm simmering with rage, waiting for Madelene to speak up and tell everyone that's not exactly what was happening, but at least Nash didn't use the word rape.

"Seems he was trying to take liberties not offered to him."

"Motherfucker," I rumble.

Angel and some other guy I've never seen before glare at me. I scowl but don't argue. I'm not having this fucking conversation in front of a man I don't know. Honestly, I don't owe any of these fucking people an explanation.

"He wasn't," Mads says, and I feel the brush of her body on my side as she steps forward. "I thought he was one

of Alessio's men.”

Relief washes over me. I was afraid for a long moment, not that she was accusing me of it but that she really felt like I would do that to her. In the moment, I wasn't so sure that I wouldn't, regardless of how her body was responding to mine. I was out of my head with lust and need. I honestly didn't know if I could have stopped myself if she begged me to.

“Why is he in fucking cuffs?” Angel hisses. “Take them off. You're not a fucking cop.”

Nash shrugs, seeming less affected by Angel's anger than a smart man would be.

“Just doing my job,” Nash grumbles.

“Not going to stop you from getting your ass beat,” I remind him as he pulls the metal from my wrists.

I turn to face the man, my hands wringing the sore spots the cuffs caused. Nash looks thrilled at the prospect of going head-to-head with me and it makes me wonder why he used a gun in the first place if that's the case. We could've easily had it out in the living room of my safe house if he wanted to challenge me.

“Can't wait,” he says, winking at me.

Angel turns his attention to Madelene, and instinct tells me to step in front of her, to protect her no matter the cost. It leaves me frozen because it's been a lifetime, it seems, since I've felt that way.

The way he scans her makes me wonder if he's looking at her like a paycheck. I don't know the man's reasoning for doing what he does, but more often than not, money is what motivates people. He could very possibly not give a shit about what happens to Madelene so long as the motherfucker gets paid.

“Tell me what the fuck is going on,” Angel demands, drawing a warning growl from my throat.

Lauren steps forward. At first, I think she's going to go all momma bear for her man, but there's a knowing grin on her

face.

Mads opens her mouth to speak, but she squeaks instead, a weird sound I've never heard, when she looks over Angel's shoulder.

She steps around the guy most would consider my boss, and I move to step in front of her. I have no real way to protect her other than my hands, but I don't have time to evaluate why I'm so fucking willing to take a bullet for this woman.

I haven't kissed her lips.

I haven't sunk inside her hot cunt.

There's absolutely no reason for me to feel so protective of her.

The man behind Angel growls, a possessiveness to the sound that makes my hackles go up. It's very possible Angel is double-crossing all of us. Alessio could've easily offered more money than her father did for her safe return.

"Step away from my fucking sister," the man demands.

Confusion stops me in my tracks. A million considerations hit me all at the same time. It's not the first time I argued with myself that she was playing me the entire time, that she was the one in control. What other reason would she have to stay? Her freedom was hers to take the second I untied her hands.

She was so damn tearful when she told me about her brother's death. Coldness I've only ever felt once before settles back inside of me. Even her next words don't have the ability to change how I feel.

"How?" she whispers. "You're dead."

Chapter 26

Madelene

Dizziness washes over me.

So many things have happened today. I don't know what to believe.

Maybe it's a dream. Maybe I've been hurt and my fantasies are blurring with reality.

How many times in the last several years have I wanted my brother to rise from the grave and rescue me?

Why would he choose now when I'm not so sure I need to be rescued?

Hollis wants to protect me. He stepped in front of me, was willing to block whatever harm may come my way.

I can't recall a time anyone but the apparition across the room did that, and eventually even he stopped doing it when challenged by Marcello as a teen.

"Elio?" I whisper.

There was something familiar about the man, causing my inability to speak while my brain tries to figure it all out.

He looks different, no longer a boy of seventeen but a man. His face is covered with a full beard, tattoos covering mottled skin on his right arm. His earlobes are both plugged with huge black pieces of jewelry.

But his scowl and the look of disapproval in his eyes are exactly the same. The glare so familiar it's as if he's looking right at Maya the same way he did when she flirted with him in our kitchen that first time.

Hollis turns to face me, a look of betrayal in his eyes. Seconds ago, he was willing to take whatever may have come his way to protect me and now he looks as if I've somehow double-crossed him. There's also a hint of confusion in his eyes. I don't know which person to respond to first.

I swallow a bubble of emotion, my eyes drawn back to the ghost of my brother. Blinking doesn't make him disappear, and suddenly I feel unsteady on my feet.

The man doesn't look happy to see me, and that doesn't make sense. After so long, he should open his arms up to me, tell me everything will be alright.

Am I dead?

Is Nash really one of Alessio's men and I was killed in that tiny house with Hollis.

I raise my hands, gripping the sides of my head. Nothing makes sense. I feel feverish in my confusion, like I should scream, but screaming never helped me in the past.

My eyes dart around the room. Familiar faces, unfamiliar faces. I can't tell what's real and what's not.

Hell, it could all be real. It could all be fake. I could have a head injury. There's a slew of explanations because my brother being alive isn't possible.

"Why the fuck is she here, Angel?" my brother's ghost demands, his voice a growl, unfamiliar.

"Someone needs to explain what the fuck is going on," the man Elio called Angel snaps. "Care to fucking explain, Donovan?"

Donovan?

My eyes snap between the two of them. I want to look at Hollis. He'd be able to help me understand but the last look of betrayal in his eyes keeps me from glancing in his direction.

"How are you here?" I ask Elio. "Donovan? Who is that? Did you fake your own death? Have I lost my fucking mind?"

"Watch your mouth," Elio snaps, sounding more like the man I knew.

He hates it when cuss words would slip out. He, like my mother, expected me to be a lady at all times.

I hate the glare in his eyes, but mostly I hate that he's not even looking in my direction. He's asking his questions of Angel and Hollis, not me.

It feels treacherous, disloyal, what's going on. We were as close as siblings could be without having shared a womb. Being born only ten months apart made it easy for our bond to form. There's no way the boy I grew up with would do such a thing to me. Our mother died thinking he was gone, his death drawing her into an early grave.

I swallow down my anger, but it threatens to bubble right back up.

Anger makes my hands ache to hit something. My shaking transitions from fear to hatred.

Animosity carries me across the room, and this time, Hollis doesn't try and stop me. It stabs at me in a way I can't explain, and that just pisses me off even more.

I stand directly in front of Elio, simmering with a bitterness so strong it threatens to taint everything around me.

Without hesitation, I reach up and slap the man across the face. He'll never understand the pain and heartache he caused. His selfishness has ruined countless lives.

His only response is the flex of his jaw muscle, and that makes me want to claw his fucking eyes out. I reach up to hit him again, but he grabs my wrist, his dark eyes turning down to look at me.

"Your fiancé may tolerate you treating him like that, but I fucking won't."

It doesn't matter how he looks, or our parents' blood flowing through our veins, this man is no longer my brother. He's different from the man we buried years ago.

"You know better than to think Alessio would tolerate that from me," I say, my voice cracking with barely restrained grief. "You left me to the fucking wolves."

His eyes twitch, but I know better than to think he's affected by my words. If he knows Alessio is now my fiancé,

then he should be well aware of the fucking hell I've been through at the hands of the Severino family since he left.

He drops my hand, a look of disgust in his eyes, as if he's now tainted just by touching my skin.

His memory has made me angry in the past. It isn't the first time I've thought of betrayal when thinking of him, but it's all just too much right now.

I pound at his chest, scream my questions like a lunatic, but he just stands there and takes it. I'm not even worthy of his eyes as he stares over my head at the other people in the room.

"You left me to them!" I scream. "Like a wounded animal left to the wolves! I'll never fucking forgive you!"

Hands pull at me, the distance between my brother and me increasing, but it isn't Hollis that is keeping me from hurting him. The woman that opened the door is in front of me now, her frown so deep it leaves shadows on her forehead.

"I need you to calm down," she says, her palm somehow comforting on my cheek.

"Lauren," someone growls. "I swear to fuck if she hurts you or the baby..."

The warning is clear in his voice but she doesn't back away.

I drop my eyes to her swollen belly.

"I'd never," I vow, earning a soft nod from her.

"Just breathe. We'll get to the bottom of all of this. I promise."

I do as she says but only because I can't function with my heart rate so damn high. I don't hold anyone to promises any longer. I always end up on the losing end of them.

I look around the room. Nash looks like he's enjoying a cinematic blockbuster. Hollis is simmering, his hands clenched at his sides. Angel still has his eyes locked on me like he's willing to pull my limbs from their sockets if I so much as twitch in his woman's direction.

Lauren looks like she's ready to spit nails, and I have no idea who her anger is directed at.

Elio, or Donovan as the others called him, steps forward. Unlike I did when we were kids, I shrink down a little rather than hold my chin higher. The boy I grew up with would never hurt me. I'm not as certain about this man.

I don't pull away when he grabs my arm and spins me toward the front door of the office.

"The fuck do you think you're doing?" Hollis growls, shoving Elio and forcing him to break his hold on me.

"Guys," Lauren growls, but the two men stand nose to nose, nonverbal threats swirling between the two of them.

"She's my sister, and she's coming with me," Elio growls.

Hollis breaks eye contact first, his head turning in my direction.

I'm not sure I'm safe with Elio, but I have so many unanswered questions, I don't fight when my brother takes a step back and directs me out of the office.

My mind is a jumbled mess. If Elio is alive, it means so many things. Maybe I won't have to marry Alessio. If the Lombardi heir is alive, then the money the Severinos expect isn't mine.

The man doesn't speak as he ushers me into a dark truck. He doesn't open his mouth as he drives either.

I commit this new man to memory, letting my eyes scrape down every exposed inch of him. The tattoos, the earrings, nothing screams Lombardi. He looks less like my dad right now and more like my mother's father, the grandfather neither of us liked growing up. Our grandfather was a ruthless man, one who kept the feud between the Lombardi and Severino families alive out of spite.

If I passed him in the street and only gave him a quick glance, I probably wouldn't even recognize him as my brother. He's that incredibly different.

I'm questioning my choice when he parks outside of a motel fifteen minutes later.

There's a very good chance I'm no safer with this man than I would've been with Alessio and his guards.

It makes me wish that Hollis were here, despite knowing I'll probably never see the man again.

Regrets swim inside of me when Elio turns off the truck and gives me his undivided attention.

Chapter 27

Hollis

I watch the closed door for longer than I probably should. I don't know that I expect her to run back through it and into my arms, but damn I'm left reeling with everything that just played out.

"What. The. Fuck. Just. Happened?" Angel asks, his voice so calm it's almost scary.

Madelene made her choice. She wasn't exactly under duress when she left here, and that's the only thing that's keeping me from running after her.

I turn to face Nash, ready to exact my revenge for busting into my house, but Angel, predicting what's going to happen, steps in between us.

I could easily blow up right now, and the thought that I would get shot twice, possibly three times if Lauren is having a bad day, is the only thing that keeps me from lunging over Angel onto Nash.

"I want fucking answers," I growl. "Who the fuck is that guy?"

"Don't take that fucking tone with me, asshole," Angel says, stepping closer, simmering with rage.

"Can we take the fucking testosterone down a couple fucking notches?" Lauren says, stepping between Angel and me.

She must know neither one of us would put her unborn child in danger.

Angel visibly calms when she presses her palm to his chest.

"That," she begins, "is Donovan Gibson. At least that's the name he's using now."

The flex in Angel's jaw tells me he's just as surprised about the turn of events as I am.

“That’s not his name?” Nash asks, confused.

Angel and I both scoff at his realization.

“Wait,” he snaps. “You guys aren’t using your real names either, are you?”

Lauren rolls her eyes.

Nash looks directly at me. “You actually picked Hollis? Who the fuck would *pick* a name like that? Of all the fucking names and you—”

“What do you know about the guy?” I ask Angel, ignoring Nash.

Angel doesn’t say a word, and despite Lauren looking like she wants to speak, she takes his lead and remains silent.

“I wouldn’t give anyone your information either,” Angel says eventually.

I’d argue that he only knows what I gave him, but the look in his eyes tells me that may not be accurate.

“I’m more concerned about who the fuck you think you are. I send you out for a job, and instead of doing what you’re hired to do, you take that fucking girl for yourself. How long have you had her? How far have you fucking taken things with her?”

The only thing that stops Angel from ripping my head off is Lauren’s hand to his chest. She leans closer, pressing her mouth to his ear.

I have no idea what she says to the man, but he stops inching forward. He doesn’t seem satisfied, but he’s not looking like a murder is going to take place in the next five minutes either.

“I will not be lied to, ever,” Angel says. “You’re fucking fired.”

I stare at him as if he’s suddenly grown two heads. Fired? Like he’s some legit boss in the first fucking place.

Without a word, I turn around and fucking leave the office. What’s one more fucking bridge burned? I’ve been

setting the motherfuckers on fire since I was a teen. Angel Guerra makes no fucking difference in my life. He certainly isn't the only asshole that can offer me work.

Mads left the keys in the ignition when we arrived so I climb inside my truck and head back to the shitty little house that has been mine and Madelene's sanctuary for the last couple of weeks.

It seems emptier without her here, but this place was never home to begin with.

The sun starts to set, and with the absence of light inside, the walls seem to close in on me. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and head to the back porch.

