



*She's too tempting,
too pure, and
I'm her monster.*

**B
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scoundrel

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ARIA COLE



RIVER WEST

BRUTAL SCOUNDREL

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RIVER WEST

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SAFI

“**W**hy did I agree to this?” I put my hand to my head, squeezing my temples, wondering if there’s a quiet way out of this kitchen and back to my old life.

My safe old life, studying cuisine and keeping out of trouble.

My old life where nobody ever really noticed me.

My old life of wondering where the next paycheck will come from. Of wondering if I’m going to be able to make my share of the contributions for my brother’s care this month, or if this is the month he goes into a home.

That’s why I agreed to this, I tell myself. That’s why I *have* to follow through.

Glancing out of the doorway into the large, softly-lit private room, I watch the two men at the table with a pile of chips sitting between them, cards in their hands as they talk in voices so gruff they’re like sandpaper on a chalk board. Clarissa told me not to speak to them unless they speak to me, and preferably not even then. The client appreciates discretion, apparently. I’m to have no eyes or ears, just provide the food.

Which would be fine, except they’ve already noticed me.

I mean *noticed* me, noticed me.

How am I supposed to have no eyes or ears when they’re mentally undressing me and making comments that would have a working girl slapping them across the face?

“Just do the job, Safi,” I tell myself as I head through into the main kitchen area. “One evening, then that’s it. A good reference from a clearly well-connected client to get your own business off the ground.” I nod, as if to myself, as I come around the corner to where the main business is going on. “God, I wish Clarissa was here instead.”

“You’re doing fine.”

I turn to Becca, the sous chef Clarissa provided me with, and force a smile. “Thanks, but I’m not. I’m out of my depth.”

“Anyone would be. I’ve done this with Clarissa before and even she ends up rushed off her feet. The client likes discretion and that means far too few people to cover the kitchen in my opinion. But we have it under control, you and me. The appetizers are popular. Main course will be ready to plate up in thirty minutes. You can do it. How is Clarissa, by the way, have you seen her?”

“I saw her this afternoon for a final rundown of tonight’s menu. Her leg’s healing.”

I shrug and Becca nods. What else can she say? A broken leg is a broken leg, and dealing with all this when you’re on crutches would be impossible.

Clarissa and I met on my first day at culinary school, when she just happened to be there to see one of her old instructors. I was running late, tripped over my own feet, landed in her arms and she made a comment about at least buying her dinner first.

In short, we hit it off right away.

She’s amazing. The best caterer in the city. And me? I’m talented, even if I do say so myself, but I haven’t even quite finished my schooling yet. I’m just hoping nobody tells the client I took her place, or we’re both in deep dog poo.

“More of these, malishka. They are fucking delicious.” The larger of the two men, Egor, laughs as he holds up the tray of vol-au-vents and winks at me, and his friend, Mikhail, grunts as he tries to sneak a glimpse of his opponent’s cards.

Malishka. I don't like it. He doesn't know me and I don't know him. I want to tell him I'm not his anything, let alone his *malishka*.

Whatever that is.

Instead, I draw a deep breath, blowing it out slowly before putting my game face on. "Sure thing, two ticks!"

Clarissa designed the menu. I have her sous chef assisting. I can do this.

What's a bit of staring and a few lewd comments? A few more hours and I'll get paid. Turning to the counter, I pick up another tray of vol-au-vents and head back through to the gaming area, which is in darkness with a couple of strip lights above the long card table. A dealer is standing by, but he's mostly just for decoration, like the statues of Greek gods placed at regular intervals around the walls and the trickle of water from the fountain in the corner.

All just here for the entertainment of the men playing cards, who I'm sure have been discussing *business* in Russian all evening, and I'm equally sure are not the kind of businessmen that sit in board rooms and have an abiding love of spreadsheets.

"Fyodor, here at last!"

The tray almost tips all over the floor as I flinch out of the way of Mikhail's flailing arm, turning as I step back and almost falling into the arms of a much younger man, with curly blond hair and a neatly-trimmed beard. He makes no attempt to hide the way his dark eyes linger on my cleavage.

"Three years since I last saw you," Mikhail continues, not even offering an apology. *Seen and not heard.* Sure, maybe if I could be seen at least. "How is your family? Your wife is still just as beautiful as ever, I trust?"

"Moscow Mike," the younger man says, finally drawing his gaze away from me. While the other two have strong Russian accents, Fyodor's is an easy, natural American. "How are things, brother? I've told you, call me Frankie."

"What is this *Moscow Mike*? I am from Omsk."

“Oh, come on, it’s a nickname, Mikhail, nothing meant by it. Gloria’s doing well. She sends her love to you all of course.”

“Hmm. Well, your wife has manners at least. She is a good woman, you married well. Don’t you think so, Egor?”

“Da, she is. Have one of these, Frankie, they are delicious.”

“Thanks, Eggo.” He heads over to the table and takes a seat, grabbing one of the vol-au-vents and taking a bite, then his eyes return to me. “Fucking right. Compliments to the chef. Anything else on the menu, sweetheart?”

He grins and winks, and I almost lose *my* lunch.

“Apollo always provides the best catering. I have always liked him.”

“He sure does. So, how about it, darlin’? Can they spare you out in the kitchens?”

My mouth falls wide and no words will form. Weren’t they just discussing his wife? And here he is making a pass at me? Should I be flattered? “No, I mean...” I hear the words coming from my own lips as I glance at the door, wondering how quickly I could get out of here if I needed to.

“Fyodor, you have embarrassed her. Ignore him, malishka, he has no manners.”

“Oh, that’s not embarrassment, Egg Man, you need to learn a thing or two about women. Forget the vol-au-vents, darlin’, I’m in the mood for something sweeter.” His grin widens as he opens his legs, and I can see the small bulge between his thighs. With a squeak of helplessness, I turn away, looking for anyone who might come and help me. The dealer is standing by, but he seems oblivious to what’s going on. Or perhaps he doesn’t care.

Most likely, he knows they’d probably kill him if he stepped out of line.

Please, somebody.

Frankie chuckles. “No need to worry, darlin’, I just want to peruse your, er, menu, so to speak.”

As they all laugh at the joke, I start to back away. This is more than any amount of pay is worth. “I—I’ll get another tray of vol-au—”

“Oh, no need to go.”

Someone’s fingers are on my shoulder and it’s too much. I pull back, clattering over the table leg and losing my balance. The vol-au-vents go everywhere as I grasp for something to hold onto and pull a glass of scotch down with me. As my legs go wide, the drink falls on the bodice of my dress, splashing a dark wet patch right across my left breast. I scramble to cover it, but Frankie’s hands are already on my wrist.

“Ohhh, hey, let me help you up there, darlin’—”

“Don’t touch me!” I shout the words, no longer caring who they are as I scratch at his fingers. All he does is laugh, his other hand going to the inside of my thigh.

“Feisty! I love a woman with a bit of—”

There’s a yelp, and suddenly his hands aren’t touching me anymore. In fact, as the room falls eerily silent, I watch him plucked into the air like a child’s toy. The world is moving in slow motion as he’s slammed against the wall with a thud that reverberates through the whole room, probably the whole casino.

I take a single, deep breath, as I allow my eyes to follow the hand that’s tight around his neck. Thick, gnarly knuckles twist and pop as Frankie squirms, struggling against his captor. His hands look tiny, almost comically so, as he scrambles at the wide wrist covered in coarse dark hair that’s sticking out of the sleeve of a dress shirt, diamond cuff links catching the low light. My gaze travels along that strong arm, to wide shoulders, neck tendons like train hydraulics, a sharply-chiseled jaw covered in a spattering of stubble, and eyes like...

Like a shark’s.

Like a predator staring down his prey.

My heart, already thundering, picks up the pace as I see the power, the confidence. If these other men are frightening, this new contender is terror incarnate. I draw back, wanting to get away, wanting nothing to do with whatever this is. I'm caught in the middle of something I should never have been a part of.

“Fucking touch her again and I'll rip your arms off.” The voice is deep, earth-trembling. His words rumble in my mind. *Fucking touch her again...touch her again...touch her.*

He's protecting me. Why is he protecting me?

I stare at the man's face, disbelief making my lips fall open. Lights glint from the sweat across his shaved head, a deep scar cutting through his lip, nose to chin.

“Roman...brother...just having a little fun. With the entertainment, you know? I didn't mean anything—”

Frankie falls silent as my protector growls. An actual growl. I don't think I've ever heard a man growl like a wild animal before, but it does something. Changes something inside me. I'm no longer seeing him as a threat. He's a knight, protecting the damsel in distress, and I feel like I've never felt before. There's a dampness between my legs as I shift against the floor.

“Don't even fucking look at her, Fyodor. I mean it. Your eyes go to her, I'll pull them out and feed them to you.”

“Uspokoitsya, Roman... Fyodor said he was sorry.” Egor's voice is calm, placating, respectful and fearful. “He sees an attractive girl, he gets excited. He means no harm or disrespect.”

The man, Roman, turns, and Fyodor drops to the floor like forgotten trash. He glares at the two men still sitting at the table, his eyes unreadable, his jaw set. He's like a gladiator surveying the competition sent to fight him and finding it wanting.

With a dismissive grunt, his gaze turns to me, and I draw a breath as our eyes meet.

He isn't so scary.

The thought occurs to me as I stare into his eyes. He's big, sure. Powerful. A force of nature. But he won't hurt me. He would never hurt me. I'm as certain of it as if he'd just said so. His face may be hard, but it's beautiful, his eyes are the gentlest, most calming ocean-blue. The scar that cuts through his lips only makes me want to press mine against them, to taste them, to feel their coarseness.

"Are you hurt?" he asks, his voice gentle.

I shake my head. Words? I'm not sure how to string them together into a sentence. My hands flutter to my chest, trying to calm my breathing. I gulp air as I feel my heart thudding through the dress, my fingers finding the patch where the drink spilled on me.

"Wet," I say, distractedly, running my fingertips over the spill.

"*Wet...*" he repeats, slowly.

I can barely drag my eyes away from his, and when I do I see *it*. I don't even want to think about the bulge Frankie tried to taunt me with just a few moments ago, but I can't help comparing his pathetic display with the ridge I see against Roman's leg. The urge to set it free, to get my hands on it, to taste the tip...

What is happening to me?

I've never had thoughts like this before. I've never seen a man the way I'm seeing him. It's like we're suddenly the only two people in the world and I'm free to think whatever I want to think. I bite into my lip as his gaze travels down my body, making me tingle and shiver as I clench every muscle. A trickle of liquid spills from between my legs and I mewl at the feel of it.

And finally, that sends him over the edge.

"Everybody out. Now. I want you all gone."

"Chyort! Roman, come on, we're here for business."

"Not anymore. I said get the fuck out." In a couple of strides he's across the room, throwing the door open. "I won't

ask again.”

Mikhail stands from the table, but he doesn't move for the door. “Roman, be reasonable, your father won't stand for this. It is by his invitation we're here, and this is how you treat us? We're honored guests, you should be—”

“My father isn't here. This isn't his casino. Now get the fuck out or I'll call security and have you thrown out. I'll call the fucking police if I have to.”

“Nyet! Call the police on us? Nobody will do business with your family again!”

I watch as Roman reaches into his silk dinner jacket, my heart in my throat. *Is he going for a gun?*

Instead, he pulls out a cell phone. “Nine. One... You want me to press the one again? I will if I have to.”

Mikhail blows out a breath through his nose, shaking his head, but he holds up his hands. “Pidaras. Whatever you say, Roman. I will be talking to Apollo about how you treat his guests.” He turns to me and his lips twist into a snarl. “Shluha vokzal'naja,” he mutters as he grabs what's left of the tray of vol-au-vents and hurls it at the wall above me.

Apparently, he shouldn't have said whatever he just said.

Even Egor and Frankie look shocked as they silently turn their eyes on Roman. And following their gaze, I see the blind fury written on his face. Mikhail straightens his tie, attempting to look unflustered, but when he takes a step forward, it's like the spell has been broken.

As Roman thunders across the room, drawing his fist back, Egor and Frankie flee out of the open door, and I pull myself back into a crouch against the wall, drawing my knees up to my chest. Glancing at the kitchen, I see Becca, her eyes wide as she watches what's going on, and where the dealer went is anyone's guess. Roman's fist connects with Mikhail's jaw like a battering ram, Mikhail's head whipping around so fast it's surprising it doesn't break his neck. Blood spatters across the wall as I yelp in fear.

Even if he's offensive, I don't want to see him killed. But apparently that's not on the cards.

Roman grabs the back of his collar before he can turn back to throw a punch of his own, and an instant later he's hurled out of the open doorway, stumbling into the silence of the main casino.

"Nick. Boris. Get over here. See to it that this *gentleman* makes it to his car safely. Then do not let him back inside my casino. Never again. I mean it."

Roman smacks his hands together, as if ridding them of dirt, then huffs as he turns my way. He looks me up and down as I cower against the wall, sucks on his teeth, then stomps across to me, holding out his hand.

"Let me help you up, my sweet treat."

ROMAN

W *hat's she doing here? Who is she? Why have I never seen her before?*

I try to keep my grip gentle as I pull her to her feet, every instinct telling me to sling her over my shoulder and carry her back to my cave. I want to throw her over my desk and hold her down as I rut into her, letting her scream in pain and pleasure, letting the whole world know she's mine now, claimed, taken, and anyone who tries to come between us will regret it.

Unbidden, my fingers are already tracing her face, my thumb caressing her warm, soft cheek, fingertips gently tucking silky waves of dark hair behind her ears.

The greater surprise is, she's letting me.

Even leaning into my rough palm like a kitten asking for her master's touch. Is she even aware she's doing it? The way her wide, hazel eyes are staring at me, I'm not sure if she's eager or terrified, or maybe both.

All I know is, something has changed. Something fundamental. My complete lack of interest in sex, relationships, the normal human stuff, has been switched. I want her. I want us. And I'm willing to do anything to get it.

"What did he say to me?" Her voice is like water tumbling over small pebbles; calm, soothing, warming the heart I'd almost forgotten I had.

How did she exist in this world and I knew nothing about it?

Everything about her is fucking perfect, and there's no way I'll sully her presence with words that never should have been spoken to a woman, let alone a goddess like her. I don't even want to remember them. God has sent me an angel, and I'll be damned if I'm about to commit a sacrilege by disrespecting her, even indirectly.

I shake my head, drawing in a deep breath of her. "You don't need to worry about him. Never again."

She smiles and it spreads into her eyes, flecks of gold in her irises reminding me that she's treasure and I'm nothing but a scoundrel, just like my last name. *Schalk. Rogue*. I'm a pirate set to plunder her depths. I've caught the luster of her and my course will stay true.

"Is..." A new voice catches my attention and I turn, annoyed at the interruption. All I want is her. "...is everything all right?"

The girl looks vaguely familiar, like I've seen her around here before. Not one of my staff though. I make a point of knowing the names and faces of everyone that works for me, from management to cleaners.

