



*In life and love
sometimes you're just gonna
have to play dirty.*

DIRTY

Stack

Part 2 of The Devious Games Duet

DD PRINCE

author of The Dominator Series



*In life and love
sometimes you're just gonna
have to play dirty.*

DIRTY

Stack

Part 2 of The Devious Games Duet

DD PRINCE

author of The Dominator Series

Dirty Stack

Devious Games Duet Part 2

by DD Prince

©ddprince.com - 2021

This is not a standalone.

Please read Kill Game before reading this
book!

©Copyright 2021 by DD Prince – ddprince.com

All rights reserved. This book is the intellectual property of the author and may not be copied, distributed, or stored for sharing without expressed permission from the author. Please respect the author's work and purchase or subscribe to read this content from an authorized source. Thank you.

<http://ddprince.com> has details about availability of all books by this author.

Killian saved me from the hell of life with Ray.

But have I been pulled from the frying pan only to be tossed straight into the flames?

Dirty Stack is part two in The Devious Games Duet, a psychological romantic suspense.

Please read book one, Kill Game, before reading this book.

If you enjoy this book, kindly review it. A book review, even a few sentences saying you liked the story, is like tipping your server after a great dining experience. Thank you!

Subscribe to The Scoop, DD Prince's newsletter for news about new releases, freebies, and sales.

<http://ddprince.com/newsletter-signup/>

Join DD's Chickadees, a private group on Facebook, the author's reader group for fun, teasers, author drop-ins, book talk, and most of all...*shenanigans*.

<http://facebook.com/groups/ddprincefangroup>.

Dedication

For those of you who have found that you have trouble recognizing yourself because of what you've been through.

I hope you try to find yourself again.

Maybe you'll never be the same as you used to be, but I hope you can somehow begin to feel pride, strength, and love for yourself when you look in the mirror – even if it takes time.

xoxo

DD Prince

1

Killian

Sixteen Years Old

“C’mere, you little shit!”

Hearing this, I break into a jog, moving down the yellow hallway toward the door to the shithole I have no choice for another year and a half to call home. The hollering is coming from that asshole, aimed at my ten-year-old brother. This isn’t the first time he’s called him that, though now that I’m the same size as him, he only does it when he thinks I can’t hear. Considering I’ve heard from six doors away, he’s on a tear about something. As usual.

He’s mean when he’s drunk, mean when he’s sober. No clue which version Willie’s dealing with right now. It’s not five o’clock yet, but that doesn’t matter to this asshole. I’ve seen him drink at all hours.

I’m gonna have to quit the football team. I’ve been chewing on it for a week already and I know I can’t put it off any longer. Too much time for Willie without me. With me being so busy, I haven’t been able to pick him up or drop him off to school most days and fuck knows *she* won’t get out of bed early enough to get him there on time and since she loses track of time, it means at least a couple days a week I gotta go looking for the kid when I get home after practice because she forgot to pick him up.

It’s five blocks to his school and I’ve found him at the school, at the park that’s the drug dealing square for our hood, and the other day hangin’ out with a couple drunk bums by the

warehouses at the end of our block. We live in a shitty complex, not the sort of place he can just hang out. Either there will be crackheads or homeless drunks bothering him, flipping him out – or when there are kids around, they’re usually older and pick on him. Until they see me, then they scam. He gets hassled for always being late for school, not to mention harassed for his shitty shoes, for being so skinny, for his drunk-off-her-ass mother.

Our mother’s mother, Nan, she’d slap Mom in the face if she saw how bad things have gotten since she died. Not that they were ever that great before that, but they’ve gotten way worse.

I quickly get the door unlocked and shove in, seeing the asshole directly beside the door hauling my brother out of the coat closet by the back of his ratty t-shirt.

He sees me and lets go of Willie, whose wide eyes switch from fear to relief at seeing me as he stumbles and falls to his knees.

“Get yer hands off him. Already told you,” I bite off, “You do not fuckin’ touch him.”

He nearly backhanded my kid brother last week for making noise before noon on a Saturday, standing there in his boxers pulling his hand across his body because Willie was playing with his Beyblades and with rip cords to set them off, it’s loud. But as he was getting ready to strike, he saw me poking my head around the corner, so the asshole stormed off and slammed the bedroom door instead, directing his frustration at my mother.