My lip twitches at the sight of Nash sitting in the fucking rocking chair.

"You're looking for an ass beating."

"You're the one who promised me one."

Nash doesn't flinch once when I step in front of him and punch him in the fucking mouth. I expect the man to explode out of the chair, but all he does is smile up at me, his perfect white teeth painted red from his busted lip.

It's a sinister look, one that doesn't match his normally chatty, carefree personality. It makes me wonder just how much of himself he's been hiding. We all have a lifetime of secrets we'd never reveal.

"I'll split the fee with you if you help me take out that big bastard Donovan," he says.

I fucking hit him again for having the nerve to think for a second I ever had any intention of turning Madelene over to her father to collect the money.

His laughter sounds maniacal. "That's what I thought. You fucking care for her."

I can't fucking deny it, so I keep my mouth closed, taking a seat on the damn porch stairs.

“I don’t know what kind of kinky shit the two of you are into, but you may want to seek professional help. It looked violent as hell. Can’t be natural.”

I growl, feeling a little better when he holds his hands up near his ears. “Just my opinion.”

“Keep your fucking mouth shut.”

“I don’t think you want me to do that,” he says, his eyes narrowing, the moonlight catching on a glint of something hidden behind them.

I refuse to ask questions, knowing I’ll probably only get half-truths from the man. I know he’s here for a reason, and it’s not because he wanted the fight I promised back at the office.

“I overheard a conversation between Donovan and Angel,” he says, unprompted like I hoped he would.

I turn my bottle of water up to my lips, keeping my eyes locked on the dry grass in the backyard. I want to ask, but so does he. I keep my lips tightly closed.

“He mentioned where he was staying while he was in town.”

My skin comes alive at the prospect that I could go find her, but if she wanted me, she would’ve stayed. She would’ve been much harder to pull out of that office than she was.

Now that I’ve settled some, I know she was surprised to see her brother standing there. She thought all this time that he was dead. The way she reacted proved it.

I want to ask Nash to give me all the information, but I don’t feel like I have a right to any of it. She made her choice.

I turn to face him, unable to resist.

“Tell me.”

“Do you think she wants to be rescued by you?”

“I don’t want to rescue her,” I say honestly. “But I need to speak with her brother.”

Chapter 28

Madelene

I keep catching him glancing at me. I can tell that he wants to have a conversation with me, but I don't know if he's avoiding it because he knows I'll ask as many questions as he will or if he doesn't really want to know the truth.

The silence over the last fifteen hours has been familiar, but also excruciating.

When I was at the Severino compound, I didn't speak much. I tried my best to never draw attention to myself. With Hollis, he seemed to like the quiet. I'm certain the noise of the television is what made him spend so much time out on the back porch. He also needed to get away from me since I wouldn't leave.

I shake my head, staring at a spot on the wall. I refuse to think of the man. He didn't try to stop me when I left with Elio. He hasn't barged into this motel room and demanded that I leave with him. Whatever connection I imagined us having was clearly one-sided. He's probably ecstatic to see me gone. He can go back to his normal life now.

"Is this how it's going to be?" I ask, speaking for the first time since Elio offered me dinner last night.

His eyes are slow to turn in my direction, as if he's enthralled by the television show despite the thing being muted. He has had no problem just existing in the same space as me since bringing me here yesterday. Despite me feeling like he has a million things to say, he's remained aggravatingly silent.

"What's your plan?" I ask, pretty certain he'll never answer me.

He insisted that I come along with him, but now he seems as regretful of it as Hollis did after getting me back to that tiny house of his.

He blinks in my direction, as if he can't believe I'm here, as if I'm the ghost and not him.

"I don't know," he finally says. "But whatever it was it's all fucked up now."

Elio was always the planner. He's the one that was able to get Marcello to stop and think every once in a while. Elio was the voice of reason, and sometimes it got him into trouble with the Severino boys. They wanted to be wild and crazy. They wanted to have their fun without thinking of the consequences. Even with their age difference, Alessio fed his little brother's need for chaos, and reprimanded Elio often for ruining the fun when he'd speak up about the trouble what they were doing would bring.

"What do you know about me?"

"Everything," he says without hesitation.

This information destroys me, and I have no hope of holding back the tears burning my eyes. They tumble down my cheeks. No matter how many times I swipe at them, they refuse to stop flowing. I never felt a sense of betrayal where the Severinos were concerned. They owed me no loyalty, but the man sitting across from me vowed to keep me safe. He was the one to chase the monsters from the shadows in my room at night. He was the one to sneak around the corner first when we wanted a snack after being refused at bedtime. He was always the one willing to put himself in the line of danger if it meant I would be spared.

I had so many questions. I had figured he had a good reason for being gone. Maybe his absence somehow ensured I was mostly safe. Alessio hasn't killed me after all. He hasn't raped me. His confession makes none of it matter.

"Everything?" I repeat, turning the word over and over in my head, really letting it sink inside of me.

I don't understand the way he's looking at me. I could be anyone to him right now. I could be a cashier at the store, or the bus driver getting him across town. I'm inconsequential.

“You did nothing,” I whisper, my head shaking as if I still can’t believe he’s sitting on the other bed a mere five feet from me. “The man I knew wouldn’t let me suffer that way.”

He’s calm, eerily so, as he watches my face.

“I haven’t been that man in a very long time,” he says, his voice flat, as if he’s void of emotion completely. “I wasn’t that man long before my car went over the bridge.”

I knew he’d changed. I knew passing the test to become part of the Severino family cost him a lot. I never thought he’d turn against everyone to save himself.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done? The heartache you caused? The pain we’ve all been through?” I sob, once again trying to clear my face of tears with the backs of my hands. “Dad is going to be so disappointed in you!”

“Your father is dead.”

I freeze, blinking at him.

“He was taken and tortured three days after you were taken.” He doesn’t pull his eyes from mine, doesn’t seem to care what he’s just told me, before continuing. “While you were hiding out with your boyfriend, your father was dying. The cops found him floating in Lake Michigan a week ago.”

I know he isn’t lying. He isn’t trying to upset me or scare me. There’s nothing but truth in his words, each one of them a strike at me. It reeks of blame and accusation without somehow having any fire behind it at all.

I always wondered how I would feel with my father’s passing. I knew it could never affect me the way my mother’s death did, but he was more a figurehead to the family rather than someone present in our lives. He was devoted to family, but the wrong one. He lived his life to impress Lucian, and I imagine he died still thinking he had a chance to get in the other man’s good graces.

Pain strikes me, but not in the way I think it would a normal person. I’ve endured so much for the sake of loyalty. I was mentally, physically, and sexually abused for almost the past four years in an effort to postpone my father’s death

because dedication to blood is paramount for us, only for it to be futile.

For some reason, my tears begin to dry, a sense of relief washing over me. They no longer have anything to hold against me. I'm not sure that the threat to my father's life, after spending time with Hollis, would've been enough to pull me back in, but now I don't have to worry about it.

All of my pain is because of my father. My mother has some blame in all of this as well, but I don't want to think about what her involvement means any longer.

None of it matters. The darkness and pain I endured are over.

I just want to be free. I don't want the money. Alessio can have all of it. Elio can return as head of the family and take it. Where it ends up, I don't care.

"You don't seem upset," I say, wondering if he's masking his grief, seriously doesn't give a shit, or if he's just had longer to come to terms with our father's death.

"I'm not," he says, his voice just as calm and flat as it was when he gave me the news.

His phone buzzes on the bedside table. He frowns after picking it up and reading whatever message is on there.

I glare at him when he stands.

"Are we not going to talk about why you faked your own death?"

"No," he says, tucking his phone into the front pocket of his jeans. "Elio Lombardi is dead."

"Please," I beg, wanting to go back ten years and change the course of everyone's lives. Hell, if I could roll back time, I'd go back even further and somehow stop Alessio from hurting Ellie because it led Hollis down a path that will only get him killed.

He pulls his wallet from his back pocket, pulling out a wad of cash and throwing it on the bed I'm sitting on. "The

room is paid up for the week. If you don't hear from me in three days, I'm dead."

Without another word or even gathering up his things from the room, he walks out.

Stunned, all I can do is stare at the door.

Chapter 29

Hollis

Despite the two guns tucked into my waistband, I feel no safer than I did unarmed in Angel's office as that big motherfucker saunters up.

Of course, Nash is hiding in the fucking shadows like a goddamned coward. The man is down for what we discussed because he's a thrill seeker, but he's not willing to put his neck on the line while shit gets ironed out.

"While you're deciding whether or not you want to rip my fucking head off and shit down my throat, I want to clear some shit up."

His cheek twitches, but he doesn't speak.

"I'd never hurt your sister," I assure him, not bothering to go into detail about giving her exactly what she wants and not being a hundred percent sure that it wouldn't leave marks on her skin. I didn't have the fucking chance to find out, and it's one more reason I still want to punch Nash in his fucking mouth again.

I don't know if he believes me, but I'm not here to make friends with this motherfucker.

"I want her to be safe."

He's less than a fucking caveman because I don't even get a grunt from him.

"She'll never be fucking safe so long as any of the Severinos are alive."

He shifts a little, his thirst for their blood seeming to be the only thing that will make him perk up. It's a good thing that's exactly what I'm looking for as well.

"She wants her freedom, and I'm going to give it to her."

He takes a step closer. "Can you get to the fucking point? She isn't fucking here to listen to all these goddamned

declarations. You had me at kill the entire family.”

I’d grin at his reaction if I wasn’t sure he’d slice my throat for having the nerve to look pleased.

“First, we have to track them down. I’ve been out of the loop—”

“They’re back in fucking Chicago. I don’t want to hear how you’ve been spending the last couple of weeks,” he growls.

“Listen, I know she’s your sister, but she’s a fucking adult, and I think—”

“I said shut your fucking mouth. I don’t give a shit about Madelene Lombardi.”

My heart pounds in my chest. I hate the way he spits her name. Anyone who has ever spent a little time with the woman could easily be lured into her orbit. Her brother should, of all people, care about her. It makes me wonder if reaching out to him was the right thing to do.

He seemed protective of her at the office, if not seriously annoyed she was standing in front of him, but he also walked away from her, let her and their parents believe he was dead. Maybe he doesn’t have good intentions at all.

“If you don’t give a shit about her then why are you so fucking willing to go against the Severino family?” I ask, unable to keep the disdain from my tone.

“I’ve been planning on killing them for years. Never had anyone so eager and willing to jump in front of a bullet so I have time to get a shot off before.” The man looks me up and down. “Do you really think she cares that you’re willing to die for her?”

I take another step forward, less concerned now about our size difference than I was when he first walked up.

“They’ve put her through hell and back. They killed her best friend.”

He growls, coming nose to nose with me much like we were back at the office. “Don’t talk to me about Maya. You

don't have a fucking clue what all I lost that day.”

I want to scratch at the pain that flashes in his eyes because it's the first true emotion I think I've gotten from the guy other than anger, but my suicide mission can't end here tonight. I need to cage his rage at least until we can get to Chicago and finally set Madelene free.

I hold my hands up, easing back a couple of steps.

“We may have two different reasons for wanting them all dead, and I'm okay with that.”

I get the feeling that Elio and Maya had more going on than even Madelene may know, but revealing family secrets isn't part of my plan.

He calms down enough for a plan to be formulated. The man knows a lot about the family and the ins and outs of their compound, but I can also tell he knows more than he discloses. He has no obligation to confide in me, to tell me everything he knows. I don't think he was joking when he said he was fully expecting me to take a bullet so he could end Alessio Severino for good. I also don't think I'll back out even knowing that's how things will go down.

Two hours later, we've made our decisions and talked through what needs to happen and who's responsible for what.

We both got stuck on who gets to pull the trigger, him arguing that I got to kill the man he's wanted dead for years, so it's only fair that he gets to take out the other Severino brother. I finally agreed, but will pull the trigger on sight of the man if given the chance.

I know with the information that he's disclosed that neither of us may be able to make it past the front gate, but we both seem very willing and very eager to die in Chicago.

My avoidance of the city will come to an end very soon.

The second we've agreed what will go down, Elio walks away.

I don't hesitate to follow him, thinking maybe he'll head back to the hotel where he's staying and it will allow me some

form of closure with Mads, but he hits the highway instead. Nash refused to tell me what hotel he was staying at, only agreeing to make contact with Elio and set up tonight's meeting.

If I survive this, I may have to beat the shit out of him again. If I die, Madelene will no doubt be better off without any of us brutal assholes in her life.

I lose Elio's truck in traffic on the highway. He must be heading toward Chicago already, and I understand it. He no longer has an identity that will allow him to pass the scrutiny of TSA at the airport, and we've agreed to meet in thirty-six hours.

I head a little further east, needing to make one last stop before joining him in the Windy City.

It's a four-hour drive to San Antonio, and she's on my mind every single second of it.

Chapter 30

Madelene

It's been hours since Elio left the room, and despite my skin itching to leave, I haven't so much as peeked out the blinds. The fear I've lived with for years still hasn't dissipated. I think the mental torture the Severinos left with me has been the worst.

The bruises have healed. I can almost forget the things they made me do. I no longer close my eyes and feel Marcello's fingers ripping at my hair as he forced me down on his erection. The time I spent with Hollis has replaced almost all of those horrific memories.