So an outside contractor, then, someone that's been brought in for this occasion...

I shake my head as it hits me. How could I have been so stupid? I turn back to my girl and narrow my eyes. "You cooked all this?"

Her shoulders stiffen, like she's been caught doing something she shouldn't. "I can explain. Clarissa, she..." Her brows draw together and she falls silent, as if she might have said too much already, but she's said just enough.

I know exactly who she means. Clarissa is the caterer my father always hires for these things. I've seen her around here and I like her a lot more than I like the degenerates my father brings here for business meetings. She's professional and knows her work.

My mind is figuring it all out now, seeing the connections.

Clarissa obviously isn't here, or this curvy little beauty wouldn't be squirming like she's a fish caught on a hook. No. Clarissa was *supposed* to be here, but fate had other ideas.

Serendipity has put *her* in my path instead.

"I'm not...I mean I didn't c—cook *all* this," she says, her voice moving quicker than her mind so she's stumbling a little over her words. Fuck, but she's cute. I hope she gets flustered like this when she first sees me naked. When she first takes a hold of my cock. When she first tastes me. "I mean...I know C—Clarissa and Becca are your usual team for these things. Becca is here. She did a lot of the cooking too."

"Where's Clarissa?"

"She couldn't make it, she asked me to cover. I run my own catering company, and I'm studyin..." She trails off, biting into her bottom lip and averting her eyes.

I can hardly contain the grin. She's too good to be true. In my world, honesty comes at a premium. Most people I know lie as a habit, but her? Honesty is her first option, lies don't come easily to her lips. She's having trouble stopping herself telling the truth and it's sexy as hell to me.

"A businesswoman, huh?"

She nods, relaxing as I steer clear of pressing her for what she was about to say. "I'm just getting started," she tells me, pride in her voice. "I don't have the money to pay for staff yet so I'm borrowing Becca from Clarissa. Can I ask you a question?"

"My little sweet treat, you can ask whatever the fuck you want."

"OK..." She frowns, glancing at her friend, and I know I'm being too intimate but I don't give a fuck.

She needs to know she's mine now, and I'll be as intimate as I need.

"Who are you?" she asks, and I can't hold back any longer.

The laugh bellows from my chest as I pick her up off the ground as easily as if she was a doll, lifting her in hands that look like an ogre's fists against her perfection and dropping her into a seat at the card table. *Who am I?* Nobody I've ever met has asked me that before. If they're in my world, they already know who I am. Or else they don't want to know me and I don't want to know them.

"My name's Roman Schalk," I tell her, dropping into the seat beside hers. It creaks, but if it's strong enough to hold Egor Volkov's corpulence then it's strong enough to take the weight of my muscle. "You're in my casino, sweet treat."

Her eyes go wide, her pupils dilating, and my cock jumps in my pants. It's been hard since the moment I clapped eyes on her but now it's unstoppable. If I stood up right now, it would probably punch a hole right through my zipper.

"Oh my God..." She turns her head, looking toward the kitchen. "Becca, can you come help...Becca? I'm so sorry, Mister Sha..." She ends mid-word, her mouth still open around the vowel and all I can think is how those luscious lips would look wrapped around my shaft. "Shark?"

"Schalk. I'm German on my mother's side."

"Oh. I'm sure Clarissa told me... I thought she said..." She shakes her head. "I thought she said Volos. Never mind. I'll get all this cleared up right away."

As she starts to stand up, I grab her wrist, holding it gently but firmly, shaking my head. "No you won't. I should be apologizing to you, the way those men treated you. They're friends of my father's. His name is Volos. Apollo Volos. It's Greek. We're kind of a cosmopolitan family. And I'll be having words with him about the company he keeps. But for now, I'll get all this cleared up. I'm sure you've worked hard enough already."

"No, I..." She shakes her head, putting her hand to her temple as she takes a breath. "Please, let me clear up. You're being kind but I really need this work. If I clear up the mess, perhaps you could at least pay for the food? I know I shouldn't

be asking, but I can't afford to be out of pocket and I'm not sure if Clarissa—"

"Sorry, sweet treat, but no."

"Please. I'll do anything. I just really need—"

I put a finger to her lips, wondering how I'll ever take care of something as delicate as her. Hearing her plead is doing things to me, driving me crazy, but I won't despoil her the way I want to. She deserves silk and honey and feather pillows, not iron, salt and stone. I want to hear her plead as I lick her to a trembling crescendo, not pleading for a job she needs because the world is too cruel a place for someone like her.

"I said no. I'm sorry. I won't pay for the food." She looks on the verge of tears as I take her by the chin, lifting her face to gaze into those gorgeous gold-green eyes. "I'll pay you in full, for the whole evening. Triple whatever my father agreed. And I'll have someone else clear this all up. Becca can go home. She'll also be paid in full. As for the food, there's a homeless shelter and soup kitchen just down the block. If it's OK with you, we'll send anything we can't eat there."

"A soup kitchen? You...you'd do that?"

I nod, my hands slipping to her knees as I let my gaze slide down her body, memorizing every curve, every inch. She isn't model thin and I love that. I like that food is so important to her. Her hips are wide, her tits ample. She has thighs hidden underneath that skirt, not twigs. Everything about her is perfect.

"And I want to offer you a job." The words surprise me as much as they clearly do her. There is no job. I'm not looking to hire. But there's also no way I'm letting her go, not now. She needs the money, and I need to see her every day.

I need to see her when I wake up and before I go to bed. I need to see her for as many moments in between as God sends.

Fuck, if it wasn't likely to make her flee the country, I'd move her into my penthouse tonight.

"A...job? Me?"

“Yes, here in the casino. Private chef,” I say without missing a beat, the words rolling off my tongue as if every word is true. Like I said, lying comes easily to most people in my world. Only this time I’m using it for the right reasons. “It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while. I need someone who can prepare meals for me and my own personal guests. Someone I can trust.”

Her eyes narrow, her teeth chewing the inside of her lip. “Is this a joke?”

“No. I don’t joke.”

“And you trust me to do it, even though we’ve only just met?”

I nod, smiling. Her honesty is making my heart literally grow and come alive, the exact same effect she’s having on my cock. Anyone else in her position would be thanking their luck and shaking my hand right now. But not her. I’m here making up a staff position for her and she’s questioning whether I’ve got the right person for the job.

Oh, believe me, sweet treat, you’re the right girl.

“Yes, I trust you. Shouldn’t I?”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I’d like to change that if you’ll let me.” I decide to press my luck, moving forward, drawing close to her. Close enough that I can almost hear her heartbeat quicken. “Should we start with your name?”

“Y—yes?”

“Well?”

“Well...” Her eyes are wide, staring into my face. “S—Safi. I’m Safi.” She shivers as my hand runs down her side, gripping her hip. “Oh, God.”

“Roman will do. For now at least. So you’ll take the job?”

“No, I can’t. I mean, my apartment is in Dearborn. It’s too far. How would I even afford to come here every day? And

I'm in culinary school. I can't give up my course, it's important for my future."

Ah, so that's what she wasn't saying before. She's done all this and she's still in culinary school. She thought I'd be mad that someone unqualified was catering this evening but she's wrong. If anything, it only makes me fall in love deeper to know she's so motivated.

"There's a guesthouse here, next to the golf course. It's yours. As for your course, I completely agree. It's important for you to have that. You let me know the days and times you can't do and we'll work around it. I'll have a car take you to school and wait for you to bring you home."

Home.

This is her home now.

"I don't understand. Why are you being so kind?"

Does she really not know? Can't she feel the pure animal need seeping off me? It doesn't matter. She's mine. She was always mine, just that neither of us knew it. She doesn't completely trust me yet and that's OK, but she will.

I'll prove myself to her.

"The pay is two hundred and forty-thousand a year," I say, opening my hands as if the money might be right there for her to take.

"What? Two hundred and..." She has the look of someone who thinks they might be in a dream.

"To begin with. We can discuss a raise when you finish your schooling."

"I... I don't know what to say."

I shrug. "Say you'll take it."

As she stares at me, the door opens and I'm instantly on alert. If it's one of the Russians coming back, I won't be responsible for my actions. They're lucky they left here in one piece.

But it isn't.

Framed in the doorway, Jack Maine looks every bit the weasel he is. More than once I've had to step in to keep his grubby hands off the new hires. The only reason I keep him around is because he's a good cook, and because he was hired by my father when he used to run this place. They were on friendly terms, and my father trusted him. Too much in my opinion. Jack knows details about my father's business dealings that are better kept quiet, so he gets something of a free pass to work here despite his disagreeable nature.

"Boss, there's an issue with—"

"Wait outside."

A little grin spreads over his lips, and I almost lose my cool when I see his eyes dance over Safi's figure. Luckily for him, he immediately retreats out of the doorway, leaving the door open. Fine. He can hear what's said, I have nothing to hide.

I turn my attention back to her, fixing her with a hopeful stare. "Well, what do you say?"

"You're absolutely sure you want me working here?" Her eyebrows lift and I nod. "Then how can I say no? Of course I'll take it. When do I start?"

"As soon as you like. I'll help you move your things into the guesthouse and then I can show you where you'll be working."

"I don't know what to say. I... I'll help Becca clear all this up."

I shake my head. "I already said no. Becca can go home. I'll send someone to clear up the food and take it to the shelter." I glance at the doorway and a rumble of frustration falls from my lips. "I wish I didn't have to go anywhere, but I'm kind of in charge here. I won't be long, OK?"

She nods. "OK."

"Good. Wait here."

As soon as I'm out of the door, Jack grins at me. "New staff member, huh? I guess I'll be showing her the ropes then."

In an instant, my hand is at his throat, pinning him to the wall. “She won’t be working with you. She’s my personal chef.”

Jack’s face falls. “What? A personal chef?”

“That’s right. What did you need, Jack?”

“How about an explanation? Why wasn’t I told about a personal chef position? It should be mine, I’ve worked for you for— Fuck, Roman, I can’t...breathe!”

“You’ve worked for my father for years. The casino is mine now, lock, stock and fucking barrel. You’re lucky you still have a job at all.” I let him drop to the floor, ignoring him as he gasps for breath, just glad Safi didn’t have to witness any of that. “You’re not irreplaceable, Jack. Now show me what’s up and make it quick.”

SAFI

“**W**here do you want this one?” I can’t see the man’s face as he stands in front of me, a huge box marked *K* balanced in his arms.

There aren’t too many boxes. I don’t have that many things. But they’re also moving the furniture, beaten up as it is. And the fittings, which I’m not even sure are all mine but I’ve been assured it’s *taken care of*, whatever that means. If it was up to me, I would have just found a friend with a car to help me move everything from the apartment here to the casino guesthouse, but apparently it’s not up to me. Roman hired the removals company and told me it was *taken care of*.

As for the house, it’s amazing.

I could never afford anything like this. Guesthouse doesn’t even begin to describe it.

It’s all on one floor, with three bedrooms all fully furnished, with double beds, free-standing wardrobes and ensuite bathrooms. Then there’s a small library, which I’m absolutely thrilled about, stocked with books both old and new, a living room with the most comfortable corner sofa that you just sink into and a kitchen so well equipped there are some utensils even I’m not sure how to use.

And the view. *Oh. My. God.*

The view across the golf course is amazing.

Perfectly-manicured lawns, lakes, woods. You can hear the birds singing from the house! And in the other direction,

toward the casino, a swimming pool with sun loungers and hedges trimmed in that way where they look precise and sharp.

Apparently I have free use of *anything* I want while I'm here and I'm still wondering if I'm in a dream.

I mean, how is this now my life?

The grin spread across my lips is lost to the removals man, but I don't care. I've never been this happy before.

"Just put it in the kitchen," I tell him, dropping into the sofa. "I'll sort it out later."

"Uh...no ma'am. I can't do that." He shifts from one foot to the other, and I realize, thinking back, that none of them has actually met my eyes once, the whole time. "Sorry, but...Mr. Schalk's orders. We're supposed to help you unpack everything except bedroom stuff. If this is kitchen stuff I'm to put it away for you."

"But—"

"I'll put it all away in its proper place. Please, ma'am, I have a job to do."

I hesitate. I don't like just leaving everything to someone else. But he's right, it's just things for the kitchen, he can hardly get it wrong. "OK," I say, nodding. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." I watch him walk off toward the kitchen, and shake my head in disbelief.

It's weird, right? That they're not looking directly at me, and that they're so dead-set on doing everything for me, not letting me lift a finger. *Except bedroom stuff*. So those were Roman's orders. A wry smile spreads over my lips. What exactly does he think might be in my bedroom stuff? And what would he do to these men if they disobeyed him?

A little shiver runs down my spine. *Disobey*.

What would he do to *me* if *I* disobeyed him?

Whatever he did, I'd enjoy it. I'd ask for more.

Why would I even think that? He's my *boss*. I shouldn't be having thoughts like that about my boss. I mean, yesterday he

was being friendly, and nice, but that was probably just because I was upset, right? It doesn't mean he's interested in anything but my cooking. I need to hold myself together or I might lose the best job in the world.

I'm just chastising myself for being ridiculous when my phone starts to buzz in my bag. I reach in, fishing around for it as another removals man walks past me, carrying a box clearly marked "bathroom". My cosmetics, sanitary items and suchlike are in there, but that's another thing—when I got here this morning, the bathroom was already stocked with *exactly the same* things I buy for myself. I thought at first that there was someone else living here, but the removals men told me that wasn't the case, that I could choose any bedroom I wanted as Roman—Mr. Schalk told them, apparently—told them I was the only guest.

So why the cosmetics? Left here by the previous tenant who happened to have the exact same taste as me?

I put my hand to my temple as I look down at the phone, and my heart leaps into my throat.

Every other concern is instantly forgotten as I hit the answer call button.

"Anthea? What's wrong? Is Max OK?"

"Yes, yes. He's fine. Look, Safi, this is awkward. Teri hasn't paid me. It's almost a month late now. I can't... I have bills of my own. I've had the payment from you but it's not enough. I need to cover my expenses."

I squeeze my forehead, closing my eyes. Teri is my sister-in-law and this isn't the first time she's missed making her half of the payment. I know money is tight for her right now, but she needs to talk to me if there's a problem, not leave it until the nurse walks out on us both.

"I'm really sorry. I had no idea. How much do you need?"

There's a pause on the other end of the line before Anthea answers nervously, like the words are difficult to say. "Come on, Safi, you know how much my salary is supposed to be."

I squeeze my eyes shut against the tears threatening to escape. Anthea is my brother's nurse, and she's good at her job. She's also a really nice person that's put up with a lot, especially in the early days when Teri was a total mess. I hate doing this to her. Max needs around-the-clock care. We'd have difficulty getting someone else as good as Anthea for the money she's charging.

"I know, I'm sorry. But if I can just give you what you need *right now*, I can get you the rest—"

"Safi, I can't do it. Not again. Not this time. At some point I have to say no. I'm going to need the payment in full, or...I hate to say it but maybe it would be better just to put Max in a group home. You know, I'd help you to find a good place. It would be a lot cheaper."