“Do not fuckin’ pull the batteries outta the remote again, you little...” He points at Willie.

My nostrils flare. “He hurt you, Willie?” I demand.

“Relax, Killian. *Fuck, kid.* You’re so goddamn high-strung.” Max wanders to the fridge and looks inside.

Willie shakes his head.

“Where’s she?” I ask, looking him over.

The kid stands there in a ripped and dirty (not to mention shapeless, stretched from Max's yanking on it) t-shirt and old, pilled trackpants that are too short on him. There's a hole in the left baby toe of his dirty looking sock and his nose is running. His curly brown hair is also in his eyes. He hasn't had a haircut in six months.

"She went to the church to get food," he says, using his t-shirt to wipe his face.

Willie looks excited. Fucking embarrassing.

Kid is hungry all the fuckin' time. Just because she lives on booze and cigarettes she thinks she can get away with feeding us table scraps. If it weren't for me and my part-time job, things would be even worse.

"I'll take you for food. Go change your clothes and wash your face."

Maybe I'll take him for a haircut, too.

His eyes light up brighter as he wipes his nose. "Can we get chili fries? Chicken fingers?"

Max cracks open a can of beer and walks back to the couch while scratching his gut. Funny how she's gone to the food bank at the church for the second time this month and yet there are two six-packs in the fridge.

Max doesn't have a job right now. Which explains why he's here. When things are good for him, he's always got better places to be.

He now only has an inch of height on me as I've shot up since the last time he lived here. I'm probably not even at my full height yet. And he's got that beer gut where I've already got a six pack. He's now more cautious around me, seeing that I'm no longer a kid, plus knowing I'm a bruiser after standing back and watching me and my buddy lay a beating on three shitheads in the basketball court a couple weeks ago that had been going around grabbing girls' tits. Tried to talk me into goin' to an underground fight, said if I pretend I'm eighteen, I

can make some quick cash and he'd only take a small cut for runnin' bets for me.

As if I need him to help me earn money. As if he knows a fraction of what I know about managing bets. I first started taking bets months ago and I've got more sense in my little finger than Max has in his entire idiot head.

My mother told me the day after Max nearly hit Willie last time that I had to mind him otherwise I might find myself out on the street.

Yeah. She was shitfaced, threatening to kick me out for protecting my kid brother from her useless on-again, off-again asshole dick. And she's had a string of 'em. Anyone who might be worthwhile gets shot of her as soon as they get their piece of ass because though she's thirty-two and looks like a twenty-two-year-old smoke-show what she really is, is a shit-show.

Except Willie's dad. Would've been nice if he could've stuck around or even taken us with him when he left, but she made it so he couldn't. The asshole losers stick around longer, and this latest asshole has been comin' and goin' the past two years.

I said, "He's why Willie's pissin' the bed and havin' nightmares, woman. He's terrified of that guy. Won't get outta bed to use the can in the middle of the night after what happened a few weeks ago so he keeps havin' accidents. You gotta get rid of that guy, Mom," I said. "And stop leavin' Will alone with him."

She changed the subject.

She never listens unless it's something she wants to hear. She only ever thinks of herself. And she doesn't wanna be reminded her ten-year-old walked out while she was gettin' laid against the front door, too tanked to notice him. Not the only mental scars Brienne Coulter has responsibility for.

The only reason I haven't left is because I can't take my brother with me legally. If I ignored the legal aspect and did it

anyway, I couldn't look after him properly with school and making money.

Coach says I could get a full ride with football, but I know there's no way that happens unless I abandon my brother, and that is not happening. Plus I promised Nan I'd finish high school, even if I find it all to be utter bullshit. As soon as I'm eighteen and done school with six months of living expenses saved, we're gone.

My buddy whose father is a connected man with a lot of power and connections and I are talking and I'm gonna get backed by his family, just temporarily, so I can boost my profit and get enough that ensures I can get those six months of expenses together by the time I'm eighteen to get me and Willie outta here. I'm doin' all right on my own but like the idea of kicking things up a notch. My buddy's dad doesn't usually let anyone under twenty-one work for him unless they're blood but told me he sees something promising in me.

"Get me some chili fries, too, Killy," Max tries to yank my chain.

Willie's back.

"As if," I mutter, gesturing to Willie's shoes by the door while throwing Max a middle finger.