The threats, however, are struggling to hold on. They cling to my consciousness like smoke clings to clothing and heavy air. The Severinos swore they'd see my father dead, and they made that happen. I don't think Elio was lying to me. He seemed indifferent to the news of our father's death, not like he told me a lie to hurt me in any way. I don't think the man cares about anything enough to lie.

As darkness forms around the outer ring of the curtain covering the single window of the motel room, I grow even more antsy, but it isn't exactly fear that's making my blood hum.

I want to go to him—Hollis—not my brother.

The man that walked out of here earlier today was right. He's no longer Elio, and I think I knew that long before we buried those ashes in the crypt.

I should be happy, grateful he didn't die a tragic death. I worried for his soul, knowing suicide would send him to a different place from where my mother went a year later. I'm not so sure that the man will have an entirely different outcome no matter how he meets his end.

He was at that office, the same as Hollis and that man, Nash, who forced us there at gunpoint. If Hollis works for that Angel guy, that means Elio probably does, too. Hollis had no

problem killing Marcello nor Julio, and I highly doubt Elio will struggle with it now either.

Nighttime grows longer, the last tendrils of sunlight drifting away, leaving the heat of the day behind, clinging to the concrete of the city.

I hate the overhead lights outside the door as I walk along the side of the motel, but no one seems to concern themselves with me. I heard a lot of things. Many I don't believe dripped from Alessio's and Marcello's poisonous mouths, but I doubt they were lying when they said all men will take what they want from a woman. The woman could beg and plead, but the result will still be the same.

The protected life I lived with my parents extended to the Severino compound, and even though the guards would look at me in a way that would make me question my safety, the threat of betraying the family kept them away from me. The men that may lay eyes on me now aren't bound to that same loyalty.

The front desk clerk seems annoyed when I ask her to call me a cab but she does it anyway, her eyes skating over me in a way that makes my skin crawl.

I wait quietly, keeping to the shadows of the building for the car to pull up.

"You got cash?" the cabbie grunts when I open the back door of the car. "I'm not getting into trouble if you're using a stolen fucking credit card."

I hold up some of the money Elio tossed at me before leaving, grateful for the plexiglass barrier between the two of us.

He continues to stare at me, and I'm thinking this is the worst idea ever when he speaks up again. "Do you have a fuckin' address?"

I swallow, not having thought this all the way through.

"The corner of Gumwood and North Seventeenth," I say, wondering if I've made another mistake when his eyes widen.

“Listen, I tip well,” I tell him, and it’s enough for him to turn back around and drive the fucking car out of the parking lot.

I never thought we were in the safest neighborhood, but I never heard gunfire or yelling outside either. This guy just confirmed my suspicions that even if I stepped outside to try and escape Hollis, I might have been in more danger than I was inside with him.

The drive takes longer than I expect it to, and the driver looks at me in the rearview mirror with every red light we catch as if he fully expects me to change my mind with each chance I’m given.

I keep my eyes locked ahead. I don’t know what I’m going to say when I see him again. He could very easily tell me to get the fuck out of his life, but I know I have to try. Hollis stepped in front of me, tried to protect me from all of them. Even with his hands cuffed behind his back, he was willing to put himself in harm’s way if it meant saving me for only a single second longer.

That means something to me.

I can’t remember the last time someone was willing to endure any kind of pain or punishment in order to protect me. Elio was the last one, but he’s no longer that man. He said so himself.

The street is dark, nearly all the streetlamps either broken or barely flickering, and I have to consider the reasoning for people around here needing the darkness. What makes me want to run the other way is probably the same reason Hollis chose this place.

“That house,” I say, pointing at the familiar yet also strange house.

“This is North Sixteenth,” he clarifies, but I’m not going to argue with the man. It’s not like I had a chance to memorize the address when I was backing the truck out of the damn garage. And the first time I showed up here, I had a fucking

bag over my head. “It’s not fucking safe for you here. Doesn’t look like anyone is home.”

The house is completely dark, but I can’t just sit in the car and wonder. “Give me two minutes.”

He starts to argue, but I climb out anyway, grateful when I don’t hear the squeal of his tires deserting me out here as I walk quickly toward the house. The closer I get, the safer I feel, but my heart is still pounding in my chest. I’m terrified, but seeing him again makes it well worth it.

The doorbell doesn’t work when I press it, and although reluctant to knock on the door for the attention it might bring from the other houses, I do it anyway. It goes unanswered, and I don’t sense him the way I did when I was here before. I press my face to the living room window, the one he was always so fond of looking out of, tears stinging my eyes at what I see inside.

It’s empty. The settee, the coffee table, even the small dining room table that once had two lonely chairs pulled up to it are gone from the kitchen. He’s not just out. He’s gone.

I startle when the cabbie blares the horn, but I know better than to stick around and see just how much attention the noise will draw.

My skin is crawling as I rush back to the cab, seeing a dark shadow move down the street.

“Back to the motel,” I say.

He doesn’t hesitate to pull away from the curb, just as the man in the shadows doesn’t hesitate to watch us drive by.

“I have a right mind to take you to a fucking mental hospital because you seem on the brink of a fucking breakdown.”

“I’m fine,” I assure him, wondering just how damn close to being right he is.

Gone.

I expected many things going to his house tonight, but that wasn’t a consideration. I knew after looking around the

house for the first time that it wasn't his full-time residence. It was too sparsely utilized. Someone doesn't have to have any real personal effects to make a home feel lived in. Pictures of loved ones on the wall aren't a requirement, but there was nothing that made me believe that he could've slept one night there prior to bringing me to the house.

After two weeks of us being there together, we accumulated packets of ketchup. There were dishes in the drainer.

Trash in the trash can. He left as easily as he showed up.

I consider going back to that office Nash forced me to drive to, but I doubt that Angel guy would help me. I don't even know what to ask for. The woman might be a better bet, but there's very little chance anyone would be there this late at night.

I have no option but to head back to the motel room. Maybe when Elio gets back, he'll be more willing to answer some questions. Despite not seeming like the brother I loved all my life, I don't get the idea that he'd hurt me. If anything, I'm a complete waste of his time.

Hell, coming back to the motel may be too much effort for the man. He warned me that if he wasn't back in three days, it meant that he was dead. I'm sure that's what he wants me to believe. If anything, he just left knowing he'd have a seventy-two-hour head start. He never meant to be found in the first place after all.

I pay the cabbie once I get back to the motel, tipping well like I promised. Elio was generous with the cash he tossed my way, but it's not like it's enough to start a new life.

I try to crush the hope inside of me, knowing that I'll never see my brother again, that considering him dead is my best bet, but I was proven wrong once before.

I just can't seem to wrap my head around the fact that I'm completely alone in the world. With my father's death, something that is affecting me less than it probably should, and Elio leaving again, I literally have no one. I've felt

helpless and alone many times in my life, but right now, the desolation feels all encompassing. It has me questioning what the point of survival is. I'm not insane enough to go back to Chicago. I'll run the skin off the soles of my feet in order to stay free of Alessio, but I don't exactly have hope or plans for my future either.

I close myself in the motel room, flipping the latch for the lock and making sure to fix the curtains so no one can peek inside, before falling to the bed.

Knowing I'm not above asking for help, I formulate a plan to go back to that office and see if there's anything those people will be willing to help me with. Too bad it's Friday night and they'll most likely not return until Monday. I can wait. It gives Elio more time to change his mind and come back to get me.

Chapter 31

Hollis

My truck rolls to a stop half a block away from the small house.

It should feel like home. It doesn't.

It never did.

Many people say home is in your heart, where you feel most protected, most able to be yourself.

I haven't felt that since before Dad started drinking.

Being told *this is your new home*, doesn't make it so.

A dog barks in the distance as I climb out of my truck, but it's not close enough to draw attention to me.

I don't bother knocking on the door after approaching the house. I can't turn the handle and just walk in as one would expect of their childhood home.

I'm not welcome here. I haven't been for many years.

My mother, my protector, cast me out the day I took matters into my own hands against her second husband.

She had a problem with my father's drinking but never once voiced an ill opinion of my stepfather when he struck her.

It never made sense to me as a child, and even now as an adult, I still don't understand.

She never left him. He left her, and she hates me for it.

I don't turn back to look when the front door opens, my seated figure casting shadows on the front lawn.

"She will shit a brick if she catches you out here, junior."

"Stop cussing," I admonish, still smiling as my little brother takes a seat beside me.

At thirteen, he has gotten too old to welcome me with a hug. I miss those days. True affection isn't something I ever

get.

Mimicking my position, he places his elbows on his knees and stares out into the darkness.

“Been a while since you’ve stopped by.”

I feel like an asshole, but it’s hard to make the effort when I know I’m going to leave with a bigger hole in my heart than I arrived with.

“Sorry, bud.”

I refuse to tell him this may be the last time he sees me. I don’t want to cloud his young mind with the danger I’m facing in Chicago. It was a rule that neither Ellie nor Patrick’s name were mentioned at my mother’s house. She said it was too painful. She lost too much with the teenage girl’s death, including her husband and the financial stability she had. Life after Ellie was too much of a struggle, so she felt ignoring it would make it all better.

“I understand you’re busy. I watched the race last weekend, but I didn’t see you once on TV.”

At some point in my visits, Connor got the idea in his head that I work the pits for a NASCAR racing team. I never corrected him.

“I was off last week,” I lie easily. “Took some vacation time.”

He nods, his eyes still locked on anything other than me.

“Did you go to the beach? I’d rather go to the beach than come here, too.”

I know it’s a tiny dig at my continued absence. The kid is in one of his moods where he can’t seem to understand that he isn’t the center of the universe. He’s probably been too sheltered by my mom, and I don’t see it as a terrible thing. There’s so much evil in the world. He’ll find out about that shit all too soon. The longer it can be postponed, the better, as far as I’m concerned.

“I stayed home. How’s Mom?”

“The same.” He sighs. “She got a raise at work, but it doesn’t cover the increase rent.”

“I can give you money.”

He shakes his head. “Last time she caught me with money, she accused me of selling drugs. I was grounded for a month.”

“She won’t let me pay for anything. Everything I’ve sent gets returned,” I mutter, wanting to help my mother. She’s too smart to believe she won a month of free electricity or she landed some windfall from a newly deceased distant relative. I’ve fucking tried everything to help her out.

“She hasn’t said anything about your tuition?”

He shakes his head. “No, the lady she has the contact with at school is a great liar.”

Only because I paid her extra. My brother’s private school tuition and uniform allowance are the only things my mother hasn’t refused. Some days, I wonder if she knows about it but refuses to acknowledge it’s me because she cares enough for Connor that she won’t take the opportunity away from him.

She already has one son she sees as a criminal. It would kill her to have two. With the neighborhood they live in, private school and a different group of friends may be the only thing saving him from that.

“Making good grades?”

“Passing everything,” he answers, dodging the real question.

“Better than me.” I always found school hard, not the work but the focus and perseverance.

It’s hard to concentrate on math when you didn’t get much sleep the night before because your stepdad was yelling because Mom didn’t hand dry the dishes and put them away after washing them.

“She doesn’t know I know but Dad is in jail. His newest wife didn’t like getting hit.”

“Fuck,” I grunt.

The bastard is right where he deserves to be, but the man always paid his child support on time. I know they depended on that money.

“I can get a job,” Connor says hopefully.

“No one is going to hire a thirteen-year-old.”

“Old man Myers said I could help out around the shop.”

I glance at him, trying to see how he actually feels about the guy. “The lawn mower repair shop?”

He nods. “Won’t pay much, but any little amount will help.”

“I wish she wasn’t so stubborn,” I growl, trying to resist going inside and telling her to just take the fucking money I offer.

Last time I confronted her was years ago. She said she would once I was able to prove that I earned the money legitimately. She was too smart to accept check stubs created online.

“Me too,” he quickly agrees. “I might have an Xbox if she did.”

We both chuckle, neither of us feeling any humor in the conversation.

“I better get inside before she comes looking for me,” he says, standing from the steps.

I stand too, pulling him into my chest for a hug, knowing it could very well be the last time I see him.

My throat burns with all the things I want to say to him.

I cup his face in my hands, and I watch as his eyes well with tears, as if he knows exactly what this means.

“Connor.”

“Love you, too, weirdo,” he says, taking a step back and pushing at my chest.

He sniffles once as he turns to leave.

I step off the porch into the shadows, wondering if I'll be an even greater disappointment to my mom. My dad ruined his life, drank himself to death because of the fucking Severino family, and it's very possible I'll be joining him soon.

"What could you possibly be doing outside in the dark?" It's my mother's voice. I don't hear it very often.

Even disembodied, she sounds tired and frustrated.

"Nothing."

"I heard you talking."

"To that dog that keeps wandering over from the neighbor's yard. I was just—"

The door closes behind him, cutting off his words.

I wait a few seconds longer, wondering if he'll confess to what he was actually doing.

I always wait, praying she'll step out onto the porch and look for me in the darkness.

She never does, and tonight is no different from the others.

As I walk away, I question everything I'm doing, knowing full well I can claim I'm doing this for Ellie, but I know better.

Madelene needs this. She needs the monsters eradicated from her life. She deserves a choice.

At least Connor has our mother. He'll have someone that loves him to protect him long after I'm gone.