"I can't do that to him. He's my brother, that's his home, his wife, his kids. Please, Anthea. I'll get you the money, you know I always do."

"Safi, I need it by tomorrow. There's another job I can go to. I can start right away but they won't wait for me. Come on, let's be sensible about this. I'd like to help you get Max into a group home before I go, you know I care about him. I'd rather leave knowing he's going to be cared for."

I wipe my eyes, glad right now that none of the removals men are looking at me. Why today, when I was so happy just a few moments ago?

Would it be easier just to put Max in a group home? Am I being stupid trying to keep this up? I try to convince myself that it would be for the best, but the truth is I know it's not. He was so proud of buying that place for himself and his family. He'd be devastated. It would kill him.

"No, I can't do it. Anthea, I'm begging you, please don't make me do this."

"I'm really sorry, but we have to face facts—"

"I'll get you the money," I tell her instinctively, then fall silent.

How? How will I get Teri's share of the money as well as my own?

It doesn't matter. I'll do it. I'll figure it out. I'll call the bank. Now that I have a job, they'll lend me the money, right?

"I want to say yes, but come next month aren't we going to be in this exact same position? I think we should just rip off the band-aid..."

"I'll get you the rest of this month's money and next month in advance. Then will you stay?"

"Obviously I would. You know how much I care about Max. About all of you. But how will you get that kind of money?"

"I've got a job now. It pays really well. I can afford it. I'll get it to you by the end of today, then you won't have to worry. Deal?"

"Safi..."

"Do we have a deal, Anthea? Please."

There's a slight pause. I know that Anthea loves Max as much as I do. She doesn't want to leave him, she just needs the money.

I'll make sure she has it.

"Anthea?"

"Sure, Safi. We have a deal. You promise I'll have the money today?"

"You'll have it."

We both sign off, friends still. I love my sister-in-law, but Teri has been a mess ever since the accident. It devastated her. Devastated us both. But where I managed to find a way to make my life work, she's fallen apart. I know how much she'd hate to see Max in a group home, just taking the kids to see him there during visiting hours. I also know my brother. I know how much that would hurt him and I can't do it.

Taking a deep breath, I find the number for my bank online and call, ready to plead with whoever I need to plead with.

Twenty minutes later, I'm in tears again.

The bank manager gave me a flat out no. Apparently, having this job doesn't make any difference until I've paid off my overdraft and shown with a few paychecks that I'm a good risk. By the time I can manage that, I'd be able to pay for the care myself out of my earnings, so what good exactly is that?

My mind is racing. I need to find the money, or I need to call Anthea and tell her to take that other job. It's not fair on her to keep her waiting. I drop back into the sofa as I think through my options, or lack of them.

It's a much nicer sofa than my ratty old one that's currently standing on its end beside me. I told the removals men to leave it, but apparently Roman ordered them to bring everything in my place, no matter what anyone else says. He's really taken care of me, it's obvious that he cares not just about my cooking but about me as a person.

Even if he doesn't like me in the way I think about every time I picture him in my mind, he clearly *likes* me.

But could I ask him to help me out again?

Is it pushing things to ask for an advance on my salary? I mean, one month would more than cover the cost of private nursing care. I could even afford to give Anthea a little bonus to say thank you for all she does.

Would it hurt to ask him?

If I explain the situation, he might take pity.

"Are you all OK to carry on bringing in my things?" I ask as one of the removals men walks past. "I need to head over to the Casino to see Roman."

"Whatever you need, ma'am."

"Right. Whatever I need."



I'M BREAKING out in a cold sweat as I stand in front of the door.

Roman Schalk, CEO.

This is my last option. If he says no, what will I do then? It took me half an hour just to find his office, because apparently only a handful of the staff have ever been here. Most people tried to help, but most of them had no clue where I should go. Although all of them said they'd met him.

All of them.

Which seems ridiculous for a casino this size, but also makes me doubt how much he cares about me personally. If he's personal with all his staff, then maybe I'm nothing special to him. Maybe he won't even recognize me, or has forgotten he even offered me a job here.

I raise my hand, wondering if I should knock again. Is that rude? What if he's in a meeting? Or...

No.

I shake my head, unwilling to even entertain the thought. The idea of finding him there with some other woman shouldn't even bother me. We only met last night. He hired me to do a job, to be a professional. He could be married for all I know.

My heart almost breaks. Married? *God, please don't let him be married.* I didn't think to check if there was a wedding ring.

I'm an idiot. I should turn around and walk away right now. Perhaps get out of the casino, go back to my own life. If I never see him again, I can't have my heart broken by the reality that I'm absolutely nothing to him.

That I'm just some girl he felt sorry for.

I bet his wife is amazing, too. A model or a ballerina or something. She is the patron of a charity, probably a homelessness charity, which explains why Roman—Mr. Schalk, as I should get used to calling him—wanted to give the food to the soup kitchen. It makes perfect sense now. It

would look great for her at the next charity gala. Perhaps they could mention it as an anecdote to get their rich friends to open their wallets and give a few million more.

But you still need that money, Safi.

Ugh.

“Roman... I mean, Mr. Schalk, it’s Safi.” I say the words as clearly as I dare through the closed door, ignoring the way my voice echoes in the wide, empty corridor leading to it. “Safi Osman... You hired me last night as a personal chef. I’m... I’m sorry to disturb you. I just wondered if I might have a word.”

No answer.

I should come back later. I know that. But I can’t because I need the money today. Right now, in fact.

Could I just go in?

I shouldn’t. I know I shouldn’t. But Max means more to me than my own discomfort, or even this job, as amazing as it is. For my brother’s sake, I’m willing to risk being bawled at, humiliated, fired by the man I want to...

My stomach clenches and I close my eyes as the idea comes into my head. I *should not* be thinking anything like that right now. It feels almost disrespectful to my brother to be thinking of my boss shoving me up against the wall of his office, to feel his huge, rough hands digging into my flesh, tugging at my skirt and blouse, tearing them in his eagerness to get me naked, to...

I force myself to take a breath, to blow it out slowly. I can fantasize later. Right now I have to focus.

“Mr. Schalk, is it all right to just—” I try the door and miraculously it opens.

Falling silent, I push it wide and look around the room. Spotlessly clean. Everything in its place. A noticeboard with phone numbers, dates and first names written into every available space. A laptop computer sitting open on the desk. A filing cabinet. A waste paper basket with only a few screwed-

up tissues tossed into the bottom. An aerial photo of the casino and golf course hanging on an otherwise empty wall. The gentle hum of the A/C keeping the space comfortably cool.

But no Roman Schalk.

I'll just wait until he gets back, then fall on his mercy.

In my defense I don't mean to do it, but when I sit at the desk the computer screen is *right there*. No screensaver. No password. Just open and staring back at me. My eyes are drawn to the spreadsheet because they're bored, that's all. The profit and loss account for the casino.

For a single day.

More zeros than I've ever seen in my life.

The money I want for Max is literally a teardrop in a wide, salty ocean. Roman wouldn't even notice it had gone. Surely he won't turn me down? Such a small advance, just to pay Anthea. He's not completely heartless. I'm sure of that. I saw it yesterday.

But what will I even say? How will I explain breaking into his office?

I shouldn't be here. I should go.

Standing up from the desk, I glance around for something to write a note. I'll leave it here and go, and when he comes back he'll make his decision. I'll explain that it's urgent and he can come over to the guesthouse. Or send for me and I'll come here. Whatever, I'll find the words. Other than the computer, the desk is literally empty, so I open the first drawer. There's a pen that looks like it cost more than my culinary skills course. Great. Next drawer, a pad of paper. I pull it out and—

Oh. My. God.

As the pad comes out of the drawer, it pulls the flap on a brown envelope that was sitting underneath it, and what I see inside has me gasping. A stack of hundred-dollar bills, all worn at the edges but neatly tied together with an elastic band. It doesn't even seem like I have a choice about pulling out the envelope. My hands are moving on their own. Flicking

through the money, I can't even begin to count it. Twenty thousand? Thirty? Fifty? I have no clue. Far more than I would need for Anthea and—

“Well, well, what do we have here?”

Looking up, I see the man from yesterday standing in the doorway. Not one of the ones I was catering for, the one that came in to speak to Roman and was told to wait outside.

“You...what are you doing here?”

“Call me Jack, sweetheart. And I can ask you the same question, don't you think?” His eyes glance down at my cleavage and my hand goes instinctively to cover myself.

Which is when I realize what it must look like.

My fingers go limp and the money drops with a slap onto the desk, sitting there like an accusation.

“I—I found it when I was looking for... I wasn't going to take any. I was just looking for Roman...”

“Mr. Schalk.” A sly grin slides over one side of his face, but only that side, like he's two different people.

One cruel, the other indifferent.

“Right... Mr. Schalk. I was looking for him and found this by accident.”

“You expect me—or him—to believe that? You've been here one day and you're already snooping. You're either a thief or an undercover agent. Are you working for the FBI?”

“What? No!” I start to laugh before I realize he's not joking. Seriously? The FBI? What would they want with any of this? Do I even look like an FBI agent? “I mean...neither. I'm not snooping, I'm just—”

He glances down at the money. “I suggest you put it back, sweetheart, if you value anything in your life. Put it back where you found it before Mr. Schalk gets here. If you're lucky, I won't say a thing.”

I nod. He's right. What would this look like if Roman—Mr. Schalk—walked in right now?

“Yes. Of course.” My nervous fingers struggle with the drawer, but I get it open and shove the envelope inside, then the money on top. Standing from the desk, my heart is thundering as I head for the doorway. I’ll wait outside and nobody ever needs to know—

Jack pushes the door closed behind him. *Click.*

“What are you doing? I—I’ll just leave.”

He shakes his head slowly, his tongue playing with the corner of his lips like he’s lost a bit of food there and is trying to find it again. “Not yet. Take your dress off.”

“What? No!”

“You want me to say nothing to Roman, you need to... sweeten the pot, so to speak. Don’t worry, you’ll enjoy it.”

This is not happening.

I need to go. I need to go right now. And I need to get that money for Anthea. I’ll find Roman, beg him to help me. “Let me go. I don’t have time for this.”

He steps forward from the door, and I back away, but he follows me across the room until the desk is hard against my buttocks. Nowhere to go. He reaches out and grabs at my hip, fingers twisting into the fabric of my dress.

“Come on. You want it. I want it. Where’s the harm?”

“I *don’t* want anything from you except to let me go.”

“Oh, don’t play shy with me. I know the effect I have on women. You’ll enjoy it, I promise. Come on, take your dress off, stop playing hard to get.” His hands slide to the hem of my dress and start pulling, and I wince as I have to touch him to push him away.

“Stop it!”

“Come on, sweetheart, let me see that lovely little wet patch—”

The slap surprises me as much as it does him. My hand connects sharply with the side of his face, making a sound like the crack of a whip as he cries out in pain. It gives me just

enough time to slip away from his grip, backing to the corner of the room.

I decide in that moment that If I have to, I'll fight him. I'll kick and scream and scratch until he doesn't want anything from me.

"You little bitch!" Anger flashes in his eyes as he turns back to me, rubbing at his cheek that's already coming up with red finger-shaped welts. "I'm going to enjoy making this painful for you!"

I snarl at him, a cornered animal ready to put up whatever defense she can, when the door flies open, slamming into the wall, and both of us turn. Suddenly, the room feels darker. Smaller. Roman takes up so much of it it's like there's less air and I'm struggling for breath.

"Motherfucker!"

"Roman, man, it was her, I..." Jack scrambles back, feeling his way along the desk as Roman stalks into the room, the scar on his lips twisting as he begins to seethe. "I caught her stealing from you! The envelope in your drawer... and then she offered me *sex* to forget all about it. But I told her... I told her... Agh!"

Roman's hammer-like fist pummels into Jack's face, throwing him back against the wall and I hear the shriek from my own lips as his blood spurts. Jack slumps, but Roman already has him by the collar, lifting him and leaning in, growling like a beast as his breaths hiss through his nose, head glinting like a knife edge.

"What were you going to do if I hadn't come in here when I did? Huh?"

Jack's feet are struggling against the wall, trying to find purchase, and his eyes land on mine. There's a plea in them, but what does he expect me to do? Stand up for him? I straighten my dress, feeling violated, and narrow my eyes as I set my jaw. He's on his own.

"Look at me, asshole, not at her. Now, tell me. What were you going to do?"

“All right, all right! Fuck! I wanted her. Can you blame me? Frigid little bi—” His voice turns to a high-pitched squeak as Roman tightens his grip. “But I’m telling the truth, man! She was going to steal from you! Do you really care about a little thief like her?”

ROMAN

I turn to Safi, still holding Jack against the wall. If I squeezed his windpipe just right, I'd kill him. I know that from experience. The only thing stopping me is not wanting her to see that. But I'll do it if I have to and he'll deserve it.

"Is this true?" I ask, fixing her with what I hope is a calm, considerate expression, but is probably more like being stared down by a Great White.

There are tears in her eyes as she shakes her head. "No. You have to believe me, I wasn't going to steal from you, Mr. Schalk."

What the fuck? Where's this Mr. Schalk come from?

My hand squeezes a little tighter around Jack's throat, hearing a satisfactory croak from his attempt to breathe. I'm pretty sure he has something to do with this new formality from her.

"She—was—man..." His voice is straining for air. "It's—like I said, I caught—her with the envelope."

"I just found it. I wasn't going to take it. I—" Her mouth is quivering and I want to say something to make her happy. But what? I need to know why she was here, need to know what's up so that I can fix it. I nod, encouraging her to continue, keeping quiet for once in my life to let her speak. "I'm sorry!"

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, she turns and starts to run, and my stupid methodical brain takes a moment

to catch up. It's great when I need to make a careful calculation of risks and rewards, not so much when the fucking love of my life is running to get away from me.

"Shit," I grunt, turning to go after her and realizing my arm is still attached to Jack's throat.

I growl, fixing my eyes on him. She's hurting. I have to go to her. This piece of garbage needs to be dealt with quickly.

"I told you, man, she's a little thief. I was just checking to make sure she wasn't FBI. I knew if I started touching her, she'd have to warn me off if she was... I was doing it for you!"

I let go and he crumples to the floor. Dealing with a dead body right now would just slow me down. "Get the fuck out of my casino. And don't come back."

"What?" His voice is a squeak, which suits him. Fucking vermin. "You're firing me? I've worked here longer than you have! I used to work for your father, I—"

"Get out, Jack. While you still have all your limbs intact."

I stare him down, counting down in my head. When I get to zero, all bets are off. I'll kill him, lock my office door and deal with the body later.

Sensibly, he doesn't say another word. I watch him scramble to his feet and head out of the door of my office, then I turn to the desk.

Opening the drawer, I find the cash out of its envelope, so it's clear some of what Jack said was true. The thick wad of bills, payment for an outstanding debt, thumps against the side of the table distractedly while I think things through.