"Watch it, kid," Max points and then throws his beer back and gulps a few times before belching. "Don't be gettin' too big for yer britches there or I might hafta go old school on yer ass."

"Whenever you feel like you're man enough," I return, staring straight into his eyes.

He looks the other way and scoffs, flicking the channel on the television.

"You're cute," he mutters.

I grind my teeth and herd Willie out the door. As soon as it clicks shut, I squat to tie his left shoe for him. He takes forever to tie them and half the time they come undone. I don't baby

him around anyone, he gets hassled enough, mistaken for being a lot younger than he is because he's so scrawny and because he's got a shit mother, but he won't complain since no one can see me fixing them.

"Mom!" Willie exclaims.

I look over my shoulder and see she's heading our way, struggling with six plastic bags, three in each hand.

"Hey babies," she greets. "Momma's gonna make my famous spaghetti."

"We're goin' out," I say, heading for her and relieving her of the bags.

Nothing famous about anything she cooks, really, though it's rare for her to make any effort at all.

"Kill's buying me dinner," Willie tells her.

Mom pouts. "You don't want Momma's spaghetti?"

"We can have it tomorrow," Willie tries.

"Sure, babyface. Got lotsa good stuff today." She ruffles his hair.

She's not remotely embarrassed about taking all that food from the church so that she can spend whatever money she has on more booze for her and Max.

This is how it's always been. Holey shoes for the kids, new shoes for her. Broken promises of birthday parties and Christmas presents. But she's always got what she needs.

Looks like she's got a fresh manicure and hairdo, which costs money – she won't hesitate to shell out to try and look good for her asshole boyfriend, yet there's always something we're going without unless Nan or charity steps in. And since Nan's been gone more than a while now, things have been shit.

"You got the money for fries, Killy?" she squeezes my shoulder affectionately.

"Yeah," I mutter.

“Good,” she smiles. “You’re doin’ good, huh?”

I shrug.

She knows I make money working at the pizza place and Max ratted on me hearing I’m taking bets. My mother wasn’t pissed at me, instead she hit me up to pay the electrical bill and sixty bucks went missing from my jacket pocket three days after I paid it. Since then, I’ve kept my money hidden.

“How was your game?” she calls out.

“Not a game, just a practice, but I’m quittin’,” I say.

She frowns. “Oh. Not likin’ it?”

“Somethin’ like that.”

She doesn’t push. She doesn’t ask questions. She doesn’t really give a shit unless it affects her and in this case, it does. Me being around more will mean she can worry about her youngest son even less.

She opens the door for me so I can carry the bags to the table.

Max eyes us. “Get some more whisky, Bree?”

“My hands were too full. I’ll go get it after I put the groceries away.”

I shoot them both a look of disgust before I head back for the door, seeing my brother hovering in the hallway. He doesn’t even wanna come back in, he’s that terrified of this asshole.

Another year and a half: We’ll have a clean place to live with a full fridge of food and zero assholes to have to deal with.

Can’t fuckin’ wait.

I’m woken with screaming.

“Max, please! I’m sorry!” That’s her.

I also hear my kid brother bawling, calling my name while banging on my door. I run out, passing Willie, catching sight of Max in her room in just a pair of jeans, looming over her in her bra and underwear. She cowers on the floor beside the bed

and just as I get there, he backhands her hard, spitting, “Stay outta my fuckin’ business, woman!”

I wrench him back by the arm, haul back and clock him in the mouth. He falls into the closet, denting the metal sliding door as he goes down.

“Keep yer fuckin’ hands off her,” I shout.

“Don’t hit him, Killy. Don’t.”

“Get the fuck out,” I grind out.

“This little shit lays a hand on me again, Brianne, I’ll hit back.”

“I dare ya,” I sneer. “Hit me now. Go ahead ‘n see what happens to you, you stupid fuck. Lay a hand on my mother or my brother again and I’ll fuckin’ kill ya.”

He rises to his feet, wipes at his bleeding lip while grabbing his t-shirt. He then shoves me, but I don’t budge far before I haul off and punch him in the throat. He grunts, then staggers toward the door. He’s hammered and can barely walk. Barely walking, but he can beat on women, can’t he?

“Babe, wait!” She shoves past me to run after him.

“You all right?” I slap Willie’s shoulder, staring at her back, feeling something ugly slither through me at seeing her, beat up, in her underwear and chasing after him. I shouldn’t feel a thing. I should know better by now.