Mads has no one but me.

Chapter 32

Madelene

My stomach growls as if it has to voice its own irritation with the vending machine spitting out the dollar bill I tried to use to buy some damn chips.

I've been hungry for hours, but I had to wait for the sun to come up and for all the blue-collar workers that are staying at the motel to clear out for the day before venturing out of the room.

Outside entry places are fucking creepy, and rather dirty, but I guess I don't have any room to complain. I'd rather sleep on dirty sheets than worry about who has access to my room, although I don't feel exactly safe.

The door to the front office is locked, and even cupping my hands over my face to peer in and banging on the door doesn't bring anyone forward.

Elio left me mostly big bills and one single dollar folded up in the middle. I'm pretty sure it was all the cash he had on him at the time, but the machine doesn't take twenties and it sure as hell doesn't take hundred-dollar bills.

"All this money, and I still can't fucking eat," I grumble as I turn the corner to head back to the room.

"Such a filthy mouth," a man says, stepping into my path.

"Excuse me," I tell him, dropping my eyes and attempting to step around him.

He doesn't say a word as I pass, but he grabs me the second my back is to him.

I scream and fight, but his hand covers my mouth. It's broad fucking daylight, and this guy has the balls to just sweep me up?

"The boss said not to hurt you, but if you keep wiggling, I'm going to break the fucking rules," he growls in my ear.

I'm not being mugged for the money in my pocket. I'm not being attacked by chance because men are just pieces of shit. This is Alessio's goon. I was foolish to think that I'd managed to escape them, that being in a room paid for by my brother would somehow keep me safe.

It's like being abducted in Mexico all over again. No one pays attention. A man walking out of his room turned right back around and closed the door. People are too fucking coward to even call the fucking police.

I scream and kick, knowing that I'm being taken back to a monster instead of just considering it a possibility.

A second pair of hands grab at me, the four on me now making it easy for them to subdue me. My arms are tied behind my back, a rag shoved in my mouth before something is tied around it to prevent me from spitting it out, and then darkness. I know they're taking me to Alessio so the bag over the head is a little too fucking much.

I cuss into the gag, my time for acting docile and pleasant long gone at this point.

Tears leak from my eyes when I jerk and jolt so much I scrape my shoulder on something sharp. I found sweats and a t-shirt in one of the motel drawers after Elio left, but they're not providing the protection I need.

What I need is use of both of my arms and a couple of bazookas for these assholes, but that will never happen.

I'm once again a captive. Once again a fucking victim. I know it will be my last time. I know I won't survive this again. Alessio would never allow it.

I calm down, not exactly accepting my fate, but unable to do anything about it at this moment in time.

I register the sound of an engine starting, the roar loud from my position on the floor of the van.

The men inside don't speak. They could easily contact Alessio through text, but I don't hear either of them place a phone call. They drive for what seems like hours, but time really is irrelevant.

The sound of a small plane, something familiar to me with all the times I've been required to travel with Alessio and Marcello, fills the inside of the van. The doors squeal as they're pulled open, and rough hands grab at me.

I don't fight this time. It would serve no other purpose than to cause more injury to myself, and I know I have a lifetime of it coming.

I'm jostled repeatedly as the man carries me over his shoulder onto the plane. No one argues or asks why a gagged, bound, and blindfolded woman is being brought on board. The pilots will just as easily kill for the Severino family as the goon carrying me will.

Surprisingly, I'm sat down a little more gently, the seat belt pulled around my waist and snapped into place. Safety first and all that, I suppose. I scoff into my gag, but get no response from anyone around me.

The plane eventually takes off, and I'm subjected to listening to whatever goon is on the plane with me getting sucked off by the stewardess. It's probably Trixie. It doesn't seem like she'll survive if she doesn't have a dick in her mouth. Countless times I've seen her eyeball both Marcello and Alessio. They were always happy to oblige her.

I know we're heading back to Chicago, and not for the first time, I pray for turbulence strong enough to make us drop out of the sky.

We don't, of course. The landing is as smooth as ever.

Lucky fucking me.

"I pray he gives us all a turn with you, whore," a man growls as he lifts me from the seat of the plane.

It's Rocco, Julio's younger brother. He's pissed, as he should be, at his brother's death.

Tears spring up once again, some because I'm getting closer to Alessio, but mostly because Elio didn't care enough to stick around and keep me safe. The man who drops me into the backseat of a car without care if I'm injured in the process

or not cares more for his criminal brother than mine cares for me.

It hurts me as much inside as I imagine Alessio is going to hurt me on the outside. If I had the ability to use my hands, I'd throw myself from the vehicle once we got on the interstate, but luck is never on my side, it seems.

Once again, no one speaks in the vehicle, but I can't be certain that Alessio isn't with us. The air inside is heavy, but that could be attributed to my harsher breathing as I try to stanch the part of me that wants to beg fruitlessly for mercy.

I learned long ago that begging is a lot like praying. Pointless.

I stiffen my spine as the car slows before turning right. I've taken this trip so many times, I can picture the men in the guard tower at the gate. In my mind's eye, I can see the massive oak trees lining the driveway.

My bravery, the straightened spine, don't last long. I try to curl into myself the second the engine is turned off.

I kick at whoever opens the door beside me, but their sinister chuckle tells me I didn't hit them.

"Calm down, princess."

I don't recognize the voice, but I know better than to be grateful it's not Rocco. Alessio has many men in his employ, and each one has the ability to be more brutal than the next.

The hood is pulled off, and I have to shake my head to get my wild mess of hair out of my eyes.

I stare at the man standing in front of me, my eyes pleading and begging, hoping he has a shred of decency. He gives me a sad smile as he reaches for the gag.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

His words aren't comforting because I know he won't stop the people that plan to.

I whimper in pain, unable to hold that weakness in, when he pulls the gag down and removes the wad of fabric

from inside my mouth.

“Better?”

“Thank you,” I say, instinct taking over.

“Can you stand?”

I nod, but he still reaches in and helps me out of the back of the vehicle.

“Let me untie your arms.”

My chin quivers as he turns me around, horrific thoughts coming to my head.

Like being gagged and bound when Hollis took me, it wouldn't be the first time if this man bent me over the seat and lifted my dress only to threaten to rape me. Alessio would press his erection into me. Marcello was fond of running his hand between my legs.

I'm not bent over, however, and the man doesn't touch me in any way other than to remove the bindings from my wrists before turning me back around to face the house.

Heavy feet carry me toward the front door, and I'm surprised I can manage to walk. I stupidly wonder if this is what men being led to the death chamber feel like. Being brave is stupid. I should run even knowing I'll be caught within seconds. It feels like giving up.

The man beside me opens the front door, and I freeze, locked in place at the sight of Alessio standing there with a small smile on his face.

“Madelene! Thank God you're okay!”

I feel like an extra in the *Twilight Zone* as he wraps his arms around me, burying his face in my neck, but then I see Lucian standing off to the side.

Alessio takes a step back, his huge hands on my shoulders as his eyes sweep my body. It's all an act for his father. I have no doubt the man is well aware how mean his sons have been to me, but so long as it doesn't happen in front of him, then who cares, right?

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I say, looking in Lucian’s direction.

He nods once before turning away, his face just as blank as it always is when I happen to see him, which isn’t very often.

“You made it home just in time for dinner,” Alessio says, his jaw twitching as if he hates being forced to act this way.

My nerves are shot, my hands trembling as much as my chin when I attempt to smile at him.

“Run up to your room and get ready. I’ll see you in, say, half an hour?”

I nod, wondering if the man will give me even that to prepare for what’s coming.

He steps out of my way, and I don’t hesitate to angle toward the stairs.

My room is exactly the same, its pristineness maintained by house staff while I was away. There isn’t a thing out of place nor a speck of dust to be found.

I lock the door behind me, knowing it’s only a suggestion for honest people and there aren’t many of those around here, before heading into the bathroom.

I know better than to be late, so I don’t waste a second, stripping naked and getting into the shower. I wonder if I’ll be brave enough to not mention Elio being alive while Alessio is hurting me. If my tormentor knew my brother was still walking the earth, he would’ve used it by now to hurt me.

I can’t enjoy my shower because I know how long it takes me to dry my massive mane of hair. I have to pull it up in a bun due to time constraints, but it doesn’t really matter how I fix it or what I wear. The night will still end the same way.

I want to cry all over again when I realize my clothes are tighter than they ever have been. The hamburgers with extra bacon and french fries I paid Hollis for with my nudity

have settled on my hips, and I know it will be just one more thing Alessio will punish me for.

I take several deep breaths before leaning in close to the mirror to put on my mascara. I choose the kind that isn't waterproof because I know the man likes to see my face streaked with my pain. Maybe this will help him to end things faster. It's no longer time for bravery. All I can hope for is quick at this point.

Silence surrounds me as I leave my room. I don't hear or see any of the guards. The door to Lucian's office is closed tight like normal. I don't run into any house staff on my way to the dining room, which I find empty other than a note on the table.

He's already starting his games, I realize, as I pick up the card that directs me to the theater room.

I wobble on my heels as I climb the set of stairs opposite of the living quarters. I don't consider rushing out the front door because I know it will be guarded. Even if it wasn't, the perimeter is walked constantly and I could never make it over the twelve-foot walls surrounding the compound.

The hum of electronic equipment greets me before turning the doorknob.

The theater seats twelve in electric recliners and up to eight more if people are willing to sit on the giant bean bags placed around the room.

Dead center of the room is Alessio. If I didn't know better, if I hadn't seen the type of monster I know he is, I could mistake him for a gentleman. His suit is tailored to fit his body. One I know from being forced to watch him fuck other women is toned, tanned, and covered with ink declaring his allegiance to his family. I know without seeing it that he has his favorite knife tucked in at his back. His brother was fond of his two pistols, but Alessio likes to take a more personal approach when teaching a lesson.

“There you are, my love.”

He lowers the bottle of wine and holds out a glass of wine in my direction. I know better than to refuse, despite him being well aware that I hate the taste of wine. It's an exercise in control.

“Thank you,” I tell him, lifting the glass to my lips.

With any luck, he's put poison in the damn thing.

I drain it, refusing to gag at the flavor just to spite him.

“Now, now, darling. No one likes a drunk.” His lip twitches. The man is already losing his patience with me.

He takes the glass from my hand, sweeping his arm to one of the recliners.

I take my seat, knowing he's purposely trying to fuck with my head. He chuckles, the tiniest of laughs slipping out when the toe of my high heel drags the carpet, making me stumble a little.

Whatever bravery I managed slips away, my chin threatening to quiver when he takes the seat next to mine as he lifts the remote.

“I thought dinner and a movie would be the best way to welcome you home.”

The screen lights up, but instead of a big production showcasing the studio responsible for the movie, it automatically flickers to life, on a man tied to a chair.

I turn my head, already guessing what he's going to force me to watch.

Rough fingers grab my chin, his whiskey-tainted breaths on the side of my face.

“If you close your eyes longer than it takes you to blink, I'll slice your eyelids from your fucking face.”

I know better than to challenge his threats, so I sit, with tears streaming down my face, as I watch Alessio and his men torture and kill my father.

Chapter 33

Hollis

“Can I call you Donnie?”

I smack Nash in the chest, holding my fist up in front of his face to threaten him. His dopey smile tells me he won't even consider growing up to take care of such a dangerous matter. The man will quite possibly get us all killed.

“Not if you want to live,” the man grumbles, his mic going scratchy as if the thing bumps his cheek when he talks. *“Can we get this shit done?”*

“Now's a good a time as any to fucking die,” Nash mutters, his normal happy-go-lucky demeanor suddenly gone. He looks over at me, covering the tiny microphone near his mouth with his right hand. “I still think he's fucking setting us up with his *I'll take the back* bullshit.”

I clench my jaw.

“You can fucking walk away right now, and it wouldn't make any fucking difference to me,” Donavan growls into the mic.

Nash looks shocked as if he can't believe the extremely expensive headsets would still work if he covered the little microphone.

“I was umm... just kidding?” Nash laughs, the sound more fake than anything I've ever heard.

We're all going to fucking die tonight. I'm certain of it, especially with these two bickering like old men around the early morning meetup at the local coffee shop.

I'm considering taking his advice and just walking away before I hear Donavan once again.

“I'm thirty seconds from the back guard station. You guys better hurry the fuck up if you're coming.”

Another round of static and then silence.

“Donavan?” I hiss.

Nash shakes his head. “He pulled his headset off. I bet this is a fucking setup.”

I clench my jaw in irritation but shake my head. I don’t know the man well, but he needs vengeance as much as I need to protect Madelene. I may not be able to stop the Severino family from catching her eventually, but I hope I can slow them down, giving them something else to focus on for a while, like burying their dead after tonight.

“I hope I’m fucking wrong,” Nash says as we slowly make our way to the front guard station.

Before I can lift my weapon, Nash puts a single bullet in each guard’s forehead, proving that he’s more skilled than I ever imagined. It proves that his goofy, carefree attitude doesn’t carry over into his work.

I don’t have time to commend him for his accuracy as we approach the front door.

“Fuck,” Nash whispers, his voice louder in my ear due to the mic.

Donavan was coming in through the back, but it’s clear he’s already made it through the house and up the stairs.