My eyes wander to the laptop screen, the casino spreadsheet open and soothing in its way. I like things to be ordered. Neat little boxes delineating everything that goes in and out. It's not the only spreadsheet I have. There's another that makes me even happier, the one for my cryptocurrency investments. Crypto may or may not be on its way out, I've heard a few things about its environmental costs that have me questioning its viability, but the amount I've made over the

past two years since I started investing would make a stockbroker cry.

The way I feel about Safi doesn't fit with my usual style. Watch. Wait. Take things carefully and build things slowly. With her, I want it all right now. Looking down at the waste paper bin, I can't help wondering if she noticed the tissues discarded in the bottom. Evidence of exactly how much I need her. Not that I'm satisfied from jerking off, not anymore, not now that I've met her. It used to be enough for me, but Safi has changed that.

Every drop of cum is hers from now on. Everything of mine is hers.

That thought calms me and I nod. The way I feel about her might not fit into a neat little box on a spreadsheet, but it's real and valid nonetheless. Crazy as I am for her, I can't let her go, not now, not ever.

Tucking the wad of cash into the inside pocket of my sports jacket, I head out of the office, this time locking it behind me.



IF ONLY I'D been there.

I'm just hoping Safi fled to her guesthouse and not somewhere else in the city. I'd track her down either way. Fuck, I'd track her across the ocean if I had to. But I don't want to. I want her here, with me, preferably in my arms.

If I hadn't gone to see my mom earlier, none of this would have happened. I would have been in my office, Jack wouldn't have got his dirty little fingers on Safi and I would have already known exactly what she needed me to do to set her world right. But what nobody else knows right now is my mom is taking over the casino. I'm signing the whole thing over to her and becoming nothing more than a silent partner while I concentrate on the investments that make me happy. It makes perfect sense, she's a qualified accountant, but it will also cause ripples in the Volos "family". My father gave me

the casino because he needed to put himself at arm's length, but he still thinks of it as his.

And he and my mom aren't exactly the poster couple for amicable divorce.

As I head across the golf course, I make a silent promise to myself that I'll tell my father all about what's going on before it becomes common knowledge. I need to get the last few details ironed out, but in the next few days I should be in a position to make the deal public.

And deal with the fallout.

When I push open the door to the guesthouse, the first thing I see is the open suitcase. Then the tears.

Shit, I hate to see her like this. I step into the room, my instincts kicking in, wanting to go to her and soothe away all her cares, but she still shrinks back from me like I might be circling for the kill.

Fucking Jack Maine.

I have absolutely no doubt he's the reason for this reaction, but as much as it hurts I stop, standing still and hoping not to frighten her. Like a wolf trying to calm a bunny.

"Everybody out," I say, raising my voice for the removal guys I hired. They're doing as I told them and keeping their eyes off her, but I need us to be alone.

"Mr. Schalk?"

"Take the rest of the day off. Come back tomorrow."

Her eyes are wide and dripping as she looks up at me from her place on the sofa. Beautiful. Even sobbing, with those golden circles surrounded by red, puffy flesh, she looks like an angel. The tears seem to shimmer with a light of their own, like she's crying pure starlight.

I can't help myself. Despite the fear I see, I have to be near her. I cross the room and take a seat beside her, the sofa creaking under my weight. Without thinking, I reach out, but she flinches back and my heart cracks in response.

“Safi...”

“I know I messed up. I only came to the casino to find you. I wanted to ask...” She shakes her head. “What does it matter now? I’m packing up my things. I’ll go. You don’t have to say anything.”

“You’re not going anywhere, sweet treat.”

She meets my eyes, confusion written in the slant of her brows. “What do you want from me?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I don’t know the words, but...” I reach out again, and this time she finally doesn’t move away. She lets me take her chin in my massive paw, stroking a thumb under her eye, wiping away the tears. “What did you need the money for?”

“I wasn’t stealing it from you.”

“I don’t care about that. I’ve fired Jack. I know you weren’t stealing it. I know you. You wouldn’t. And can’t—you can’t steal what’s already yours.” I reach into my jacket pocket with my free hand, take out the money and put it on the sofa between us. “Is it enough? Do you need more?”

“Aren’t you firing me?”

“No, sweet treat. I’d never fire you. What’s the money for?”

“My brother. He’s...well, he was in an accident. A few years ago. It left him with difficulties, but he’s still my brother, you know?”

I nod. If there’s one thing I know about, it’s families.

“He finds it difficult to do some things for himself now, but he was always good to me. He took care of me when we both had nothing, saved the small amount of money our parents left for us and gave it to me when I needed to pay for my course. I...I have to take care of him. I want to. So my sister-in-law and I...we hired a private nurse. We pay half each towards his care, but she—” Safi meets my eyes, as if just realizing I’m there. “I shouldn’t be telling you this. It’s unprofessional.”

I turn her chin up so that she's staring into my eyes, and just drink her in for a moment. How can a beast like me ever think he would stand a chance with beauty like hers? It doesn't matter. I can't stop now.

"So is this," I mutter.

Taking her lips with mine, I let her know who she belongs to. The kiss isn't hesitant or gentle, it's needy and forceful. Our teeth clash as I lean into her, listening to her struggle for breath as the kiss deepens, feeling the softness of her lips, the eagerness of her tongue as it glances against mine then tangles, electricity firing through me at the contact.

"Oh, god," she whispers as we break apart.

My hand snakes down her wide hips, searching for the hem of her dress, wanting in underneath. I need to feel her, need to know if she's wet from thinking about me. She's mine and I'm hers, and she needs to know what that means.

"The money is yours, Safi. If you ever need more, just tell me. Or if I'm not here, take it. Whatever you need money for, just take it. I don't care. But you can come to me with any problems. You should know that. I can help if you'll let me." I take both her hands in mine as she stares, wide-eyed. Her breathing is shallow as she watches me slide down onto the floor. "Do you have to go right away, or can we..." I take my hands back and play with the hem of her dress, lifting it just a little higher "...take some time to get to know each other?"

She shakes her head, eyes pinned on mine. "It—it can wait. Anthea needs the money by the end of the day. D—Do you need me to make you something to eat?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

A growl falls from my lips as I finally lift the hem of her dress, listening to her gasp as I expose her creamy thighs, drawing the fabric higher, seeing the wet spot forming on her white lace panties. *Mine*. This pussy is mine. I can smell her scent already, musky and sweet as I draw closer.

"Oh, God. Roman..."

"Who does this pussy belong to?"

“Roman, I don’t know if I can—”

“Who?” I demand, looking up into her eyes and seeing her draw back.

Most people who look into my eyes see a monster. They see a giant of a man who’s willing to kill for what he wants, who’s cold and calculating and completely without remorse. She sees some of that, I know. She sees that I would murder for her. I would stand between her and any danger. I would die if I had to. For her, I’d do anything.

She sees that I am without remorse for what I want right now.

But where others see bitter cold, she sees heat. Need. An all-engulfing flame that burns just for her.

“Y—you, Roman.”

“Say it. Tell me this pussy is mine.”

“It’s yours. My p—pussy is all yours. God, I feel...” Her cheeks heat as my fingers drag over her crotch, pressing the damp lace into her slit. “Oh, God...I don’t know what it will taste like. You don’t have to—”

“You will know,” I tell her, and waste no more time.

Diving forward, I press my tongue against the soft fabric, finally tasting the salty-sweet flavor of her honey. It spreads over my taste buds like nectar and my eyes drift closed at the wondrous gift she’s giving me. I grip her hips as she arches back on a moan, throwing her head against the back of the sofa, as far as it will go, arms spreading, body shifting, but I have her tight.

“Roman...”

“Right here, baby,” I murmur as I drag her panties down with my teeth and finally see my prize.

Her cunt is tight, inviting, glistening with need. Tiny hairs spread in a neat delta above, on her mound, and I rest my nose against them, drinking in her perfection as I run my tongue through her dripping slit. Her labia spread around the tip of my

tongue, lubricated by her own juices, but when I touch her hot little nub, that's when she really goes off.

She's almost too strong even for me as she writhes against the seat, riding my tongue like it's the most natural thing in the world, and I love it. I love that my sweet treat is such a vixen with her own sexuality, that she wants what I'm giving her as much as I want to give it.

"That's it, baby, ride the wave," I whisper as I draw back, swallowing, letting her flavor engulf me completely. "Give me what you've got."

"Roman, I'm going to...oh, God, I don't think I can hold it back."

Has she done this to herself before? Has she touched herself and brought on an orgasm? Not like this, I can guarantee. She'll feel this one through the very soles of her feet.

"Don't try, sweet treat," I tell her as I add two fingers to my ministrations, lapping at her clit as I apply gentle pressure at her slit. "When you're ready, give it to me. I want it, baby, I want it all. I want to taste what you've got for me. If I could, I'd save some for later, just so that I can taste you again."

"Fu—fu—fu..." She pants, the words dying on her lips. "Roman, please..."

Her body begins to tremble, and I know she's right on the edge. I lean forward, drawing in a deep breath, enjoying the slight change in scent as she gets close to coming for me. She's holding back, has been for a while now, and that only tells me how strong she is, how much she wants this. She wants to ride the wave for as long as she can before letting go, but I'm a demanding partner and I know what I want.

Pressing my fingers inside the very edge of her pussy, I hook them forward and press hard, at the same time increasing the speed of my tongue, lapping at her clit. It's enough.

With a moan that turns to a high-pitched scream, Safi goes rigid, pushing back, and then gasps as liquid gold squirts from between her thighs. I feel her try to squeeze them shut against

the onslaught, but my head is right in the way and I have no intention of moving it.

My mouth clamps over her entrance as I suck and lick for all I'm worth. Her squirting nectar fills my mouth and I guzzle it down with enthusiasm. Every drop of her is my oasis in the desert. After two powerful jets of cum, she moans low and a steady trickle of thick, sticky liquid continues to dribble over my tongue.

I don't catch it all. I can't. I don't want to waste a single drop but I'm not fast enough and my mouth isn't big enough. Some drips down onto the sofa, and I trail my fingers through it, enjoying every moment.

"I'm sorry!" she says with a gasp. "I didn't...didn't mean to make a mess..."

Licking my lips, I push up off her thighs, climbing high up her dress until we're face to face. "Baby, it's perfect," I say, and press my lips against hers, letting her taste her own release. When we break apart, I meet her eyes and smile. "You made the perfect sweet treat, my little sweet treat."

SAFI

I can't believe this is my life now.

Looking at the perfectly-still open-air pool is like a dream come true. Somewhere on the golf course, a cuckoo is making its call. There's the quiet *snip, snip* of shears as one of the many landscapers trims the hedge that runs around the pool area, hidden from me here in my own little private world.

"So you're not living there anymore?" Clarissa says over the phone. "Did you have to move out for a reason? Is everything all right?"

A cool breeze makes me shiver in my bikini. But the heat of the sun replaces it so quickly I barely notice. "I tried to call you, but to be honest I haven't had much time to myself. Everything is amazing. It just happened so fast I...don't know where to start, to be honest with you."

"What? What happened so fast?"

"Well, you know I was doing the catering job for you at the casino."

"Uh huh. How did it go?"

The thought of the men, pawing me and making me uncomfortable makes me frown. "Let's not go there. Anyway, that's not important. I met someone."

"On the catering job?" Clarissa's voice takes on a higher pitch, obviously distressed. "You remember what I told you about those guys, right?"

“I know, I know. Don’t get involved. They all have wives.”

“But you did anyway?”

“Not with one of them, no...” I can barely keep the grin off my face as I think about what happened just two days ago. How my world completely changed when Roman made his feelings quite clear.

Quite, quite clear...

“You know the owner of the casino? Roman Schalk?”

“I didn’t know he owned it, I thought that was his father. Anyway I haven’t really spoken to him... Hold on, are you saying...?” I struggle to hide the grin as I take a seat on the nearest lounge, lying back to look up at the perfectly-blue sky. “Jesus, Safi, are you sure you want to go down that road?”

And like that, the moment is broken.

The way she said that last comment, it’s clear she doesn’t approve. She might as well have said: *have you lost your mind?* I’d hoped for a squeal of delight or a gasp of pleased shock or something.

But no.

She thinks it’s a bad idea.

“He’s a nice person.” The thought enters my mind of the money he gave me to pay Anthea. No questions asked, just handed it over and told me to ask if I needed more. “You said yourself you haven’t really spoken to him.”

“No I haven’t, but I know him by reputation and I’ve seen him around. And I’ve heard stories that would make you literally throw up. He isn’t a good guy, Safi. I mean, I guess he’s hot in a battered gladiator kind of way. Even I can see that and I’m not even into guys, but still, there are limits—”

“It’s not his looks,” I say flatly, starting to feel defensive. “I like him. I *really* like him. He’s moved me in here, on the casino grounds, and he’s given me a job. I’m sitting on the side of the casino pool right now. There’s a marble replica of Michelangelo’s David standing at the entrance to the pool, for God’s sake. He’s pampering me, he’s encouraging me with my

schooling. Honestly, you don't know him the way I do. He isn't a bad person."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. Silence, like she's taking in not just what I've just said but the way I said it. Then she draws a deep breath. "Wow, this isn't just a fling is it?"

"No. And I'd hoped you'd be happy for me." I fold my arms over my stomach, feeling deflated.

"Safi, I'm sorry. Of course I'm happy for you. I really am. It sounds amazing. But I wouldn't be doing my job as a friend if I didn't sound a word of caution, would I?" She pauses, obviously expecting a response, but I pout instead. "Would I? You would do the same for me, right?"

My mind goes back to another friend, years ago. Helena. And Brad. God, what a douchebag. Helena couldn't see it but he was playing her. He had three girls on the go at once. "Yes, of course I would," I mutter, remembering how that particular friendship ended.

"I love you, you know."

I nod grudgingly. "I'm glad you're watching out for me. I just... OK, is there anything I should know about Roman? Any dark secrets? A wife somewhere?"

"His family is *the mob*, Saff. I think dark secrets go with the territory. But no, not married as far as I know. Never has been. In fact, have you spoken to any of the girls in the casino? A few of them are convinced he's not interested in women at all. That he gets his kicks from making women want him and then destroying their lives."

I hesitate for a moment, brows drawing together in a frown. "That's a bit far fetched, isn't it?"

"Is it? He has the means if he wanted to. Are you sure he's interested in you in the same way you're interested in him?"

The way he used his tongue on me a couple of nights ago? "He's interested. Trust me."

"Have... Have the two of you sealed the deal then?"

I draw a deep breath, suddenly uncomfortable in my bikini out here, even though there's nobody to see the way my nipples are peaking. The thought of what I've seen under those pants going inside me is both terrifying and enticing at the same time. Would it even fit? Would we have to stop at foreplay because my body is literally too small?

Would it be like being impaled on a rigid iron spike?

And more to the point, would I mind if it was?

"No," I admit. We haven't actually done the deed, but I mean...there's no way, is there?

"Then how do you know?"

"He's... He does things. You know. I've never been able to..." My cheeks flame. "*You know*, Clarissa. But with him it's different."