Willie nods, pulling his lips tight. His chin still trembles.

“Go back to bed, okay?”

He heads off, lookin’ at her with tears in his eyes.

She’s in the hallway now, doubled over, bawling for Max to come back. Apartment doors are opening, and people are watching the spectacle. My mother, drunk and in her fuckin’ bra and underwear, hair a mess and black eye makeup tracks down her cheeks, pleading with the asshole who just hit her to come back.

“Fine, go you fucking dick,” Mom shouts finally and slams the door.

Her face is about to crumble, but then her eyes are on me and they change to pissed. She points. “You shouldn’t have done that. I had it under control.”

She looks like a sad clown. All that black on her face, her lipstick smeared.

I let her know exactly what I think. “Hope he’s gone for good, this time. You let him back after that...” I point at her. “You deserve what you get.”

I slam my bedroom door.

Five minutes later, Willie’s in my room with his blanket. I let him climb in with me and he’s sleeping in less than five minutes. He starts sprawling so I wind up on the floor and I don’t fall back to sleep. Instead, I listen to her crying in her room for almost an hour before things go quiet.

A few nights later, I’m woken from a dead sleep on my bedroom floor, Willie again in my bed, and I’m woken by the sound of my own grunt when I take a hoof to the gut. Max kicks me a second time, in the center of my back and the pain is so extreme, I can’t do anything but curl into myself.

My mother is in the doorway crying. Saying nothing. Not a fucking thing. Fucking damaged. Broken. She makes me sick.

“That’s what you get, asshole. From now on mind your own fuckin’ business,” he says and then pushes by her. “He gets in my shit one more time, Brianne, it’s him or me.”

I go to rise but she shakes her head sharply. “Leave it, please, Killy.” She points at me for a split second with warning in her eyes.

Will sits up, rubbing his eyes. “What’s goin’ on?”

I stare at her. She stares back with a trembling lower lip and mouths to me, *please*, then walks after him, saying nothing.

“Back to sleep, bro,” I tell him.

“M’kay,” he says and closes his eyes.

I lie there, the pain starting to ebb but my anger getting sharper. I wanna go in there and put a knife through his heart. That might be the only way to get rid of that fucker. And then I hear a sound that makes me taste puke in the back of my throat because it’s a banging sound. It’s the sound of her shitty bedframe hitting the wall. And then she’s moaning. She lets him fuck her after he does that to me? Moans like a whore for him?

Sad, broken, trashy bitch.

The next morning, she’s there at the stove when I come out, ready to head to school. She’s flipping pancakes, plastering a fake smile on her face.

“You gotta make peace with him, Killy. I love him and I don’t wanna be forced to choose between you.” She points the spatula at me.

She’s got a hangover and she looks like shit. She’s also looking at me like she needs me to *get* this and cooperate.

I am very *fucking* ready to be out of here.

“I wanna tell you that you can do better than that,” I start, gesturing toward her bedroom – I can hear the fucker snoring from here – but her body language immediately changes, and I know she doesn’t think she can do better. She slumps. Her eyes point to the floor. And the fact is that we’ve had this conversation before. Too many times.

“But that’s pointless isn’t it?” I finish, tempted to bring up Willie’s dad, a good guy who would’ve given her the world, who wanted to move us to his house, a place with a yard, with a park across the street. The guy made time for us. Taught me about football, took me to a game once, treated me as good as Willie even though I wasn’t his blood.

The problem with him was that he didn't drink, didn't party, and that wasn't what she liked. So she not only ended it, but she also ruined his life and kept him from me and his biological kid by claiming he hurt her so he couldn't fight for custody of us. She needed us not for the love she had to give us, for the love we wanted to give back. She needed us for the welfare check she gets being a single mom with two kids.

She says nothing. Turns her back to me and lifts the cooked pancakes onto a plate and passes the plate to Will.

"Got any syrup, Mommy?" Willie asks.

"Oh. No, baby. Sorry."

"Jam?"

"Oops. No. Damn it."

"Butter?"

We've got no butter.

Willie eats his pancakes anyway. Dry-lookin' misshapen circles from a box that you just add water to. Shitty pancakes from the food bank.

When I get a place for us, I'm gonna make pancakes with chocolate chips in them. With real butter. Maple syrup. As many as my kid brother wants. From scratch.