“What the he—”

Nash drops the man before he can finish his question and fully enter the room.

“Really?” I growl, looking over at the older man that was once carrying a tray with a glass on it.

“We said kill them all,” Nash grumbles as we approach the man, blood pooling around his head from the bullet Nash put in it.

“An old man?” I hiss, trying to keep my voice down.

Nash, using the tip of his foot, kicks the man’s jacket open.

“We said everyone,” he snaps, pointing at the gun tucked into the man’s slacks.

A door creaking upstairs has us on the move again.

We check the house, and I grow increasingly annoyed with the locked doors around this place. We can't exactly kick them in. It would draw too much attention to us.

Nash gives me weird-as-fuck hand signals like I speak fucking commando before pointing to a slightly ajar door. I just wave him on. He's been a badass so far, might as well let him take point. Heaven forbid a child walks out of one of the rooms.

He frowns as he enters the room. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

I take a step further, looking into the room.

"Jesus, Donavan is getting to have all the fun," Nash complains as we both look at the man leaned back in a leather office chair.

"He's going to get to Alessio before we even locate them."

Nash points at Lucian Severino, his eyes open, unseeing, with his head pointed to the ceiling.

"I'm going to be pissed if all I get to kill are a couple guards and the strapped fucking butler."

I wave him on, knowing we're heading upstairs next, unsure if we'll find anything. Donavan taking his headset off is complicating the shit out of things. I had plans for how I wanted all of this to go, and the kingpin, the leader of the most dangerous part of the Italian Mafia, being shot in the head without being tortured, without hearing him beg for mercy, wasn't a part of it at all.

I'm annoyed, irritated so much my skin itches, as Nash and I climb the stairs. I know better than to think everyone we will encounter has already been killed, but we haven't heard any gunfire. The Severino men probably wouldn't have silencers on their weapons like we do, and we've yet to hear a single round pop off.

Our footfalls are soft, the carpet in the hallway and rooms muffling the sound, as we clear room after room upstairs.

The silence is weird. I don't doubt Donovan has wiped all these men, including Lucian, off the face of the earth, but I don't hear a damn thing as we approach the last door.

Nash does those hand movements again, pointing and jerking. I frown at him, walking ahead and pushing the last door open.

Cool metal presses to my right temple, a hand reaching out and pulling my weapon from my grip. Whoever it is has given me more of a chance than Donovan or Nash has given the other men in the house. I know not to count it as a good thing just yet as I look around the room and see Donovan. His face is a mask of fury as a man holds a gun to his temple.

"Fuck," Nash says, handing over his weapon when he sees the one pointed at me.

I don't know how to feel about it. Nash could easily kill both of these men, but he paused because my life was in danger. My skin crawls with the consideration because I don't know that'd I'd do the same for either of them if the roles were reversed.

I'm half a breath away from taking my chances and attempting to get the gun away from the Severino man when I hear a feminine whimper.

My head spins when I look to the other side of the room and see Madelene. She's as gorgeous as ever, her wild hair pinned to the top of her head, tears streaking mascara down her pretty face.

This isn't how things are supposed to play out. She was left in Texas. Donovan assured me she was safe.

I try to convey to her with a look that we'll get out of this alive, but I can't manage to even lie with my eyes right now.

Enraged, I look over at Donovan, his mouth turned down in a scowl, his body vibrating with unused violence.

This is in no way a setup, and from the look in his eyes, he had no idea that Alessio had Madelene.

I swallow as the man motions for me to get on my knees.

Nash follows suit a second later.

“Now that everyone is here.”

I look to the left of Mads, feeling pain at the situation tangled with hatred, when my eyes fall on Alessio.

I focus on him because focusing on Madelene makes my brain go haywire. I get that feeling of empowerment, the lie that tells me I’m invincible, that I can protect her against three men, all while being unarmed and in a position of submission.

I also don’t want Alessio to sense the connection I feel to her. It will only make things worse for all of us, considering what she said about Alessio’s obsession with owning her, taking every chance he gets to remind her who she’s vowed to.

Maybe if I were closer, more connected to both Nash and Donovan, we could make a plan with simple glances, but I couldn’t figure out Nash’s train of thought looking directly at him, aided by hand signals.

One guard stands between Nash and me, a gun pointed at each of our heads, and Donovan is in no better a position with one man drawn down on him.

Alessio twists a knife in his hand, the tip digging into his finger and drawing a bead of blood, but the pain doesn’t even register on his face.

It’s the only weapon I see, making it obvious that Alessio has full faith in his men. He knows they will protect him.

“This knife, junior, is the same one I used to peel pieces off Ellie Baker.”

I stiffen. He called me the same thing my mom and brother always called me. I tremble with rage, fear for my family sneaking up on me. It means he knows not only who I

am, but is very aware of the only other people, besides the woman sitting beside him that matter to me.

I kept my distance all this time because my mother demanded it, but a side benefit of that is they were safe from all the bad things that touch me in my world. I was certain they'd never be used against me.

My throat threatens to clog with the fear trying to take over, but I push it down, my body growing so stiff an ache settles in my spine with the effort.

"You seem shocked," Alessio says. "Did you think I didn't know about you? That I don't know about Connor and your mom? I had you researched. It didn't take long. Hollis Ford isn't really the greatest cover. Fifteen minutes of my men working on your alias to find the connection, to figure out what pissed you off so bad that you'd kill my brother and start a war, was all it took."

I don't say a word. The man doesn't need confirmation. He seems more than a little informed.

I look back to Mads, wondering how much information she gave him, and how much effort it took to pull it out of her. My hope would be she talked before he had to cause her any harm. I'd never want her to suffer to defend me. She's not supposed to be the protector. I am, and I've failed her.

Her tears are a constant stream down her face, and I have to look away from her. It pains me too much to see her so broken, both of us so close to our end.

"Seth here," Alessio says, pointing at the guard with the gun to Donovan's head. "Got a speeding ticket. Patrick Baker, the shithead cop that pulled him over was kind of an asshole."

My blood runs cold. The reasoning Patrick tried to convince the district attorney's office can't possibly be the reason, but Alessio confirms it is.

"He needed to be taught that discretion is best used when anyone connected to the Severino family is concerned," Alessio continues. "I let Seth fuck her first. She screamed for her daddy when he stuck his cock in her. She begged for

mercy when I took her ass. She was silent by the time the fifth guard got a hold of her.”

“That was a great night, boss,” Seth says, making my stomach turn.

“I can still hear her screams, the whimpering and whining. Even after all this time. I guess it’s true,” Alessio says, stepping closer to Mads and running the tip of his blade across her shoulder. I can’t tell if he cut her or if the tiny red stain now marking her skin was from the wound on his own hand. “You never forget your first.”

He takes a step away, but his proximity is still too fucking close to her.

“Maybe I’ll test that,” he says, looking at her. “How do you feel about doing the honor with lover boy over there?”

“Alessio, please,” Mads begs, but it’s not in a way that she’s asking for the opportunity. She looks like she’s seconds away from puking.

“Oh sweetheart. I’ll let you kill Elio over there also,” Alessio says. “But honestly, he’s been one foot out of the grave since Marcello had fun with his girl.”

Donavan stiffens which is a feat, considering how rigid the man already was.

“Do it,” Seth says, moving his finger from the side of his handgun to the trigger when Donavan clenches his fists. “I fucking dare you.”

Alessio chuckles when Donavan remains still.

“He won’t risk it,” Alessio tells Seth. “You remember how much he cried, not saying a word, the night we watched Marcello cut his unborn baby from that bitch’s stomach?”

Madelene gasps, her eyes darting to her brother. She didn’t have a clue about an unborn baby. I have to presume he’s referring to Maya who she believed was Marcello’s first kill. But for a man to be able to do that, he had to have had prior experience.

“The way—”

Alessio's words halt at the sound of gunfire.

Chapter 34

Madelene

I scream although I know it won't help the situation at all. I'm no stranger to gunfire, but the echo of it fills the room unexpectedly.

I can't bear to look over at Hollis, knowing I'm going to find him dead in a heap on the floor. Pain, unlike anything I've ever felt before, grips my chest, my eyes squeezed tight as if it won't be real if I keep them shut forever.

"Goddamn it, Alessia! He was one of my favorite men!"

I snap my eyes open just as a feminine laugh fills the room.

Hollis is still glaring, his eyes filled with a little more shock and less fury than before as Alessia, my betrothed's twin sister, walks from the doorway to join our group.

Alessio doesn't seem bothered by the gun in his sister's hand, her eyes locked on Seth's crumpled body next to Elio's still-kneeling form.

"He's been with the family for decades. Do you know how hard it is to find really good help?"

She points her gun at Nash, the man that barged into Hollis's little hideaway home and forced us to Angel's office several days ago. It seems like a lifetime has passed since then.

"He killed Arnold," Alessia informs everyone.

Alessio glares at the accused man. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Shot him right between the eyes," the woman confirms.

Arnold didn't do much more than run errands for Lucian, but he was a fucking creep. His eyes tracked me every time I walked into a room and not in a grandfatherly way one would expect from a man of his age.

Nash looks smug as Alessio points his knife at him, as if challenging the man to attempt his revenge for Arnold's death.

"Dad's going to be pissed," Alessio says.

"Your father is dead," Elio snaps.

Alessio freezes, his face working through a series of emotions in a matter of seconds.

"Who the fuck are you?" Hollis growls as if irritated this entire situation has been interrupted at all.

Elio ignores the blood soaking into his jeans from Seth's body, and despite the terror filling my blood, I could almost smile at his death. The man was demonic, probably worse than Alessio and Marcello put together. I seriously think that Seth fed the Severino boys' evil sides from the time they were kids. He played a huge role in turning them into the men they became.

"You're supposed to be in Boston," Alessio snaps, ignoring Hollis's question.

"And miss the slaying of my family?" she asks, a wicked smile of her own filling her pretty face.

I've only met the woman once or twice before. She helps see to her father's businesses in New England and rarely darkens the door here in Chicago.

"Did this motherfucker kill our father too?" Alessio asks, taking a step closer to Nash.

Both the man in question and Hollis look over at Elio.

"Him?" Alessio snarls.

"It doesn't matter," Alessia snaps as she walks around Elio and inches toward Nash and Hollis. Rocco, the guard pointing guns at the two of them, doesn't twitch, making anyone who doesn't know better think he's just fine right now, but his face tells a different story. He's scared. If this woman is willing to kill the family's longest, most vicious employee, then what does that mean for him?

“This one here killed your brother,” Alessia says to Rocco, pointing at Hollis.

I can't help the whimper that erupts from my throat when Rocco readjusts his grip on the gun pointing at the man.

“I know how it feels. He killed my little brother, too.”

“Alessia,” I beg, knowing the woman owes me absolutely nothing.

“Oh, sweet little plaything,” she says, her eyes meeting mine. “You seem to be attached to him.”

Her eyes leave me and focus on her brother.

“Is it his ability to protect you that you like? Because he doesn't seem very capable.”

Alessio smiles.

“Is it his cock that you're going to miss?” Alessia keeps her eyes on her brother, her taunting meant more for him than for me. “He looks like he'd have the perfect one.”

She circles around again, now standing behind Rocco and the two kneeling men.

“I bet his is leagues better than Alessio could ever offer you.”

Nash chuckles, making Alessio draw in an irritated breath. “Alessia.”

It's a warning, a low rumbled growl, but Alessia doesn't seem bothered by it.

“My brother would never put himself at risk for you, sweet Madi.”

I hate the way my name sounds on her lips. It's possible this woman is just as psycho as her brothers.

“He wants all the family glory but doesn't want to do any of the real work.”

Alessio grows more and more irritated as his sister speaks.

All the rest of us can do is listen and wait to see how things will pan out.

Another gunshot rings out, and I flinch, my hands coming up to cover my face as if they'd be effective in stopping a bullet.

"Jesus fuck," someone mutters, and I think it's Nash.

I open my eyes just in time to see Rocco fall to the ground.

"He could've pulled the goddamned trigger," Nash growls at her, and confusion really starts to settle inside of me.

"Would've saved me one," Alessia says, pointing her gun at him and making it clear whatever connection I imagined they might have was a very wrong assumption.

"What are you playing at, Alessia?" Alessio growls.

I dart my eyes to Hollis who is looking down at the gun in Rocco's dead hand as if he's trying to determine his chances of being able to get to it and use it before being shot himself.

"You never were really smart," Alessia says as she angles her gun at her brother.

Alessio's jaw ticks, but he seems more irritated than afraid his twin will shoot him. The man looks toward Elio. "You didn't kill my father did you?"

Elio gives his head the slightest of shakes.

"Motherfucker," Nash says, a little awe in his voice as he turns his head to grin at Alessia.

I can't keep track of what's going on. Alessia killed Lucian?

"Alessia," her brother says, chastisement in his tone. "I don't—"

Just like what happened with Marcello, blood sprays my body, coating my skin in a warm red mist.

I swallow, the room silent except for the echo of the gunshot. My arms are covered, the skin exposed on my

shoulders sticky with it.

When I look up, I see Elio standing behind Alessia, arm around her throat and a gun pressed tightly to her forehead.

Years of pain cloud my brother's eyes. He seems feral, a wild animal that only knows vengeance and heartache.