She snorts a laugh. "Congratulations, I guess. Though if you'd asked me I could have helped."

"Clarissa!"

"Oh, not like that. I love you, Safi, but not in that way. Anyway, I'm spoken for." I can almost feel her rolling her eyes down the phone line. "I just mean I could have helped you find some toys. Explained a few techniques. Anyway, just because he's made you come it's not exactly conclusive, sweetie."

I hear a noise in the background, the voice of Tara, her girlfriend, saying hi. "I'm going to have to go, Safi, Tara has just got back. OK, I'll admit it, Roman Schalk doesn't sound like a *complete* asshole. Just don't give him your heart until you're sure he's going to treat it with the care it deserves, all right? And keep me in the fucking loop. I want details whenever you have them. Gotta go, bye."

After we sign off, I put the phone down on the floor beside me and draw a deep breath.

Ugh.

Don't give Roman my heart? It's way too late for that. He has it under the heel of his dress shoes and could crush it

anytime he likes. But so what? He has it and he *hasn't* broken it. He hasn't done anything to make me feel unsafe or insecure. He has treated me like a lady, like a princess in fact.

But he hasn't even tried to have sex with me.

But then, what does that matter? So he's being a gentleman, holding back and waiting. That's a good thing. I should be thanking my lucky stars that I've found someone who only wants what's best for me. He gave me pleasure and took none for himself. It doesn't mean he's trying to wind me up to a point where I've got a long way to fall.

Trying to push it out of my mind, I stand up from the lounge, leaving my towel there as I wander over to the side of the pool. Dipping my toe in the water, it's warm as a lagoon. Obviously, guests staying at the hotel have access to it whenever they want, but I guess they're more interested in gambling away their money in the casino, or playing a few rounds of golf, or being pampered in the spa.

All of which I *also* have access to if I want.

Climbing in, I'm glad to feel the water lapping around me. I decide to swim a couple of lengths, then I'll get out and head back to the guesthouse.

As I start to swim, I think about what Clarissa said. It's too far fetched. What evidence do they even have? They probably just see a man who isn't interested in playing the field, who could clearly buy his way into a lot of girls' pants anytime he liked and chooses not to, and make up stories in their own heads. Two and two to make five.

Anyway, he's way too hot for someone like me. If he wanted to play with someone, surely it would be more fun to go after a model or an Instagram influencer? Someone who has further to fall. Where's the fun in hurting someone who's lived her whole life at rock bottom?

Climbing out of the pool after five lengths, I collapse into the lounge, closing my eyes. It's been years since I've swum like that but I love the water. Perhaps if I stay here, in the guesthouse, I can swim a few times a week.

Stay here. Away from my own place. In the guesthouse.

No.

I'm not going to let my thoughts go down that road. He has me staying in the guesthouse because I needed somewhere, not because he wanted to separate me from everything I know.

“What the fuck? Safi?”

I open my eyes to find him standing right there. Roman Schalk, a tailored suit flapping in the light breeze. The outline of his cock is clearly visible beneath his pants, as it always seems to be when he's around me.

He looks fearsome, pain stretching his features as his chest rises and falls with each breath, fury in his pale blue eyes as he glances around. “What are you doing here?” he demands.

“You said I could—”

“What are you doing *here*?” he says again, and suddenly all my thoughts are thrown into turmoil. He sounds angry with me. Is this how it starts? Is he attempting to gaslight me? Make me doubt myself so I'm totally reliant on him?

“You...you said I could use the pool anytime I wanted.” I push out my chin, trying to sound sure, but I'm not. I don't like that he's upset. Am I that far gone already?

“I didn't know you'd... Fuck, that bikini hardly covers anything!” He glances around, then turns his head up above me. When I follow his gaze, I see the landscaper trimming the top of the hedge. “You!” Roman growls, and the landscaper almost falls, his eyes wide as he flails, only catching hold of the ladder just in time. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“Sir, I haven't finished—”

Roman's hands are balled into fists at his sides. “Don't even glance at her, motherfucker, or I'll have your eyes cut out. Get your tools and go home. And tell the others to do the same. You'll be paid for the whole day but if you're not out of here in five fucking minutes, I swear to God—”

“Yes, sir, of course.”

Roman stares at him, watching him clamber and clunk down the ladder with a look of fire, like he's half considering chasing him down right now. My mouth falls open, but I'm not even sure of the words to say. My nipples are like pebbles, my kegels battling against the rush that's threatening to overtake me. Why am I having this reaction to him going crazy at any male in my vicinity?

I should be furious, right?

I should be walking right out of here.

Instead, I'm sitting here almost in a puddle of my own making, waiting for him to claim me as his prize.

"What...what are you going to do?"

He turns his gaze on me, and I swear I see blue flames dancing behind his eyes. "That... You call that a *swimming costume*? Anyone could see you out here."

"There's nobody else here. That poor man. He wasn't looking."

"You're in full view of the casino windows. *Anyone* could be looking." He turns around, staring at the wall of windows as if expecting a whole audience.

Like people ever look at me that way... I'm nothing special. The way he's going on, you'd think I had to fight men off with a stick.

"Cover yourself up." He steps my way, picks up my towel and throws it roughly over me.

I have no idea what I'm doing when I kick the towel straight off. I guess I want to see how far I can push him. My gaze falls on the enormous shadow cast by his cock, and this time I don't drag it away. I want him to see where I'm looking. I even lick my lips a little to drive the point home.

"What's wrong with a bit of skin?" I tease. "Don't you like it?"

"Like it?" His mouth falls open as he follows my gaze, and I swear I see his cock jump a couple of inches under his pants, trying to get at me. "Every man who looks at you *likes it*."

Jesus, do you really have no idea what you do to any hot-blooded male that sets eyes on you? That body is made for one thing, Safi.”

“Really?” I frown, feigning bewilderment. Feeling brave, I let my legs fall open a little, aware that the wet bikini bottoms are molded to my lower lips, aware that the fabric is struggling to keep me covered up. “What is my body made for?”

“I...” He stares between my legs, his breathing so heavy I’m amazed he isn’t keeling over right now. “You...”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were drooling, *Mr. Schalk.*”

He finally drags his eyes away from my pussy, his gaze languidly sliding over my body until it hits my face. “You’re a little tease today, huh, sweet treat? I ought to—”

“What?” Finally I lean forward, placing my hand against the bulge under his trousers. It’s the first time I’ve touched what he’s packing, and it’s hard as a rock. Sliding my fingers down underneath, I give his balls a little squeeze, then grin. “What are you going to do?”

ROMAN

This girl has me by the fucking balls, physically, sure, but metaphorically too.

Right now I'm trying to decide if I want to grab up the towel and cover her over again, force her to keep it there this time, or rip off every scrap of the minimal clothing she's wearing and fuck her right here. Let the world know she's mine and if anyone wants her they'll have to go through me.

As she stands, pressing her tits out to reach up and grip my shoulder, my mind goes into overdrive. I know that if anyone is looking out of the windows they can see her right now. That very thought drives me crazy, making me growl as I grab her wrist, making her flinch.

I draw her hand up to my lips, kissing her fingers, the only way I know how to calm the beast that's raging under the surface. Remind him that she's delicate, that I could break her if I'm not careful.

And I will be careful.

Because no matter what else, I'll always protect her. She is my first priority.

My hands slide to her wide hips, making her shiver as the pool water follows my touch. I let my fingertips trail around, tracing the edge of her bikini bottoms.

She's a brat, driving me wild like this. She knew what she was doing, knows what she's doing now. She ought to be careful not to start something she can't finish.

“Sweet treat. There’s something I wanted to show you. In the guesthouse.” I’m desperately trying to hold onto the last shreds of civility within me.

“It can wait.” She stares into my eyes, her hazel irises glowing with a golden light of their own. “I want you inside me, Roman, I can’t wait any longer.”

My rough fingers are just inches from that sweet cunt of hers and it physically hurts to hold them back. I want to dip a fingertip in her, draw out that sweet honey I just know is trickling out right now.

But what she doesn’t know. What she can’t know, is what I have—had—planned for this evening.

The reason I was here in the first place, coming to find her.

In the guesthouse, the table is laid with the finest cuisine I could buy. I know she enjoys fine dining. I also know she loves orchids, which is why there are literally hundreds of bouquets in all colors placed throughout the house: electric blue, passionate pink, sunburst yellow and everything in between. Champagne, dessert, and a small white box.

Sneaking in wasn’t difficult, but keeping my focus right now is a struggle.

“Safi...” How do I tell her that tonight was going to be perfect? That tonight was going to be *the* night. I wanted to make our first time special, to let her know that I’m not like other men, taking what they can get. She was going to be treated right, I was going to make sure she knew that this is always. Forever.

“Your loss.” She shrugs and turns away, giving me an eyeful of that fine, round ass as she bends down to pick up her towel.

And I’m gone.

Stepping forward, I grab her up in my giant’s hands, slinging her over my shoulder in a single movement, ignoring the gasp of shock. “Don’t play with me, little girl. You have no idea what the rules are.”

I wrap my arm around her legs, almost keeling over from the musky, alluring scent so close to my face, and march down the side of the pool, heat raging in my face as I head for the guesthouse.

Safi pushes at my shoulders, squirming. “I think... I think you need to put me down, Roman.”

“You asked for this. I’m taking what’s mine.”

“Just... Just let me change into something more comfortable, OK?”

I shake my head. “No.”

There will be no more of this. She needs to understand that I’m the one in charge here. Not her. The way she’s teasing? The brattiness she’s suddenly displaying? That is a desperate plea for attention, and I’m going to give it to her.

When we reach the guesthouse I have to hold myself back from kicking the door down, reminding myself that I’ve already been in here, that it’s not locked. Turning sideways so that I don’t have to put her down for a moment, I push the door open and march inside, heading straight down the hall to the bedroom I know is hers.

I know because I’ve been in there. Dozens of times since she moved in here, whenever I know she’s not around to stop me. Looking at her things, burying myself in her scent.

“Roman, please...” Her voice no longer sounds playful. I think it’s just dawned on her that her actions are going to have consequences.

“Brat,” I mutter, and sling her down on the bed, watching the mattress bounce and wondering if it will crumple under my weight. Doesn’t matter, I’ll just buy a new one. Today, she learns what it is to be mine. “Roll over.”

She sucks on her bottom lip as she stares up at me through wide eyes, her breaths coming fast, making her body quiver. Is it the still-damp bikini or her body leaving wet marks on the sheets? Fuck. Is she ready for me? Was all this part of the game? Her foreplay? Making herself truly soaked so that she can take me inside?

I've never done this before.

Surprising, but it's true.

Sure, I fooled around a bit in high school, but it never went beyond touching and kissing and I was never really interested in taking it further. Not that I didn't have needs, or that I didn't like women. Just no woman ever had much of an effect on me, not until Safi.

She's different. She is what's been missing. I thought perhaps I was broken, that there was something wrong with me. Thirty-eight and still a virgin? Even when I had no end of very clear offers from employees, acquaintances, the daughters of business associates. But no, I wasn't faulty. I was waiting. Waiting for the right woman, the one I'm meant to be with.

Safi is that woman.

And now she's here. And I won't let her get away.

I watch as she slides to the edge of the bed, trying to swing her legs over the side. And a growl falls from my lips.

"I said roll over." Grabbing her legs, I ignore her shriek as I pull her back into place, then twist to flip her over on her front. "You need to learn to do as you're told, sweet treat."

Drawing my hand back, I let rip with a smack to her ass that sends her butt cheek jiggling as she cries out, her whole body tensing.

"Ow! Hey!"

"You tease and you make demands. That's fine, but you have to expect to be punished. You can't be allowed to get away with it, Safi."

I smack her again, but my face twists in fury. The bikini bottoms that seemed so infuriatingly skimpy out by the pool are now covering too much. I need to see what's mine.

"Roman—"

I grab the waistband and tug, hearing the elastic snap as her ass is exposed. Pushing her legs apart, I draw a deep, calming breath as I finally see the slickened lips of the world's

most perfect pussy. “This is mine, Safi. Tell me it’s mine.” When she doesn’t respond quickly enough, I land another slap on her butt, satisfied this time to see the red mark rising on her cheek. I rub over it gently and she sighs, her shoulders relaxing as she rolls her hips, exposing herself more as her back arches. “Say it, sweet treat. Tell me this is mine.”

“It’s— Oh, God.” She puffs out a satisfied breath as I slip a finger into the groove of her ass, a little whimper squeaking from her lips. “It’s all yours, Roman. Please... More...”

She wriggles against the bed as my finger continues its journey, down to her slit, spreading her thick, creamy honey along her labia.

“Ohhhh...”

I bring my finger up to my lips and draw a long inhale of her scent. She’s ready. Desperate. I lick away the moisture, tasting her need. “I don’t like you displaying yourself for anyone to see, sweet treat. You know, if I knew anyone had seen you like that, I’d...” I close my eyes, the fury rising again at the mere thought. “I’d have their eyes. I mean it. I’m not even sure that would satisfy me. Other men don’t get to see you like that from now on. You’re mine.”

She giggles into the pillow. “Kind of controlling, aren’t you?”

“When I need to be. Tell me you understand.”

“What if I want to go for a swim? What then?”

I draw a breath through my nose. That was my fault. I shouldn’t have told her she could have her run of the casino. She should never be out of my sight.

Glancing around the room, I think about where I could install cameras so that I can keep watch on her all day and night. Soon, I’ll have her with me at every hour. But until then...

“I’m going to have a pool built here at the guesthouse. It will be private, just for you and me.”

She chuckles, her whole body shaking alluringly. Then when I don't laugh along with her she falls silent. "You're serious?"

"Yes. I'll allow you to use the other pool for sitting, but only when I'm with you. And you'll be wearing a sarong."

When she hesitates, I wonder if perhaps I've pushed too far, if my obsession goes too deep for any woman to accept. Perhaps she's about to tell me to go to hell, storm out. Perhaps I'll never see her again.

My heart almost shatters at the thought.

No.

No, I'd chase her down to the ends of the earth if I had to. Where could she run that I couldn't find her? She needs to know, this is the way things are going to be.

She rolls over and meets my eyes, searching my face, then reaches down and pulls her bikini bottoms into place, despite the elastic no longer holding them there. "If you're going to make demands, you need to make me *yours*. It's no use saying 'mine' and telling me what to do like I'm some sort of servant. That's not what this is and you know it. If you want more of a claim on me than just being your private chef, you need to show me, Roman. Actions speak louder than—"

"I've been trying to hold back," I admit.

"What?"

"You have no idea how much I've wanted to bend you over and fuck you until you're screaming for mercy. You have no idea how much willpower it's taking just to stand here when all I want is to..." I let out a deep breath, closing my eyes.

Fuck, she's right. Words aren't enough for this.

Reaching forward, I run a finger through her slit on top of the bikini bottoms, watching the way they mold to her labia. Her eyes drift closed and a little mewl escapes her lips.

"Fuck, you're beautiful."

Her eyes can barely focus, but she meets mine nonetheless. “You really think so?”

“I know so. I’m going to fuck you now. I’m telling you because it’s the polite thing to do, but there isn’t really a lot you can do about it.”

“Maybe I don’t want to do anything about it.” She shrugs, arms drifting to her sides, gripping the sheet in trembling fingers. “Maybe I want to be taken and not asked for permission.”

“That so?” I climb onto the bed, leaning over her, caging her with my arms. My cock is painfully hard, held back by the fabric of my pants. I brush it against her slit and nearly cum from that contact alone. “I’m going to ask you something, Safi, and I want you to be honest. I need to know the truth, even if it’s not what I want to hear. Does that make sense?”

She nods as she rocks her hips, rasping her pussy against the head of my cock. “I’ll always tell the truth.”

“Good answer. I need to know, have you ever had sex with another man? Has any other man ever got his cock inside you?” I try to keep my words even, my tone under control, even as I prepare myself for the answer.

If she says yes, I’ll have to deal with that. I won’t like it, not one bit, but I can handle it. I’ll hire someone to track those men down, persuade them to move to the other side of the world or eliminate them entirely. I don’t much have a preference, but I guess less bloodshed will be better in the long run.

She stares silently as I hold my breath, then shakes her head, nothing but honesty in her eyes. “No. I’ve never even...” Red lights along the tops of her cheeks. “There hasn’t really been anyone I’ve been that close to, and from a young age I knew I wanted to focus on my career. Nobody distracted me from that until...”

Until me.

Fuck, yeah. That’s better than I’d hoped for, more than I have a right to ask.

“Thank God for that, sweet treat.” I breathe a sigh of relief, and push the thoughts of murder and dire threats out of my mind. I’ll never tell her what I was thinking, she doesn’t need to hear that. “And your career is important to me too. I’ll do everything I can to support it, but right now I’m just praising Jesus that you never felt this with anyone else. And here’s the thing, you’re not the only one of us that’s never had that. Truth is, baby, I never thought I’d find a woman I’d have this with. There haven’t been any women that turned my head. I thought I’d just be focused on business for the rest of my life. I don’t know, maybe it’s because of the way my dad went through women when I was younger, I didn’t want that for myself. Whatever it was, I just never did it. I’m a virgin, just like you.”

Her eyes widen, her mouth falling open just a fraction. “Really?”

“Yes, baby, really. No secrets between us, right?”

“No secrets. It’s just, I assumed...”

“I know. But you’re the only one. Now and forever, it’s you and me, Safi.”

With that, I lower myself down her body, kissing her nipples through the fabric of her bikini top, then kissing her stomach, her belly button, the indent beneath her belly where it meets her pelvis. So smooth, so perfect. Lowering the bikini bottoms, I kiss the delta of hair there, then move to position myself between her legs. “I’m going to get you so wet, baby, but I can’t promise it won’t hurt when I go in here.” When I press a finger into her hole she cries out, pelvis shifting against the intrusion. “You’ve seen how big I am, I’m afraid that’s an all over thing. It’s just the way nature made me.”

“I know. I know it will hurt. I still want it.”

A grin twists one side of my mouth. She’s so much stronger than she looks. “Even if it hurts this time, it won’t hurt forever. We’ll learn together, we’ll teach each other. Sound good?”

“Yes. Please...” She arches her back, bringing her pussy up to my face. I can smell the salty sweetness of her as I lean

forward, running my tongue through her warm groove. “Delicious, baby. You made this all for me and I’m going to enjoy it.” She moans as my tongue presses harder into her cunt, as I wrap my lips around the length of her slit, kissing, massaging, sucking. She begins to undulate as I take handfuls of her generous ass, pulling her higher and harder onto my mouth. The flavor of her spreads over my tongue and I pull away, kissing lightly on her thighs, her pussy lips, reveling in the sight of her cum trickling down from her hole.

“Roman, please... put something inside me. I need it. I need you.”

“Such a greedy little girl.” I grin as I press my tongue to her lips, putting pressure on her asshole with my thumb, fingers entering her warm virgin pussy. “So tight and fresh. This cunt is going to damn near shear my cock right off, isn’t it?”

She laughs, a high-pitched desperation of sound. “Why don’t you try it and find out?”

“You think you’re ready?”

“I think I’ve been ready for you for days. I would have let you take me that first night if you’d asked.”

“Is that so?” I climb back onto the bed, straddling her on my knees as I pull my shirt up over my head. Safi’s eyes glance down at my body, and I realize suddenly that this is the first time she’s seen me like this, without anything on my top half.

I’m aware that my body isn’t traditionally handsome. I’m not all chiseled muscle and twink-thin belly, like a movie star or a male model. The body I have wasn’t created in a gym but out on the streets with my father’s men. Once again I have a flash of doubt that perhaps she’ll run from me, that perhaps my life isn’t for her, but when she meets my eyes all I see is wonder.

“Where did you get those tattoos?”

“These?” I trace the lines of a haphazard skull, a playing card, a switchblade. They aren’t professional. They were put

there with makeshift tools, hurried and sketchy. “Baby, I wasn’t always a respectable, upstanding citizen.” I laugh, shaking my head, wondering if that’s what I am now. I’m trying, but the life I was born into isn’t easily cast aside. “There was a time when I ran with some pretty bad people. Served some time in prison. Nothing too heavy but I won’t keep it a secret from you. This one.” I twist, pointing to the horse’s head under my left arm, near to my shoulder blade. “This one I got to remind me of the time I stole a horse out of the back of a trailer.”

I see her eyes go wide, and I know what she’s thinking, but I shake my head, grinning.

“They were taking him for slaughter. As far as I know he’s still living happily on the retirement farm I paid to take him in.”

“You rescued a horse’s life?” A smirk pulls at the corner of her lips.

“Yes, baby. But the authorities called it theft. I ended up in a cell. Not for long, but it did teach me one thing.”

“What was that?”

“Laws are less important to me than morals.” I unfasten the button on my pants and pull the two halves apart, my cock heavy and hard beneath. Safi props herself forward on her elbow and runs a finger down my belly to the V of my hips, tugging at the waistband of my boxers, taking a peep inside, as if she can’t already see what’s waiting for her.

“Are you really a virgin?”

“I said so, didn’t I?”

She nods, pulling my cock from my boxers and gripping it with her fingers. When she runs her fingertips along the shaft, I feel the tingle of her touch along every inch, making me close my eyes against the urge to cover her in my cum right here and now. “It just seems so unlikely. I’m sure you could have any girl you wanted.”

“I never wanted anyone else, sweet treat.” I tilt her chin so that she’s looking into my face. “The only girl I want is you.”

With that, I put my hands on her shoulders and push her back down onto the bed, tilting her back and running my eager cock through her slick heat. Propping myself on my arms, as if I'm doing push-ups, I kiss her tits, her chin, her nose, then stare into her face while she smiles up.

“Are you ready for me?”

She nods. “Mmm hmm. I want to feel you.”

She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me down to her and lifting her ass at the same time. I feel her opening against my cock, teasing me, and I can't hold back any longer. Holding her firmly in place, I tilt my hips forward, putting the head of my cock against her pussy and her mouth drops open.

“It's...”

I nod. “Big. I know. But you'll stretch to fit it, baby. And once I'm inside it will feel good, I promise.”

Kissing her hard, I thrust my hips, letting my cock slide through the moisture at her opening. The underside rasps along her labia and she moans into our kiss as my balls come into contact, dick resting on her mound.

“Relax, baby,” I tell her as I reach down, gripping my shaft in one hand and spreading her natural lube all over. I slide my fingers along her lips for more lubrication, then spread it over my cock. “We can do this,” I say, meeting her eyes, and we both begin to laugh.

“I want you,” she whispers, and I lean forward again, kissing her chin, her proffered throat.

“I want you too, Safi.”

When I rock my hips again, drawing my shaft back, she stills, holding her breath, and we both know what's coming. In a gentle thrust, I press the head of my cock to her tight slit, feeling the resistance like a solid wall.

“Relax, baby,” I tell her, meeting her eyes, and she nods.

When I finally slide inside, it's so tight I start to see stars. I grunt with the effort as Safi moans and wriggles. I can only enter a short way before her muscles block me, but as she

moves she naturally opens up, and with careful movement of my hips I'm able to maneuver further, further. I cut off her gasp with my lips and draw back, then thrust forward harder and drive my way in. My first experience of a woman's pussy, and I'm glad I waited for her. She's perfect, playful, forgiving. Her groans and gasps tell me it's not comfortable yet, but the sweat beading on every inch of her body tells me she's enjoying herself just as much as me.

As I move forward and back, I'm memorizing every bump and ridge. I whisper words of encouragement as we move together, our bodies becoming one. Gripping her beneath me, I hold her steady as she tries to undulate, thrusting still, driving deeper, listening to the shift of her breathing from slow moans and deep breaths to quick gasps and low mewls of pleasure mixed with pain. I know we'll be making a mess of the sheets. Her virgin blood, our bodily fluids.

I don't care.

As my cock is sheathed by her, I start to find my rhythm, knowing this is my home. This is where I belong. There is nothing between us. Nothing to stop my seed when it's released. It's the way it needs to be, the way we both want it. The thought that tonight I might bind her to me in more ways than one drives me wild.

"No other man will ever experience what I'm feeling right now, Safi. And no other woman will ever be where you are. This is us, forever. We're bound to each other now, you understand that? Your pussy is mine to protect and love, and I'll bring it every pleasure. My cock is yours to take care of, for the rest of our lives."

She leans forward and kisses me absently, holding onto my lips for strength as she pants and sweats, hips shifting, raising her legs to wrap around my waist and force me deeper inside her body. Tears leak from the corners of her eyes, and I hate that this hurts her but I know it's what we both want. She grips my neck, nails scoring my flesh, and I don't even try to force her away. She needs this. I am her raft in the chaos storm of extreme pleasure, and I know that any pain she gives me is nothing compared to what she's enduring on our behalf.

“I never want anyone else,” she moans. “Roman, I never want anyone but you. I want this. I want us.”

We move together, thrusting and grunting, screaming and moaning. Learning together how to do this, how to make it work. And I can say we’re both naturals. Neither one of us wants to be the first to release, but when I feel Safi’s breathing change pace I know that she’s getting close. I bite down into her neck, making her moan and wriggle beneath me, and it draws more sensation from every nerve in my cock as she twists. I’m nearing the edge now, unable to hold back much longer. I don’t want it to be over, but the crescendo is building like an orchestra in the final act. Everything is coming together. The crash of cymbals, the blare of trumpets, the gentle sigh of strings.

I’m ready. Safi is ready.

“Now, baby,” I whisper. “Come with me. Do it now.”

“I love you...”

“I love you too, baby.”

With that, we finally crash over the edge of the cliff, falling together as we twist and writhe. The pleasure-pain through my cock is exquisite, as it’s almost torn clean off by her spasming walls. The sound of her screams in my ears will stay with me to the end of my days. She’s everything. Everything I’ve ever wanted, everything I’ll ever desire.

I pump round after round of my thick cum deep inside her as she trembles, sending it into battle to find its home.

Finally, covered in sweat, we both collapse together. I grasp her tight in my arms, unwilling to let her go, unwilling to slide out from my new home inside her. Her eyes are squeezed tight against the sensations, but I kiss her anyway, tasting her sweet lips as I whisper words of encouragement and stroke her hair, telling her it’s all right. That everything is perfect.

That she’s mine, forever.



HER POOR PUSSY was battered to hell and back.

After we lay together for a while, I lifted her in my arms and carried her through to the bathroom, sitting her carefully on the side of the bath while I ran water and added bubbles until it was almost to the top. Then I lowered her gently in and bathed her all over, carefully massaging between her legs while she winced but insisted she was fine.

I whispered soothing words throughout, and refused her attempts to get me to join her. This was about her, about caring for her. Once we were done, I toweled her dry and carried her back to the bedroom, selected the softest gown I could find from the wardrobe and dressed her in it, then returned to the bathroom and showered myself.

Heading back through, I now find her sitting on the edge of the bed, looking like a nine-course meal, the gown open down the front while her eyes meet mine, the offer clear in them. It makes me pause, taking a moment to drink her in while I stand there in my boxers, my cock responding even if I'm determined not to.

"No, baby, not right now." I cross to the side of the bed and pull the gown closed, tying it at the front. The loss almost kills me. "You need to eat and drink."

Safi shakes her head. "I'm not hungry. Not for food anyway."

"It's my job to look after you from now on, sweet treat, even when both of us would rather be doing something else. Come on, downstairs. You need to keep your strength up."

She grumbles, but doesn't put up a fight when I wrap her in my arms and lift her to my chest like the doll she is. As I carry her down the corridor, I can't help thinking about the fact we just had sex with no protection. What if Safi is pregnant already with my baby? Fuck, that would be huge. Life changing. The idea makes me want not just a baby but

babies with her. As many as we can get. Hell, fill my life with little lives of my own making.

And my less than savory life?

To hell with it. I'm out. As of right now, I no longer have anything to do with my father's business. I was already signing the casino over to my mother, already looking for a way to distance myself. It makes sense to make a clean break of it.

"What's all this?" Safi's eyes turn to dinner plates as she glances around the dining room. I almost forgot what I had planned. Food that's long since gone cold, champagne in a bucket of melted ice, only one candle left burning, now down to its last half inch of wax. "Did you...?"

I nod, chuckling at the irony. "I was hoping to bring you back here tonight. I was going to make it so special for you. Food cooked that you don't have to do yourself, all the trimmings."

The best laid plans.

"You did all this for me?"

"Well, I'm not the world's greatest cook. I had help. But yes, it's for you. Happy three day anniversary?"

Safi snorts a laugh and her hands tighten at the back of my neck as she pulls herself in close, pressing her lips to mine in a sweet kiss. "It's perfect." Her lips twist as her brows draw together. "But I don't think it's going to be edible anymore."

"No. How hungry are you?"

At the word *hungry*, I hear her stomach groan, but she shakes her head. "I don't need anything. I have to watch my figure."

Not on my watch, you fucking don't.

I grab her chin between my thumb and forefinger, making sure she sees how serious I am when I say the words, "None of that nonsense with me, sweet treat. You're perfect. Your figure is perfect."

“But—”

“No buts. You’re perfect just the way you are and if you ever did put on weight I’d love you just as much. Don’t ever let anyone tell you any different. I’m a big guy, I can handle a properly-proportioned woman. Now, judging by the way your stomach groaned, I’m guessing you’re actually famished. Right?”

She nods, her mouth wide, then laughs as she glances at the table. “Actually, I could eat all this right now. Cold or not.”

“Good. But this is ruined. What’s your favorite takeout?”

“Chinese. But we can just have salad, there’s—”

“Chinese it is. Go sit down and I’ll place an order.”

SAFI

The thumping sound reminds me of the headboard knocking against the wall last night. The grin spreads over my face as I remember it, coming slowly out of the sweetest of dreams, about Roman, about us, about a life we might have together.

Children.