Alessia wasn't around when Maya died. She didn't help Alessio, Seth, and Rocco hurt her.

My chin quivers, my own sorrow bubbling back to the surface with what I learned tonight about my brother and the girl I considered my closest friend. She was pregnant with his child. They had something going on in secret. She was the reason he was different. She was the reason he felt us knowing he'd died was better than watching the man he was after she was gone.

Elio was the reason Marcello picked her. He must've discovered what was going on between them and felt betrayed.

"You can't kill her."

I snap my eyes back to the door on the far side of the room. How many fucking people are going to come in here tonight?

"Without me, the real fucking war will start," Alessia says as Angel and some man I don't recognize draw closer.

Angel holsters his gun when he sees all the men dead. The other man seems a little more reluctant to stand down.

"She's the only one," Angel says to my brother, who glares at the newest intruder. "She didn't take anything from you. The men that did are gone."

His tone is fatherly, not something I expected from the onetime meeting with the guy.

My brother pulls the gun from her temple, taking a step back as he releases her.

I don't take his retreat as a forfeit. My brother was always the one to think ten steps ahead. There's still a very

real chance that more gunfire will happen before the conclusion of all of this.

“Killing her ensures the fall of the entire family,” Elio argues, his finger still on the trigger of his gun despite holding it at his side.

“Without her, every other family will battle to take over the throne,” Angel says, and it makes sense.

The Severino family has led by fear and brutality for decades, generations. Others will be hungry for that power.

“No one will accept her position,” Elio says, needing any reason to end the bloodline tonight.

“They’ll have to,” Alessia says, turning to face my brother. “Changes are coming and they can get in line or they can be put down.”

I don’t know what Elio sees in her eyes, but he seems satisfied in her promise, calling a truce with one simple forward snap of his head.

Chapter 35

Hollis

Balls the size of Alaska, that's what the woman has.

Alessia, the fucking sister I had no fucking clue about, nods her head, the challenge leaving Donovan's eyes as she takes a step back, her eyes scanning the mess she made in the room, as if trying to calculate how many cleaning supplies she's going to need to bring it back to its once pristine condition.

"You have half an hour to get the fuck out of my house," she says before walking out of the room.

I feel locked in place. This entire night has been one fucking clusterfuck after the other.

"Elio!" Madelene cries, but the man just turns around and leaves the room as well.

I stole his vengeance from him by killing Marcello. His alternative was to kill Alessio, which Alessio's sister took from him. The man may be happy about the men being dead, but he's also probably feeling like he was just as helpless as I was to make tonight happen.

If I had to guess, Alessia Severino killed everyone but the guards we took out and the men Donovan took out in order to gain access to the house.

I stand and walk toward Mads when Angel's phone rings.

His answer is stopped short.

"I didn't kill her. Babe," he growls, the pet name full of warning. "I swear to God..."

His voice fades as he too leaves the room.

I give Fox a wide birth, the crazy fucker looking more deranged at not having killed anyone yet.

It may take forever for me to understand the ins and outs of what happened here tonight, but I can't concern myself with any of that shit right now.

I stop a few feet in front of her, holding my arms out, urging her to stand and come to me, but she seems lost, probably just as confused as I am right now.

"Mads," I whisper, knowing there's always a chance she won't choose me.

"Hollis." Her chin quivers, and fuck if I'm giving her a goddamned option.

I rush to her, dropping to my knees and wedging myself between her legs as I wrap my arms around her.

I don't give a shit about the blood on her skin other than my hatred for the man it spewed from.

I find that sense of home, the one I haven't felt since I was a young child before our worlds were turned upside down, when she lifts her arms and wraps them around me.

She's crying, her trembles keeping me on edge as the wetness drips onto my skin where she has her face tucked firmly at my throat.

When she pulls her face back, I cup her jaw in both hands. I can't let her get too far away from me.

I growl at the clap on my back, my adrenaline still running too high for anyone to think it's okay to fucking touch me.

Angel doesn't seem offended by the noise coming from my throat as I glare at him. I didn't even notice the man come back into the room.

"Thank you," Mads tells him.

He gives her a simple nod as if he played a part in realigning Mafia families all the damn time, as if it's just another day's work for him.

I owe the man an apology, but I can't seem to find the words as I look at him.

As if he understands exactly what I'm trying to say, he nods at me once before taking a step back, his eyes darting to Mads one last time.

She's the reason I'm forgiven. I don't know how I know, but Lauren had her own hand in this. His woman's uncanny ability to read people is why he's here. This is as much for me as it is for Mads, and that gives me hope that I won't be leaving here alone tonight. It didn't even take getting knocked over the fucking head like it did for Liam for me to know the value of the woman standing in front of me.

"I missed you," Mads says, and I lean forward, swallowing whatever else she might feel she needs to say.

Her fingers curl into my arms, fire shooting from our connection to every fucking part of my body. It's our first kiss, one that should've happened at the end of a first date or possibly the second if she was feeling shy. It shouldn't have come after eating her pussy and nearly taking her virginity on the fucking floor of a goddamned safe house with barely enough furniture to be considered civil.

"Fuck, you're pretty."

I turn my head to glare at Nash, thinking it's finally time for the man to cash the fucking check his annoying mouth has been writing all damned day, but the man's attention isn't on me. He's watching Alessia walk back into the room.

I take a step in front of Mads, untrusting of any woman who would so easily kill anyone in her own family. She didn't plead with Alessio before pulling the trigger. She didn't let him make promises no one would believe about changing his ways. She shot him mid-sentence like he never mattered to her. If she could do that to someone she shared a womb with, then I don't want her even looking in Mads' direction.

"I thought Alessio was crazy," the remaining Severino says, pointing at the dead men around the room. "You two look like you're about to go at it surrounded by bodies."

A second look at her reveals her swollen eyes, red-rimmed and puffy from crying. She had balls of steel to do

what she felt needed to be done, but it did affect her. I doubt she was crying for the family she lost but rather the one she wishes she always had. Not one that would force her to annihilate them because of how toxic and deadly they were. She saw no other way, and she was right. I don't know if this woman is the answer, but it will take a true psycho to be any worse than what her father and brothers were.

"I want assurances that she's safe," I tell Alessia, unarmed yet still making demands.

She doesn't look at me with challenge. If anything, she looks a little offended that I feel the need to even ask.

"I have no use for the Lombardi family," Alessia says, holding her hand up and shaking her head when I take a step forward to argue the threat. "I don't mean to sound like I'll harm her. Neither Madelene nor Elio Lombardi have a role of any kind with the Severino family. The vow that promised her to my family was made by two dead men. It dies with them."

I nod, feeling Mads' hand squeeze my arm with Alessia's declaration.

"I will, however, urge her to take care of her family's business quickly and leave Chicago."

It gets my hackles up, but Alessia seems even less impressed when I step forward again.

"You're going to blame her for Lucian and Alessio's deaths?" I growl, feeling the warmth of another body near me.

Fox, Angel, and Nash all seem very interested in her response, but the woman is no more intimidated by the four of us than she was before killing her own brother.

"Everyone will know I'm responsible. How else will I keep them afraid?" A slow sinister smile tugs up the corners of her mouth, the smile similar to many serial killers' mug shots I've seen online. "If they know what I'm capable of, they'll be less likely to cross me."

Chapter 36

Madelene

Water pounds down on my shoulders, the warmth of it already having time to settle in my bones.

I fully expected Hollis to join me, but I feel like I've been in here forever and he hasn't even darkened the open doorway.

This bathroom is more what I'm used to, a hundred levels above what he had back in McAllen, Texas, but I find myself missing the confined space. It's as if all the room here makes me feel like I'm missing something and can't put it into words. I know it has to do with everything that happened.

I've gone through the spectrum of emotions tonight. I may not have had a great relationship with my father, he may have been the one to hand me over to monsters, but my mother loved him, and I loved her. It made it nearly impossible to watch the recording of his torture and death.

I look down at my body, now free from Alessio's blood. Bruises mark my wrists from the way the Severino men tied them together so carelessly, but that seems like the only physical proof I have from such an intense day.

I huff a laugh. Intense? What a fucking word.

I turn off the water, once again taking my time in hopes that Hollis will join me, but as I towel dry, he doesn't show.

Maybe I read too much into that kiss. Maybe he was just being overprotective in the way he held me close the entire drive to this hotel.

Maybe he's glad I'm okay, but second-guessing what happens next.

I made him choose. He wanted me to go to him, but I couldn't. I need him to make that call, but now I'm feeling as if I read it all wrong the way he comforted me, the way his heart rate calmed once he had me pulled in tight to his body.

I wrap the towel around my body, finding myself once again without clean clothes to wear. Slowly, I make my way from the room, freezing at the sight of Hollis leaned back in the armed chair on the far side of the room, his hand wrapped around a glass of dark liquid—whiskey if I had to guess.

He looks as annoyed as I felt showering alone, and it makes me restless, feeling naked and vulnerable, but I'm past all that shit. I was before Nash stopped the train that was coming by pulling Hollis off of me in McAllen. I'd made a plan then. I was going to take what I wanted from this man. I was tired of living in fear. I spoke of wanting a choice but refused to choose when I had the opportunity. The weeks I spent with him, keeping my distance, only giving him exactly what he demanded of me while ignoring the wants of my body, were wasted time. I didn't want to waste time any longer, but I may not have a choice anymore.

I step up to the tray, picking up the second glass on it and tossing the liquid back.

His jaw twitches when I scrunch my nose at the taste, taking a deep breath when it burns my throat.

Definitely whiskey.

I lift the stainless-steel cloche, my mouth instantly watering at the sight of the bacon cheeseburger and fries.

"Seventeen dollars for the whiskey," he says.

My eyes slowly rise from the food to look at him. I pull a french fry from the plate and bite the end of it.

"The fries weren't even included with the meal. Another twelve dollars."

"Yeah?" I chew, trying not to smile and finding myself unable. "That's really expensive."

"It is," he agrees, his thumb running back and forth over the rim of his glass of whiskey.

"I'm broke. Bank doesn't open until morning."

His smile is slow, a little menacing. It makes the hairs on my arms stand on end.

“Eat your fill,” he urges. “You’ll be expected to pay back every single bite.”

I knew this was the game we were playing before he ever opened his mouth, and it fucking thrills me to no end.

I fight the urge to squeeze my thighs together.

“This burger will be better than any of the others?”

He shrugs. “Probably not, but it will definitely cost more.”

I lift the gooey thing, wondering if I honestly shouldn’t pull up a chair and have a meal, but my need for other things right now wins out.

I take a bite, an actual fucking moan rumbling inside of me because of how hungry I am.

I chew slowly, liking the power I feel when his eyes drop to my lips and then my throat as I swallow.

“How much was the water?” I ask, lifting the frosty cup from the room service tray and taking a long drink.

“It was complimentary, but it took time to order it.”

“So there’s a fee attached?”

He nods, lifting his whiskey to his lips and draining the glass.

I inch forward as he places it on the side table.

“I only have one way to pay,” I tell him, dropping the towel. “I hope this is enough.”

His eyes scan my body, taking in every inch of me slowly. He pauses on the bruises on my wrists but doesn’t mention them.

“It’s not.”

“Maybe this will cover it,” I say, walking closer and straddling his body.

I lift his hand until it’s cupping my breast, and although he seems enthralled, he still shakes his head.

“This?” I ask, barely able to keep from moving faster, considering we’re practically picking up right where we left off days ago.

I roll my hips, the movement a little awkward feeling with my inexperience.

“You’re getting there.”

He lifts his arms when I tug at the hem of his shirt, not wasting a second to press my skin to his. The light smattering of chest hair he has brushes my nipples, and it sends an urgency I’ve never felt before up my spine.

His hands fall to my ass, taking a handful and urging another roll from my hips.

His erection rubs against me, still confined by his jeans, and it just won’t do.

I reach lower, whimpering with need when I bump my pussy as I try to unbutton and unzip his pants.

He helps, a simple lift of his hips when I slide off of him and try to drag the denim down his legs.

I don’t bother with his boots. Once I run my cheek up his leaking cock, he doesn’t seem very concerned at all that his clothes are tangled around his calves.

“Mads,” he says, taking a handful of my damp hair in his hands as I drop to my knees.

He doesn’t try to stop me, doesn’t tell me that he doesn’t need what I’m offering.

I like that about him more than I can say. He isn’t fucking fake, and despite what has happened to me, he isn’t going to lie and tell me he doesn’t want it. Every man wants every blow job offered to them. Some may turn them down, some may explain the fact away, but it doesn’t make it less true.

He hisses when I lick the tip of him, the taste of his precum igniting my tastebuds.

He pulls me off, his grip on my hair tight and stinging, yet somehow nothing like the way it's hurt me in the past. I meet his eyes, staring into their darkness as if they're a place for comfort not pain.

“Slowly,” he growls.

I nod my head in understanding, only dropping my mouth back down when he loosens his grip enough to allow it.

It's a warning. It's him letting me know he's not here to hurt me, but he's also not giving up his own power.

I double my effort, letting the salty warmth of his skin glide along my tongue. His thighs under my hands tremble, betraying this calm demeanor he's trying to convince me he has, as if this blow job is no different to any of the other lackluster ones he may have received before.

It's different for me, the first one I've given freely, willingly.