Could we have children together? Does Roman even want that? I do. I've never thought about it before but now that I'm with him I know he would make the most wonderful father.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

He was such a study in contrasts last night. Railing me like an animal in heat one minute, making me wonder if the bed might crack beneath our attempts at amateur gymnastics. Then the next minute, attentively feeding me Chinese food, giving me water, bathing and soothing me.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

What is that noise?

I drag myself the rest of the way out of sleep, opening my eyes to see him lying beside me. My Roman gladiator. Even in sleep he looks dangerous. But where others might see the ugliness of war, all I see is beauty. The scar cutting through his lip is silver in the dim morning light through the French doors that lead out onto the decking area. Silver like an angel's kiss. The thought makes me sigh and I lean over to place my lips

against his, hearing him murmur, his arm instinctively wrapping around my middle, pulling me close.

But if he's here, that noise must be someone else, right?

I glance around, hearing the thump come harder this time. The front door. Someone is desperate to get inside, desperate enough to—

The crack and creak of wood splintering makes me jump back, a squeal of fear escaping my lips. A second later, as I drag the sheet up around my neck, I hear footsteps storming down the corridor toward the bedroom. Roman's eyes shoot open and he sits up, putting himself in my way just before the bedroom door flies open and a large man with dark eyes walks in as if he owns the place.

“What the...” A growl rumbles through Roman's chest as I pull the sheet up further, covering my bare breasts from the intruder and...another man, coming in behind him. One I recognize. How could I possibly forget the guy who tried to force himself on me just a couple of days ago? “Dad? How dare you just storm in...get the fuck out!”

Dad?

This is Roman's father? What did he say his name was? Apollo? This is the man whose *friends* I was serving at dinner the other night?

He grins, glancing my way with a lascivious look. “So it's true. You have been moving hookers into the guesthouse. Finally discovered you're a man, huh?”

Jack, the man who caught me in Roman's office, tries to hide the satisfied smirk as he glances my way, crossing his arms over his chest.

Roman growls. “Get the *fuck* out. Both of you.”

“Roman, what's going on?” I ask, grasping his arm for strength.

“Nothing, baby. They're leaving.”

“Son, get rid of the whore and let's talk.”

Roman's reaction makes me jump. In an instant, he's out of the bed, totally naked and still hard for me, I see. But he doesn't seem to care. The look of fury on his face could melt stone as he flies across the room, arm raised, and punches his father square in the face.

The force of the impact is like a nuclear explosion. I hear myself yelp as I feel it from across the room. Apollo crumples instantly, stumbling sideways and falling to one knee as the world falls silent.

Then I watch him spit a mouthful of blood onto the carpet, grabbing a handkerchief from his suit pocket. But if I expect him to apologize, I'm wrong. He starts to laugh as he wipes the blood away from his mouth, and Roman seems to double in size as he pulls himself up at the sound, the muscles in his back tensing to cords as he towers over his father.

"Say that again, motherfucker. I fucking dare you."

"*Motherfucker*. Interesting choice of words, *son*. Still, I didn't realize you still had that in you, Roman. It's good to see." Apollo turns his head, a smile spread across his bloodstained lips. But when Roman raises his fist for another attack, his father's face falls. "All right, all right, you win. I apologize, of course. You don't want the girl to know she's just fluff. You want to get laid a few more times before she's scared off by your reputation. I get it. But you and me need to have a talk."

Just fluff.

The words echo in my head.

Get laid a few more times before she's scared off.

Is that...? No. Roman wouldn't... But didn't Clarissa try to warn me?

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Oh, we have plenty we need to discuss. Like it or not."

"Not," Roman says, raising one enormous arm to point at Jack. "Not while he's here, anyway. Get him out of here and we'll talk, but I don't think you'll like what I have to say."

“Yes, Jack said you’d fired him. I told him you’d never fire a *friend* of mine.” Apollo finally rises to his feet, clearly feeling like the situation has calmed. He glances at the handkerchief, turns his nose up and stuffs it into his jacket pocket. “Did you?”

“This is my casino. Hiring and firing is my business, not yours.”

“And who gave you this casino, son?”

“You did. Which is the only reason you’re not being carried out on a stretcher right now. But him? He’s the shit I just wiped off my shoe.” Roman turns to Jack, a snarl on his lips. “Ten seconds and I’m calling security. Ten. Nine.”

Jack, clearly uncomfortable under the scrutiny, glances down, but when his gaze finds Roman’s hard cock his eyes jump back up again, staring at Apollo. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

Roman’s father simply chuckles. “What can I say? He’s right, it’s his casino.”

“Five. Four.”

“Better get going,” Apollo says with a shrug. “Security in this place has been known to get...rough with trespassers.”

“What? This is what I get for fifteen years of loyal service?”

“Two.”

I wonder, as Jack’s eyes go wide, whether Apollo has any friends at all. It’s clear that he doesn’t care what happens to this man. More like, he was just an excuse for coming in here today, which means there’s something else going on. Jack has overstayed his usefulness.

Suddenly, the feeling comes over me that I’m caught up in the middle of something, and that I’d be better off anywhere but here. My heart thunders. *Just fluff*. I’m just fluff. Clarissa was right all along, wasn’t she? And I didn’t listen. Who would know Roman better than his own father?

“Time’s up.” Roman grabs Jack by the shoulder, but he pulls away, scrambling back into the corridor.

“Get your hands off me. I’m going!”

Roman takes a step forward, growling, but I hear Jack’s faltering steps fleeing toward the front of the house.

“Good,” Apollo says, nodding with satisfaction. “Now that he’s gone, we need to talk about the Russians.”

Roman turns around slowly. “I have nothing to say about that. They were disrespecting Safi.”

“Son, I know this is new for you but you really need to learn to separate business and pleasure. Our associates can get a little...merry, I’ll admit, when they’ve had a few drinks. But throwing them out of the casino? You talk about respect, but you show none to me or my business partners. Now, I can smooth things over, but they are going to want compensation. Another night here, perhaps some...” He pauses, licking his lips, his teeth still red with blood. Then his eyes slide my way and a chill runs down my spine. “Perhaps some female entertainment?”

Roman steps between us, slamming his father back against the wall. “Eyes on me, Dad. I mean it.”

“Fine. But you see my point.”

“No. What I see is you trying to muscle in on a business *you* decided to step back from. Need I remind you why you chose to take a back seat? Perhaps I should give the FBI a quick call, they could look into these *Russian friends*, add them to their list of persons of interest.”

“You’re threatening to turn on your own father? You wouldn’t fucking dare! Do you know what we did with rats in my day?”

“Do your worst.”

Apollo huffs in frustration. “I should have beaten some sense into you years ago. Spare the rod, spoil the child, as they say. Perhaps if I hadn’t spared the rod you would have dipped

your wick in something sooner and not got so smitten over a second-rate piece of ass like—”

Roman’s body moves far faster than his size would suggest. His father’s words are cut off by a groan as Roman’s knee connects with his stomach, doubling him over, even as his fingers twist into the back of his suit jacket. I watch Roman lift Apollo right off the ground and toss him like a sack of garbage out into the hall.

“That’s it, son! That’s what I want to see! We can use that in the organization. You always were my favorite. Intelligence and brawn, not like your brother.”

“You leave my brother the fuck out of this.” Roman stalks out into the hall after him, leaving me all alone. “He worships the fucking ground you walk on and this is how you talk about him? Fucking piece of shit.”

I hear a crash as something is knocked over in the living room, my body still frozen in place by everything that’s just happened. I don’t want to be a part of all this. It’s too much. Clarissa was right to warn me off.

Glancing around, I realize how stupid I’ve been. This guesthouse belongs to the casino, and the casino belongs to Roman. He’s not going to let me stay here forever and I was stupid to think he would. As soon as he’s tired of me, he’ll kick me out and I’ll have nothing.

And the job?

It’s pretty clear he never needed me to cook for him. He had someone cook the meal that was set up in here last night, didn’t he? I’ve been a fool. I’m not being paid as a private chef, I’m being paid for sex.

I’m nothing but a prostitute.

Sliding out of the bed, I pull open the wardrobe and see the hangers filled with clothes that Roman bought for me. How he knew my size, I’m not sure, but if I put any of them on I’ll still belong to him. I don’t want anything from him. I need to get away.

My own clothes sit in their cases still in the bottom of the wardrobe. I can't take them all with me right now, but at least I can put something on that belongs to me.

ROMAN

My fist is feeling battered, but I don't care. I can plunge it into ice when I've killed the man who gave me life.

The next punch lands square in my father's gut, lifting him off the ground, and I let him collapse at my feet. In an instant, I'm stepping forward, my bare toes connecting with his skull. He's no pushover, and maybe in his day this would have been something of a contest, but he's no longer in his prime and the beating is taking its toll.

I grab him by the collar and pull him to his feet, ready to deliver an ultimatum, aware that it will put me on the wrong side of the entire organization but no longer caring. But he holds up a placating hand.

"All right, Roman," he splutters, one eye swollen shut. "All right. Enough. You're stronger than me, you have been for a long time now. But if I get any more injuries there are people who will head over here and shoot you just to impress me. I don't want that, you don't want that—"

"I don't fucking care."

"Oh, you don't mean that." His feet scramble against the floor, trying to keep him upright, but he's tough as old boot leather and the injuries that would floor another man will just make him a little later getting out of bed in the morning. "We need to talk. The Russians—"

"Haven't you heard a word I said? The Russians have nothing to do with me or this casino, not anymore. It's my

name on the deed and I'll be the one who makes those decisions.”

“Oh, don't be ridiculous. All this over some...” His gaze meets mine and he backs away, drawing a deep breath. “Over a woman? You and me, we're family.”

“Not anymore. I want you out. Now. And for your information, I'm signing the casino over to Mom.”

“No you're *fucking* not. I won't allow it.”

“My casino, I can do what I like with it. She needs something and I want to concentrate on investing. Mom's good with figures.”

My dad laughs, drawing out his handkerchief, looking at it for a moment, then tucking it away and leaving the blood where it is, smeared across his face. “I *know* she's good with figures, son. She was my accountant. She's very good at cooking books, that's not the argument. I don't want to see her every time I come in here. In case you haven't noticed, I was two million dollars richer before I divorced her.”

“She divorced you. And she deserved twenty times that much. Anyway,” I say, glancing behind him to where two heavily-built men are stalking across the golf course, “that's not going to be your problem anymore.”

The security guards finally walk in through the door of the guesthouse, no doubt the two that drew the short straw. My father was right when he told Jack that the security in this place is first rate; I'm sure they were informed immediately that there was a disturbance down here. By rights, I should fire them on the spot for their tardiness, but I can kind of understand the hesitancy. On the one hand, their job is to throw out intruders. On the other hand, one of those intruders is a man that could have their brains blown out by the end of the day if he's riled.

I nod at the nearest of the pair. “Please escort my father from the premises. If he enters again, call the police.”

He hesitates, glancing at my father, and I grunt in frustration.

“Fine, I’ll do it myself and the two of you can look for new employment.”

The second man quickly steps forward. “Apologies, Mr. Schalk.” I wait while he nervously walks over to my father, his companion following behind, barely meeting my eyes.

As soon as a hand is placed on my father’s shoulder, he shrugs away. “Don’t touch me. I can leave on my own.” He turns his eyes on me, a fire in them. “Just remember, Roman, you wanted this. Wherever it goes from here, you’re responsible for the outcome.”

“No shady deals, no shady business partners? A life free of your influence? I’ll consider myself lucky.”

I watch them go until they’re out of sight, then turn with a growl. That won’t be the end of it. My father will try to retaliate. But what he doesn’t know is how well insulated I am. I may not have been expecting to leave his organization in quite so dramatic a fashion, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t prepared for the worst. Over the years, I’ve made arrangements. There are things I know that, if pushed, I could make public, and there are friends and funds available to me if I needed them.

He’ll be cautious coming after me. He’ll check into my resources. When he does, he’ll back off.

Turning with a growl, I survey the ruins of the battlefield. We’ve made a mess, and someone will have to clean it all up, but all that matters to me right now is my sweet treat.

“Safi, they’re gone and they won’t be coming back.” I walk down the hall to the bedroom, trying to get my voice under control. “I’m sorry you had to hear th—”

My jaw hangs open as I turn to look around the bedroom. Empty. Some of her clothes are strewn across the floor, the French doors standing open. But there’s no sign of her.

“Shit. What now?” I grab my pants up off the floor, hastily pulling them onto my legs. “Safi!”

I have no idea where she is. I could check my security cameras, but that will take time I might not have.

Fuck, why didn't I already install a tracking app on her phone? Why didn't I have her guarded 24/7?

Think, Roman. Use that analytical brain of yours. Where would she go?

She doesn't drive.

That thought hits me. She didn't want to take the job here because it would be too far away from her culinary school. I offered to lend her my car.

She still has access to that, but the fact that she left without saying a word tells me she wouldn't use it. So what then? A cab?

Yes. A cab. She was in a hurry, she won't book one, she'll hail one. Turning to the bedside cupboard, I tug open the drawer and retrieve the little white box that's lying safe in the back. If I'm lucky, she'll still be outside the casino, if not I'll just have to threaten someone to give me the address where she was taken.



I BURST through the front doors of the casino like a man possessed, my eyes sweeping the crowded street, looking for those hazel eyes, that dark hair. My heart is pounding in my chest, the thought of losing her making me desperate. It's my life on the line. Without her I'll wither and die, and I'll be happy to do so. Without her, my life is worth nothing.

"Safi!" My voice comes out hoarse, stolen by the breeze. People turn to stare at me but I don't care. "Safi!"

She's everything. I can't lose her. Picking a direction, I start running, looking at every person I pass, hoping it's her. She's already gone. She must have. If she was here I'd—

There.

I see her crouch to climb into the back of a taxi, tears streaming down her face. No no no. I can't watch her go. I break into the fastest sprint of my life. "Safi!"

Her face rises to look at me, shock painting her features. I watch her say something I can't hear, as her hand comes down on the door lock, shutting me out.

No. Fucking. Way.

I grab the handle from the outside and tug, and when it doesn't come away I brace my foot against the side of the cab for more leverage. I'll pull the fucking thing off if I have to. I hear the metal starting to creak as the driver winds down his window.

"Fuck you, buddy! Get your hands off my—" He visibly shrinks back when I turn my face on him. I'm in no fucking mood.

"Please go." Safi's voice is almost a whisper.

"Don't you fucking dare!" I fix the driver with a death stare and watch him freeze. "This cab starts moving forward, I will not be responsible for my actions. You hear me?"

Safi turns her face toward me as the door pulls away from its setting far enough for me to wedge my fingers into the gap.

"What do you want?" She sobs. "Just let me go. Let me go."

"Don't you get it? I can't let you go, Safi. I'd rather die. If you're heading out of my life, you may as well run me down with this cab because I don't want to live a day without you."

I see her hesitate, her mouth moving as if she's thinking over the words, but then she shakes her head, fresh tears falling from her eyes. "I'm just fluff. Your dad knows you better than I do. The guesthouse belongs to the casino and you'll throw me out as soon as you're bored with me."

"No." The door moves another fraction as I grunt with effort. "Safi, you're everything. I've just thrown my dad off the premises and he's not coming back. He's wrong about what we have. He's wrong about me. He doesn't know me as well as he..."

The thought suddenly occurs to me that I'm concentrating my effort in the wrong place. Sure, I could tug the door open.

It's almost there. Brute strength has always been my strongest suit, but I'm not just brawn. In that, my father was right. If I have to force her to stay, what good is that? I could tie her up and keep her here, but I want her to stay because *she* wants it.

Letting go of the door, I take a step back, fixing her with my eyes. Then I drop to one knee on the pavement, bringing my eyes level with hers.

Fuck, she's beautiful. That beauty almost makes me forget how to talk. I'm sure everyone is staring now. I don't give a fuck. Safi means everything.

"My life," I say, my voice cracking on the words. Shaking my head, I draw a deep breath, then reach out towards her as if I might be able to touch her through the door. "My life used to be empty and meaningless, sweet treat. I was more like my father than I wanted to admit. Then you came into it and everything changed. You made me see beauty, Safi. Suddenly there was color where before it was all varying shades of black. I can't go back to that version of myself, not now. Not after I've seen what my life could be with you in it."

As she stares at me, I reach into my pocket, pulling out the box. It's such a tiny thing, like her. It looks comical nestled in the palm of my hand. But for her, I'll be different. For her, I'll put the monster to bed.

"You want commitment, I get that. You want to know that this is more than just a way of stringing you along. I was going to do this last night, but, well, things got out of hand." A smile pulls at the corner of my lips, and finally I see her laugh, wiping tears from her eyes as she looks down into my hands. "I wanted this moment to be special. I wanted candles and rose petals and soft music. But none of that matters. All that matters is the two of us. You and me. Safi, marry me."

I hear a few gasps, a few cruel laughs. Time was, I would have turned on those laughing and given them a beatdown they'd never forget. But now? Let them laugh. I feel sorry for them, not knowing what I feel right now.

As I stare into her eyes, I finally see her take a breath, and it's like the spell is broken.

She reaches for the door, fumbling with the lock, then starts to frown. “I think you broke it.”

It’s my turn to laugh. Standing, I grab hold of the door and with a final grunt of effort I hear the scream of bending metal and it flies open. There’s laughter and applause, and none of it matters as I gather Safi up into my arms, peppering her face with kisses everywhere I see tears.

“Stop!” she pleads, giggling and trying to push me away.

“Not until you say yes.”

“Yes. God, yes, Roman.”

“I’m sorry we’re not somewhere special, I just had to—”

She places her finger against my lips, shaking her head. “It’s perfect. I don’t need wine and rose petals, I just need to know that you want me.”

“Always, baby. I mean it. I’m never letting you go.” I push the ring onto her finger, breathing a sigh of relief at the symbolism. She’s tied to me now.

“This ring is beautiful. It must have cost a fortune.”

“It did, many, many years ago. My grandmother gave me that ring, the only family member on my father’s side I ever actually cared about.” I laugh, shaking my head. “I was angry with her when she told me I wasn’t like them. Turns out, she saw me for who I was, not what my father and grandfather wanted me to be.”

“She sounds special.”

“She was, baby. She passed away five years ago, but I’ll never forget her. She would have been happy to see me with you. Somewhere, she’s looking down right now, laughing her head off at the mess I made of all this.”

Safi grins, looking at the door hanging half off its hinges. “What mess?” she asks, and leans in, resting her head against my chest.

And as I turn, I place a kiss on her forehead.

Mine.

EPILOGUE

Safi

One Month Later

Roman thrusts inside me, nearly splitting me in two as I scream into the open night sky. I don't know if I'll ever get used to the sheer size of him. He's large all over, a giant in every way, but his cock is out of proportion even for a giant. As I screech with joyful agony, an owl returns my call from somewhere out on the golf course, connecting me in that moment of bliss to the earth and all its inhabitants, our lovemaking just another expression of mother nature's endless wonder.

"Gonna make you mine," he grunts with another thrust, making the lounge scoot across the paving. "This pussy is mine tonight. I own it. I'm going to make sure you know it."

Panting heavily, I lean my head back, exposing my neck, knowing what he will do next. It's a part of our power play. He needs to know he's in control, that I'm fully and completely beholden to him. The nip of his teeth into that sensitive flesh makes me cry out, and I almost come right there and then. My body quivers and I have to hold on, but I know not to tip over the edge without his permission.

"Who owns you?"

"You...ohhhh...you do, Mr. Schalk," I reply, barely holding it together.

"Fucking right, Mrs. Schalk."

We were married six hours ago, by the river, and if we're not back inside the casino in the next thirty minutes I'm sure someone will try to send a search party. Clarissa will be hobbling along on her crutches, Tara at her side. Teri will be wheeling Max in his wheelchair, their kids following on behind. They'll be blocked by his mom though, I know that for certain. She gave me a knowing wink as Roman dragged me by the hand, away from them all, to our own little private sanctuary that used to be the guesthouse.

Not anymore.

Roman has added a whole new wing to the house, containing more bedrooms, a larger kitchen and an office for himself. *More bedrooms*. I'm not even pretending I don't know what that means, and I couldn't be happier.

"There's something I...something I...oh, God!" My body quivers, my core undulating, and I squeeze every muscle I have trying to hold on. As I do, Roman growls, his body barely moving, sweat pouring from his brow.

"Too fucking tight. I'm never going to get used to how small this pussy is."

I choke out a laugh, shaking my head. "Don't stop. Please..."

He grunts as he thrusts again, a sudden flood of my cream lubricating the way for him, and I wonder if I've made a mess of the cushion beneath me or if he's plugged me so tight it can't escape. One thing I've discovered, I'm a bit of a squirter. When I get *really* excited, which is every time with Roman, my orgasms are literally explosive. I have no idea where it comes from, but it's sticky and messy and Roman absolutely loves it. He says it's his special gift, and who am I to deny him?

"Something I have to tell you..." I murmur, trying to pick up my previous thought.

"Later, baby."

I shake my head as he leans forward, held above me on those strong arms, taking my lips in his. I fall into that kiss,

wrapped in it, comforted. His lips are rough to my smooth, and sometimes when I use my tongue I can feel the harsh ridge of his scar. I love it. It's a part of him and it means everything to me.

"...have to tell you now..." I gasp the words as our lips come apart, meeting his eyes, staring as he pummels me from below. He has to hear this. He has to know.

"What is it, Safi? What's so impor—"

"...think I'm pregnant."

"What?" For a second, his body stills as he stares at me, then it's like a piston pounding me into next week as he kisses my neck, my face, bringing us both closer while he talks. "A baby. Fucking perfect. My fucking sweet treat. Everything I ever needed but didn't know I wanted, right here. I love you. Love you so much. Best wedding gift you could have got me. Oh, fuck, I'm close, Safi."

"Me too...give me a countdown."

He laughs, kissing the side of my face as he thrusts inside. "Three."

"Three..." I echo.

"Two."

"Oh, God...two!"

"One."

"One! Now, Roman, tell me I can go now!"

He grins, holding himself still for an agonizing moment, then, "Come for me, baby."

I scream so loud, every guest in the casino hotel must have heard it. My body quivers as I release the tension, muscles relaxing and tensing, relaxing and tensing as I hiss like a pressure valve. Waves of pleasure rock through me, my mind barely able to hold onto reality as I drift on the ocean of our love for each other.

And love it is.

Pure, undiluted, unfiltered love. We can't get enough of each other and I'm sure we never will. Even Clarissa, tears in her eyes at the wedding, had to admit that she was wrong about him, that he's not the man his reputation would suggest.

As for my brother, and my sister-in-law, Teri, everything is working out. Anthea has stayed, and Roman insisted that I increase her wages, paid for by him out of the wealth he tells me is virtually limitless. He's looking into special therapies for my brother, too, and while I'm not getting my hopes up it's hard not to be optimistic. If we can just hold a conversation one more time it will mean everything to me.

"Calm down, sweet treat," Roman coos as he strokes my forehead, and the world comes back into focus. "Lost you there for a moment," he says, smiling down like an Olympian God on a favored mortal.

"I'm so happy," I murmur, and his eyes turn glassy with a mixture of mirth and adoration.

"That's the dopamine and serotonin talking. Give it a minute and you'll remember that I'm a monster and you've been captured against your will."

I playfully punch his arm, but I'm not even sure he feels it. Big as he is, I think I could hurl rocks and he'd shrug them off like sand.

"I *am* happy," I tell him. "I have everything I could ever wish for. A home, someone who loves me, a baby on the way, and just a few months until I'm a fully qualified chef. And you're *my* monster. My own."

I wrap my legs around him and feel the head of his cock against my pussy, hard again already. I know I'm teasing, but I can't help it when I rock my hips, rubbing myself against him.

Roman's eyebrows come together in a thoughtful frown, and he meets my eyes. "Is it possible to put another baby inside you when you're already pregnant?"

I chuckle, still barely able to believe I'm his first sexual partner, or that I'll be his last. He's told me so many times but

it still takes a moment to sink in. No other little Romans running around Detroit, ready to one day call him daddy.

Shaking my head, I lean in for a kiss, then lower my voice to a whisper. "I'm pretty sure it's impossible."

"Want to try, my sweet treat?"

Yes.

Always, yes.

SECOND EPILOGUE

Roman

Ten years later

“Kids, your auntie and uncle are here!”

I hear a squeal of delight from the east wing of the house as Teri enters with Max in his wheelchair. He holds out a hand for me to shake and I do so, unsure if today he remembers who I am or not until he speaks.

“Roman,” he says, grinning, his voice a little difficult to understand at first but easier once you get to know him. “Romulus and Remus. The twins who founded Rome. Suckled by a she-wolf.”

I laugh, nodding. He’s told me the story dozens of times before, but I don’t care, it’s just good to see such an improvement. “Come on through and tell me the whole thing,” I say, nodding to Teri as we all head through to the front room.

Anthea, Max’s nurse, is still on the payroll, and she’s earning more now than she would anywhere else. I like to reward loyalty, and I know it always pays off in the end. She and Max get along well, and it’s partly thanks to her efforts, prodding his mind with random facts about his life, testing him on things that he remembers, that he’s responded so well to the experimental treatments and therapies we’ve had him on.

Max starts to tell me the story again, but before he can get very far Safi bursts in through the door and runs to his side, throwing her arms around him like she hasn’t seen him in

years. In truth, it's only been about two weeks since he and Teri left for Germany on their second honeymoon, but Safi has been climbing the walls worrying about him the whole time.

“Safi...” he grunts, wrapping his arms around her even as he squirms with discomfort at the sudden attack. “My dearest sister.”

She pushes away, narrowing her eyes at him. “I’m your only sister.”

“I...know that. It was a joke.”

Safi turns her head up to look at Teri. “He’s joking these days?”

“Try and stop him.” She rolls her eyes. “That last operation seems to have restored his cringe factor and then some. You should hear the dad jokes he makes with the kids.”

“Speaking of,” Max says, “where are my nieces and nephews?”

Safi turns her eyes to me, a question in them.

“I called them. I heard a squeal, Nicole I’m guessing.” I shrug.

We have six children. Roman Jr. and Maxwell, twins born a little less than eight months after our wedding. Sabine, named after my mom, is younger by just over a year. Two years younger than Sabine is Bear, who takes the most after me in the size department and earned me a few choice words when Safi was in labor. We decided to take a break after that, but when Safi fell pregnant less than six months later with our fifth child, we were happier than either of us expected. Little Safi was born with a few health problems, and she’s smaller than any of her siblings, but she’s a miracle child and at four years old she’s both a terror and an angel in equal measure. After she was born, we decided we didn’t want to stop at five children, and tried again, and Nicole was born just over a year after her sister.

Seems my sweet treat has little difficulty getting pregnant when we want it, and truth is we’ve been trying again. I’m fully expecting to make another announcement soon.

So, two boys, three girls and one, Maxwell, who has told us since they were five that they weren't a boy or a girl. We fully support that and wouldn't have them any other way. Children are the biggest blessing in both our lives, and we have so many of those to count.

And you'd think with all that, Safi wouldn't have had chance to do anything with her culinary skills. You'd be wrong though. She makes time for our family, as I do, but we both have our work as well and wouldn't be without it. I have my investments, and I help Mom with the casino whenever she needs it, while Safi found she had more of a knack for show pieces than working kitchens. Her cakes get a lot of interest on Instagram, and make a lot of money for the charities she donates them to. Many do research into neurological injuries, which has a special place in her heart after what happened with her brother.

"I'll go and—"

I was about to say *see where they've got to*, but as the whole troupe comes flying in through the door shouting "Uncle Max!" and "Auntie Teri!" I fall silent.

"We drew this for you!" Nicole squeals, laughing as she holds one edge of a huge piece of sugar paper.

"It's *drew*, sweetheart," Safi corrects, and I can't help but smile as Nicole repeats the word under her breath, always trying to learn.

"Is this me?" Max asks, pointing to a drawing of a man in a wheelchair and turning to look at Bear.

He nods. "Uh huh. And that's Auntie Teri next to you."

"And your mom, clearly."

"Yep."

"And...Frankenstein's Monster?"

The kids fall about, laughing at their uncle's silliness.

"That's Daddy," says Sabine, glancing across at me. I flash her a smile and she blushes. "There aren't any monsters."

We talked about monsters a while ago, when she overheard me and Safi talking about a letter I'd received from my dad. Some monsters are real and very human, but Sabine thought we were talking about monsters like from the movies. We told her that there is no such thing, and that even if there were monsters in real life they'd be too scared to cross her dad. I think she still needs a little reassurance occasionally, but we're getting there.

"Sure aren't," I tell her, nodding. "Uncle Max is just jealous of my dashing good looks."

I turn to meet Safi's gaze, and she mouths the words: *love you*. I throw her a wink, and can't keep the grin off my face. I love her more than words can say. I love the life she's given me. My investments paid off and we have more money than we'll ever be able to spend, but I'd give it all up in a heartbeat rather than give up what we have.

Over the years, and with each child she bears, my wife gets a little softer around the edges, a little fuller in some areas, and I'm obsessed with every inch. I eat her out every chance I get, and can never quite get my fill. I'm so glad that I waited for her, because every time we make love it reminds me that she's it for me. There was never another and there never will be. I'll love her until we're old together, and I'll love her into eternity after that.

And in the end, that's what life is all about. I know that now, as I look around at my family gathered together.

Love comes in so many forms, and I'm here for every single one of them.

MORE FROM THE AUTHORS

Aria Cole is the pen name of a USA Today bestselling author who published her first book in 2012 and began writing contemporary romance long before that. She's published more than 65 independent titles and her books always feature possessive alpha men and the sassy, curvy, nerdy heroines who love them. She lives with her dreamboat husband and two sassy children on the Great Lakes and lives for long walks on the beach with a hot coffee in hand.

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