I swallow, my throat constricting around the head, but instead of trying to press further, to reach deeper parts of me, he pulls me off, his breaths making his muscled chest rise and fall erratically.

“You're not sucking me off tonight, Mads.”

Mads... I freaking love his nickname for me. It speaks of a connection, of familiarity.

“Take my fucking boots and jeans off.”

His release of my hair is a relief physically, but I scramble to do as he instructs because I'm desperate, in need of another connection from him.

It doesn't take long to pull the wad of clothing around his calves from his body, both of us ignoring what has to be Rocco's blood on them.

He doesn't urge me closer, doesn't pull my mouth back on his cock. He stands, forcing me to look up at him from my knees. The way he traces my face, looking reverent and grateful for a long moment, feels both familiar and not at the same time. It reads as forced but perfect as well.

My heart pounds, the rhythm of it dictating my breathing, another thing I'm experiencing that fluctuates with his every move.

"I'm not going to stop," he says, urging me to stand.

I press into him once I'm on my feet, his huge hand immediately grabbing my ass, his erection stiff and leaking against my stomach, leaving behind a trail of wetness on my skin.

The man is virile, huge, and I know I should be scared about what happens. Just the pain should make me want to run from the room, but I'm locked in place by need and nothing else.

It feels dangerous what we're doing, but it also feels like a choice, as if I really pumped the brakes on this, the night could end much differently than the direction we're heading right now.

I don't want different.

I don't want soft.

I don't want him whispering that I'll be fine in my ear as he slowly takes the only part left of me to give.

He has to know it's been his.

Maybe he knew long before I knew it belonged to him.

I'm tired of waiting.

I'm so fucking glad he is too.

"I'm not going to stop once I get started," he repeats.

"Okay," I agree.

"I'll fucking marry you tomorrow if it's what you want, but this is happening tonight."

I nod, knowing it won't go over well to tell him my virginity is something Alessio put a value on, not me. I've held on to it for my own safety after my dad made his vow, not because it was some spectacular thing that really meant something.

“Your pussy is mine, Mads. If you giving it to me makes you a whore, then that makes you my whore, understand?”

It’s not the first time I’ve been referenced that way, but it’s the first time the word has ever sent a zing of need through my body.

“Your whore,” I quickly agree, licking at my suddenly dry lips.

“If you scream too loud, someone will call the police,” he warns as he walks me backward toward the bed.

“I won’t scream.”

He looks down at me, a challenge in his eyes that makes me curl my fingernails into his arms deeper.

“I’ll try not to scream,” I amend, my fear and anticipation both doubling.

“You wet?” he growls as he lays me back, but he stands tall, nudging my leg with his knee to see for himself.

I spread wide, bending my knees until my feet are nearly touching my ass before I let them fall open.

“Mmm,” he groans, his hand reaching down to stroke his length. “Seems impossible to fit all this in such a tiny hole.”

With his free hand, he circles my clit before dipping his finger down to tease my entrance.

I don’t reach for his hand this time, don’t insist *not inside*, like I did in the past.

“Hollis,” I say, his name a plea, but I have no idea what it references.

Please, stop.

Please, take me.

Please, love me.

Please, never leave me.

His eyes find mine, the look in them answering every single question I could ever ask.

“Anything for you, Mads.”

He pierces me without warning, the pain so immense that I can't even manage the sound he was afraid of.

It takes my breath away. My heart skips several beats. Once I can breathe again, I attempt to scramble away, the instinct to end it the most natural thing ever.

He holds me in place, his thumb making pointless circles on my clit. There's nothing that can make this better. I'm torn, ripped, coming apart at the literal seams.

“Shhh,” he says, the sound so unfamiliar coming from him that it makes me lock my eyes on his.

He swallows, his cock seeming to grow even more inside of me.

“Hollis, I can't.”

“You were warned, Mads. I won't fucking stop. Tell me what you need to endure it.”

Endure it.

This thing that's happening to me. This thing I wanted. This thing I taunted and teased until he gave me.

“Your mouth,” I say, my cheek twitching, my legs shaking in that way it does when I need something I can't find the words for.

“Literally anything else, Mads,” he says, the words escaping past his clenched teeth. “Can't fuck you and eat your pussy at the same time.”

I huff a laugh. “Your mouth on mine.”

He looks relieved, like if I insisted, he'd try his damndest to give me what he thought I was asking for.

He leans forward, the action somehow shoving him deeper, to the point I'm unable to kiss him once his mouth is in reach.

I whimper when he pulls his hips back, the bulbous head of his cock striking at something deep inside of me.

“Yeah?” he asks, his lips turning up into a smile at the noise I make.

He bites at my lips as he inches forward, only to pull back just as fast.

“That’s—”

“Tolerable?” he asks, sounding slightly annoyed, as if he’s second-guessing himself.

“Better,” I clarify, finding truth in my words.

The initial pain has ebbed away, although I imagine we could do this a million times and the fullness will always remain.

We attempt kissing, but our panting mouths just can’t get coordinated enough to accomplish it. He growls when I twinge, making me bite his lip, but his hips jerk forward again, telling me he liked it.

I can’t fight him. I won’t. Just like I’ll never tell him no. He’ll stop. I know it in my soul the man would quit if he thought it’s what I really wanted.

“Harder,” I tell him instead, pushing against his chest.

He pulls back, but only enough to lift my body as he curls his legs under him and sits back. The angle is awkward, the heft of him so large inside of me.

“Fuck me,” he groans, his eyes locked between my legs as he pulls himself out of me to the tip.

Blood coats his length, proof of what he took, but the sight of it turns him on rather than disgusting him.

“I want to come,” I moan. “But you’re just too big.”

That same sinister smile he gave me the first time I obeyed him and paid for my food by getting naked spreads across his face. My complaint is a compliment to him. It turns him on to know his cock is so big it hurt me.

“You’re a fucking animal,” I snap as I slap out at his stomach.

He grips my hand, forcing me to sit up as he pulls it to his mouth, biting my palm.

My jaw unhinges. How can I feel teeth on my hand in the depths of me?

“Hollis,” I groan, rolling my hips, the pain nearly gone, but being too full to really enjoy it. “I’m too tight.”

He shakes his head, his smile wide. “I’ll just have to fuck you loose.”

I groan. “That’s not how vaginas work.”

He snaps his hips forward. “Don’t use the word vagina.”

I huff a laugh. “Too formal? God, why are we talking right now?”

“I was wondering the same fucking thing.”

He curls over me, my body barely touching the bed with the way his arms are holding me to his chest.

He’s as deep as he can possibly go. I’m as full as I ever could be. I clench, testing the feel of him inside me. There’s a twinge of pain, but it’s bearable.

“Jesus.” He huffs, gripping me tighter when I squeeze again.

Without warning, the man releases me, pulling from my body so fast I gasp.

Like one of the porn stars on the movies Marcello wouldn’t bother turning off when I entered a room, Hollis strokes his cock once, painting my tits and chin with cum.

I stare up at him, unbelieving that he’d actually do that. I was fully prepared to take Plan B tomorrow because there are a lot of conversations we need to have before we complicate things with a child.

“Sorry,” he says, not looking at all repentant as he scrapes cum from my chin and presses it inside my mouth.

His eyelids grow a little heavier as I wrap my lips around it and suck.

“Hold that thought,” he says, but when he shifts his weight, he doesn’t back away completely. Without warning, he drops to his elbows and covers my entire pussy with his mouth.

The ache of being filled by him never fully dissipates, and as he brings me to orgasm, it somehow plays a role in the pleasure I feel.

I’m too fucked out to focus on it long, as Hollis kisses his way up my body, unconcerned about his cum marking my skin or the mess between us as he pulls me against his chest.

Chapter 37

Hollis

“I feel like I owe you an apology,” I say, doing my best to resist the urge to run my hand over her back. I lose the battle.

“Why?” she asks, nudging my arm. “Don’t pet me. I’m not a dog.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling even though she can’t see me with her head curled under my chin.

“Maybe I don’t,” I mutter, pressing the palm of my hand firmly to her skin. Not touching her at all isn’t an option. She doesn’t complain. “Seems you don’t have a problem at all telling me what you want and don’t want.”

“I just don’t like—”

She narrows her eyes at me when I lift her chin and make her look at me.

“I want that from you. I need you to tell me what you like and don’t like.”

“And you’ll listen?” she asks, rolling her eyes.

“I will sometimes, but you’re never going to get your way all the time with me, Mads. Know that going in.”

“Because you’ll let me leave if I don’t want to stay.”

My grin is slow. The woman has to know the answer, but she seems hell-bent in forcing me to say it.

“I’ll crawl over the edge of the earth through broken glass on my knees to track you down, baby. Never forget it.”

She scrunches her nose. “That sounds all fucking caveman to me.”

I shrug, urging her head back down onto my chest. “So be it.”

A long silence fills the room around us, but I’m not wondering whether she’s questioning why she left the

Severino compound with me. She's exactly where she wants to be for now, and if that decision changes, I'll just have to be creative in keeping her exactly where she belongs.

"I enjoyed it," she says after a long pause. "I knew it was going to be uncomfortable the first time."

"Because my cock is too big?" I tease, hissing when she twists my nipple. "That will get you tied down and fucked again, Mads."

I grin when I feel her smile against my chest.

"Does it make me fucked up—"

"Yes," she answers before I can finish.

I pinch her ass, loving the way she rolls her hips to get away from my fingers rather than pulling completely away from me.

"I wish I could pop your cherry over and over and over."

She lifts up, staring down at me. "It really hurt, and I don't mean just a little, Hollis."

I shake my head, grabbing her chin when she tries to pull away.

"If you ever expect me to change, it's not going to fucking happen. If you think there will ever come a time when the thought of being the only person ever inside that tight pussy of yours doesn't turn me on, you're going to end up disappointed every time. Understand that now, Mads."

Her eyes search mine, but I don't know that she found what she was looking for before she drops her head back to my chest.

I know she has a lot to say. I know there are some very serious, very complicated conversations we have to have. Normally, I'd avoid them at all costs, but Madelene Lombardi isn't the type of woman you ignore. Even if she weren't right on top of me, my thoughts would be on her.

But then instead of opening her mouth and holding a conversation, she backs away, standing at the edge of the bed.

I watch, not supplying any help when she looks around the room. She has nothing to change into but the bloody clothes she stripped out of. I didn't offer to have anything sent up for her, despite this expensive-ass hoity-toity hotel probably having some sort of boutique downstairs.

I hadn't planned on letting her out of bed for a month, honestly.

She scoops up the towel she dropped during her taunting and teasing earlier and wraps it around her body. If it's what she needs right now to put up a barrier, a faux protection for her safety, I won't argue about it.

"What?" I ask when she huffs, my eyes locking at the hem of the towel where it barely covers her thighs.

The blood there, just the faintest of smears, draws my eyes.

"You're fucking crazy," she snaps, noticing what I'm staring at.

I'm slow to raise my eyes to hers. Everything about this woman gets me riled up. Even with empty balls, I still feel like a fucking animal, needing to rut into her and mark her as mine. The men who harmed her, the ones that could've compromised her future are dead, but there's still this insistent need inside of me to curl around her and growl at anyone that comes within ten feet of her.

"That's not changing either," I assure her because those thoughts aren't exactly sane.

"What are you thinking?" Her voice is low as if she can either read my mind or her thoughts are taking her to some weird possessive place as well.

My cock threatens to thicken once again at the idea that she may want to own me as much as I do her.

"What are your expectations?"

I stare at the mounds her tits are making just above the towel she has wrapped around her body.

“Expectations?” I bite my lip as I think. “I expect you’ll eventually be able to take my cock down your throat without gagging.”

She huffs.

“I expect you’ll complain that my cock is too big for your ass, but you’ll take me there anyway.”

I know this isn’t what she’s exactly asking about, but since she didn’t specify, I figure now would be a great time to let her into my head a little.

I’m finally able to meet her eyes when she props her hand on her hip, the classic are-you-fucking-kidding-me stance, not enough to make me reconsider what I said.

“You look like you’re about to give me a piece of your mind,” I say, trying not to smile because she’s fucking adorable. I doubt telling her so would go over very well. I hold my hands out to her. “Give me some pussy instead.”

She looks down at my now fully erect cock, chewing on the inside of her cheek as if she’s in serious contemplation about what to do.

“You will really hurt me if we go again so soon.”

There’s no tease in her voice. It’s nothing like it was when she first walked out here and I told her she’d have to pay for every bite of food she took.

Like a bastard, knowing she’s sore from where I was inside of her turns me on. I want her to feel me there. I want her thinking of me with every step she takes.

“Poor little pussy. Let me kiss it better.”

She huffs again, and I don’t know if she’s aware of the way her hips move closer just a fraction of an inch.

“I don’t really have an answer,” I tell her. “I came to Chicago to kill those assholes, so you had a choice. That’s

what you said you wanted. You wanted to be able to choose the direction your life took.”

“I did.”

I sit up on the edge of the bed, grinning when she comes right to me when I hold my arms out. I pull her close, making sure she’s looking me in the eye.

“I can’t give you a choice. I’m no better than Alessio in that regard. You’re fucking mine, Mads. There can’t be any other way. When we get back to Texas, we can work on figuring out exactly how that looks, but—”

“We?” She swallows. “You want me to go with you?”

I tilt my head. “Have you not listened to a word I said?”

Her cheeks heat, flushing the prettiest pink. “I thought it was hormones and post-sex whatever making you say sweet things.”

I blink up at her. “Telling you you’re stuck with me because I’m a possessive asshole who won’t take no for an answer is saying sweet things?”

She tries to look away, her face growing redder as if she’s embarrassed.

“It’s not going to be easy on you or this delicate body of yours,” I say, tugging at the tucked knot of her towel, my eyes locking on her tits as the fabric falls to the floor. “Do you know how expensive just this hotel room is? That’s not even considering the cost to travel all the way up here from Texas.”

She moans when I suck her nipple into my mouth, her hips rolling as if she’s already forgotten all about the soreness she complained of earlier.

“You owe me so much.” Another nip at her skin, and the moan that slips out of her mouth makes my cock leak like it hasn’t gotten any action in months. “Gas prices are super high right now. My truck needs an oil change from all the travel. The expenses are endless.”

She pulls back, trying not to smile as she presses her hands to my shoulders.

“And you’re expecting me to earn all of that on my back?”

I shake my head, a sinister grin tugging up the corners of my mouth.

“Sweet, sweet, Madelene. You should know I’m not that vanilla. You will spend the least amount of time on your back, baby.”

I draw her even closer, forcing her to spread her legs. She doesn’t complain when I grip her ass and pull her body to straddle mine. Her mouth hangs open, the tiniest of squeaks coming from her when I press the tip of my cock to her pussy.

“I didn’t know sore pussies still leaked for their men.”

“She has a mind of her own,” she whispers, her lips moving against my jawline.

I’m breathless, struck stupid, when I pull her down onto my length. She doesn’t complain, despite her fingernails digging into my flesh.

“You’re going to get me pregnant,” she whispers.

Swear to God, I nearly come. She just unlocked some fucking hidden part of me I never knew existed.

“Shut up,” I hiss.

“Seriously, Hollis. I’m not on birth control.”

I inch back so I can look into her eyes. “If you think I won’t fuck my cum into you for a month straight just to know I did exactly that, you’re underestimating my need to own you.”

A slow smile spreads across my face when her pussy clenches, rippling along my shaft.

“Someone likes the idea of that,” I tease, rolling my hips upward to press into her deeper.

“Mind of her own,” she reminds me.

I press my lips to hers and spend the rest of the night getting lost in her.

Chapter 38

Madelene

“And those pens?” Lauren asks, her eyes rolling once again.

“Still on back order.”

“Angel’s going to be pissed.”

She has a glint in her eyes that tells me his anger is a treat for her. She’s made comments that have caused me to pause and wonder just what goes down between the two of them, but I’ve never gotten brave enough to ask. Her sexual relationship with the scary man is none of my business.

“It’s not your fault,” I tell her.

“But it could be.” She winks at me before going back to the stack of papers on the desk in front of her.

It’s been six months since Hollis took me from Chicago, and I can honestly say it’s been the best six months of my life.

Hollis has demanded more from my body than anyone ever has, but I don’t go to sleep in fear of what’s going to happen. He can’t guarantee my safety every second of the day, and I know that bothers the shit out of him on occasion, but I know he’ll sacrifice his own life for me if it comes down to it. The crazy thing is that I’d do the same for him, something I know he appreciates but would never ask of me.

“I wonder about you sometimes,” I say with a chuckle.

“All you have to do is ask.”

I look up, meeting her eyes, and they sparkle with something I’ll probably never understand. I’ve heard stories of what Lauren has been through in her life, catching bits and pieces here and there. We’ve never sat down and compared life stories, but I get the feeling if it were a competition of who endured the most then what happened to me pales in comparison.

I shake my head. Not because I'm not curious, but because it seems like I would be expected to reciprocate, and I'm nowhere close to talking about the things I've been through.

I don't even speak of them to Hollis. When I've tried in the past, he got so angry, not at me but the dead men who hurt me. I'd much rather spend my time paying him back for running water, electricity, hell, even the taxes he pays on the road we take when he brings me to the office for my twice-a-week part-time job.

I started working at the Mission Mercenaries office when Lauren went into labor, coming in twice a week while she was on maternity leave. When she came back to work, I was told I could stay if I wanted to. I need something to do with my time. Plus, I need a little cash to tease Hollis with. Nothing gets him more riled up than me reminding him I have money in the bank to pay for my own things rather than being indebted to him. It makes him creative in what I owe him for, and I'm quite ecstatic about how I had to pay him back for the hardwood flooring that I walk on in his house even though he had it installed a year before I came along.

The house he took me to after he dragged me out of Mexico was just what I figured, a safe house. His real house, consequently, also in McAllen, Texas, was furnished better, although it was in desperate need of a woman's touch. He didn't bitch and complain too much when I started adding some softer touches to it. He was pleased by getting his payment for them. I had no idea throw pillows would not only cost him financially, but I'd also have to pay him for his emotional distress caused by having to look at them. That expense took all weekend to repay.

"To be in your head right now," Lauren says, pulling me from those tantalizing, delicious memories.

I duck my head, making her laugh, but it doesn't stop the heat rising in my cheeks.

"I was thinking about grocery shopping."

“The fuck you were,” she argues. “You know I knew there was a connection between the two of you the day Nash dragged Hollis in here in cuffs.”

I can’t deny her observation because I felt it even then too. I was just working under the assumption it was one-sided. Fuck, am I glad to have been wrong.

“I never thought my life could look like this,” I confess.

“Loving a dangerous, unyielding man has its perks.” She angles her head toward the front door.

My body already starts to come to life at the sight of Hollis using his key to open the office door. The only way he’d allow me to work here is if he had access to me at all times. Having to wait for someone to unlock the door in order to enter, with a wall of glass and metal between us, was never going to happen. Angel got a little irritated about his demand but after Lauren whispered something in his ear, he quickly relented.

My mind whirls with how the afternoon will go.

“Is it lunch time already?” I ask, my voice breathier than it ever should be in front of others.

A slow smile spreads across my man’s face. “It’s going to be an expensive one.”

“That new steak restaurant across town?” Lauren asks, but she must notice the look on both of our faces because she chuckles, muttering something about us being kinky bastards.

“Expensive?” I ask, swallowing in an attempt to mask my excitement.

“I’m not sure you can afford it.”

I dart my eyes to Lauren who doesn’t even have the courtesy to look away when we briefly make eye contact.

I make payments whenever and wherever he sees fit. If I didn’t think that Angel would put a bullet in his head for pulling out his cock in front of Lauren, I’d worry he’d take me right here.

It wouldn't be the first time he made demands of me in places other than the house. I don't think a day has passed that he hasn't been inside of me in some form or fashion—in the shower, in the pool, on my knees. It doesn't matter to him. Sex, my pleasure and his, is always on the forefront of his mind, making me consider the strength he had in resisting those two weeks we were together in that shitty house. He swears he was never like that before me, but I don't see how.

Even the days when we know for certain another month has gone by without two lines showing up on the pregnancy test, he makes demands of my body. I think those are the days I love him the most. He doesn't treat me differently. He doesn't blame me for not giving him what we both crave so much. He fucks me harder, deeper, promises me that it's going to happen, and he's going to enjoy every single second getting there.

I have no idea if my body will hum at the sight of him forever, but it hasn't waned at all in these last six months.

“Think you guys can hold off fucking each other on the desk for ten minutes?”

I look over at Lauren, smiling when I see her grinning at us.

“Might want to make it eight,” Hollis says, grabbing my hand with a chuckle when I smack his chest.

Warmth runs through me. He normally guides my hand to his cock when he does this. My eyes widen when he starts to do just that even with a witness. It's reminiscent of the way he did it at the little grocery store close to the house. That afternoon ended with me bent over a tower of cases of bottled water with a warning in my ear not to scream as he lifted my dress, ripped my panties away and fucked me. Of course he wouldn't go fast and hard to get it over quicker, decreasing our chances of getting caught. He fucked into me slowly, the head of his cock gliding over that spot inside of me that he knows drives me utterly crazy.

“What are you thinking about, Mads?” he asks, the tone of his voice taunting and teasing.

“Would you please—”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Angel says, coming from his office in the back.

Hollis looks from me to his pseudo boss, and his demeanor completely changes.

“How bad?” Hollis asks him.

Without answering him, Angel looks at Lauren. “I need you to call Liam, Fox, and Donavan.”

“Liam won’t go,” Lauren says as if she can read her man’s mind.

“You’ll be surprised what a man’s willing to do for revenge.” Angel presses a kiss to Lauren’s lips, and I look back at Hollis, giving them a little privacy.

“Going to have to miss lunch today, baby,” Hollis says. “I have work to do.”

Fear washes over me, but I do my best to shove it down. I don’t need him worrying about me while doing dangerous shit.

“Keep those nasty thoughts until I get back,” he says, pressing a too-brief kiss to my lips before following Angel out the front door.

Lauren and I are both staring at our men’s backs as they leave. This never gets easier, watching them walk away, not knowing if they’ll come back to us.

“Are you not going to tell me what they’re doing?” I ask, knowing even though I help out in the office there’s still a lot I don’t know.

“They’re going after the same group that held Angel and Liam hostage,” she says without hesitation.

“And Nash can’t help with that?”

Lauren meets my eyes. “Nash has been taken by them.”

I gasp, covering my mouth. I’ve heard bits and pieces of what this group is capable of. My heart pounds, both for Hollis

and the danger the group is facing, but also for Nash because of what he may be enduring. A small part of me is concerned for Donovan. He's blood after all, but I don't have a relationship with the man. His presence is scarce around the office, and he's held true to his declaration that Elio Lombardi is dead and that he has no family.

He even refused any part of the inheritance that came through a couple of months ago when I turned twenty-two. He wants nothing to do with his past life, including me.

I no longer even think of him as Elio. He's one of Angel's sub-contractors, an employee, the term used as loosely as possible, of course, of Mission Mercenaries.

I have a million questions, half of them I know better than to ask, and the other half will also probably go unanswered. Lauren sits back down at her small desk, picking up the phone to place the calls Angel instructed her to.

The entire group of men must be more in the know than I am, because it only takes a handful of words to mobilize all of them.

I pray that they all make it back safely, sending an extra plea up for Nash to remain strong while the other guys make their way to save him.

THE END

**Need to find out what happens with
Nash?**

Grab his story [HERE!](#)

Social Media Links

[FB Author Page](#)

[FB Author Group](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[BookBub](#)

[Newsletter](#)

OTHER BOOKS FROM MARIE JAMES

Newest Series

Mission Mercenaries

[Lessons Learned](#)

[Mistakes Made](#)

[Bridges Burned](#)

[Depravity Delivered](#)

[Redemption Refused](#)

Blackbridge Security

[Hostile Territory](#)

[Shot in the Dark](#)

[Contingency Plan](#)

[Truth Be Told](#)

[Calculated Risk](#)

[Heroic Measures](#)

[Sleight of Hand](#)

[Controlled Burn](#)

[Cease Fire](#)

[Crossing Borders](#)

[Blackbridge Box Set 1](#)

[Blackbridge Box Set 2](#)

Standalones

[Crowd Pleaser](#)

[Macon](#)

[We Said Forever](#)

[More Than a Memory](#)

Cole Brothers SERIES

[Love Me Like That](#)

[Teach Me Like That](#)

Cerberus MC

[Kincaid: Cerberus MC Book 1](#)

[Kid: Cerberus MC Book 2](#)

[Shadow: Cerberus MC Book 3](#)

[Dominic: Cerberus MC Book 4](#)

[Snatch: Cerberus MC Book 5](#)

[Lawson: Cerberus MC Book 6](#)

[Hound: Cerberus MC Book 7](#)

[Griffin: Cerberus MC Book 8](#)

[Samson: Cerberus MC Book 9](#)

[Tug: Cerberus MC Book 10](#)

[Scooter: Cerberus MC Book 11](#)

[Cannon: Cerberus MC Book 12](#)

[Rocker: Cerberus MC Book 13](#)

[Colton: Cerberus MC Book 14](#)

[Drew: Cerberus MC Book 15](#)

[Jinx: Cerberus MC Book 16](#)

[Thumper: Cerberus MC Book 17](#)

[Apollo: Cerberus MC Book 18](#)

[Legend: Cerberus MC Book 19](#)

[Grinch: Cerberus MC Book 20](#)

[Harley: Cerberus MC Book 21](#)

[Landon: Cerberus MC Book 22](#)

[Spade: Cerberus MC Book 23](#)

[Aro: Cerberus MC Book 24](#)

[Boomer: Cerberus MC Book 25](#)

[Ugly: Cerberus MC Book 26](#)

[Bishop: Cerberus MC Book 27](#)

[A Very Cerberus Christmas](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 1](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 2](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 3](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 4](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 5](#)

Ravens Ruin MC

[Desperate Beginnings: Prequel](#)

Grab it for free [HERE!](#)

Book 1: [Sins of the Father](#)

Book 2: [Luck of the Devil](#)

Book 3: [Dancing with the Devil](#)

MM Romance

[Grinder](#)

[Taunting Tony](#)

Westover Prep Series

(bully/enemies to lovers romance)

[One-Eighty](#)

[Catch Twenty-Two](#)