"Hurry up, Willie. We're gonna be late," I say.

"You pickin' him up today, too, Killy?" she asks.

"Yeah."

I'll pick him up. I'll bring him home. Keep him safe. She'll do whatever the fuck she wants. She'll pick Max over me. She'll pick him over Willie. She'll pick him over herself, obviously; she's repeatedly proven that. She's already chosen him over me.

Doesn't matter. I've long-since decided to just bide my time here for my little brother's sake. Get through it, keep a close eye on Willie, and get gone out of this smelly shithole as soon

as I can, figuring out a way to take my brother with me that won't have child services breathing down my neck. Maybe I'll offer her money to let me take him. That'd probably do it.

If I thought going to a foster home was better, I'd have gotten us out of here when Nan died and things really went to crap. But we could've been separated. We could have it worse, especially Willie and he might not have had anyone to look out for him. At least now I can take care of my brother, shield him as best as I can, and deal with the bullshit I know instead of what I don't. And until it's time to go, I'll ignore Max. Unless he lifts a finger toward me or my brother again, then I'll fuckin' kill him.

The next few weeks, Max pretends I don't exist. I do the same. But I've got a knife under my pillow so I'm ready if he sets foot in my room again.

She actually cleans the place, does laundry, and acts overly cheerful. Almost like an actual mother. Even takes Willie for a haircut.

We've been down this road before; she's thinking she'll fake it until it's true, that she'll fool me into thinking Max isn't bad for her, fool Max into wanting to stay, thinking if she fakes it all well enough, he might turn out to be a decent guy. She's only trying to fool herself.

Seems for a couple weeks like neither of them are drinking much. They're watching TV at night, spending a lot of time in her room. Then it starts again when she gets her next check. Going to a bar one night. A couple days later – day drinking. Then a party at our place with about twenty rowdies on a Wednesday night. One night me comin' home to Willie watching TV alone, saying they went to the bar. Things continue to break down over the next month with screaming matches over who smoked the last cigarette and who was gonna go out and buy more. Fights about money. Her fighting about him flirting with someone in the hallway.

And then I overhear them arguing, her saying she knows who called social services to say she's got a guy living here.

They're threatening to evict her because she gets the subsidy being a single mother, so he starts saying he'll disappear for a while and she loses her mind, not wanting him to go.

I don't know what happens then because things go quiet, he disappears for a month or so and I think she's dodged the eviction bullet because there's no talk of moving.

And then he's back. Again.

He's pretending we're not there, saying not two words to either me or my brother. Willie's attached to me like glue when I'm not working. But he stops coming into my room and I'm proud of that. Until I hear the shithead making smartass comments about him bein' a baby, so I know that's why Willie's trying to man up. He can do that later. He's just a kid. I wind up in his room most nights, sleeping on his floor so he'll sleep better.

It's not easy balancing school, the pizza place, and bookmaking with Willie to worry about, so I've talked to the chick that lives three doors down who has the hots for me, and asked her to keep her eyes and ears open. Gina's got a mom who works nightshift and has to take care of four younger siblings. She's got no dad around. Most kids in our complex either have no dad or shitty dads.

I've asked her to take Willie to the park with her siblings sometimes. And if she hears yelling from our apartment when she's home, she should knock on the door and offer to take Willie to her place to play with her brothers and sisters.

If she can watch him, I'll pay her. If she can't, she needs to call or find me. She tells me I don't have to pay her, and my guess is she wants me to ask her out. I'm not into her but I do it anyway and we have to come back early so her mom can leave for work. We wind up fucking in her mother's bed and I pop her cherry while her siblings sleep in the next room.

Gina wants to be my girlfriend, but acts on board when I insist we're just buds and that I don't have time for a girlfriend. And she's a nice girl, is sweet to Willie, but it was more of a pity

fuck for me. She agrees to be just friends, but I know she's hoping to change my mind. She gives me these longing looks and goes out of her way to do shit for my brother.

Willie's nightmares and bedwetting don't happen if I'm in his room even though he tells me I don't have to keep doin' it. I often wind up there anyway - sleepwalking. I've been sleepwalking off and on most of my life. Most often when shit bothers me.

My mother's complaining that the teachers are saying Willie's acting out in school. So she tries to punish him for it instead of realizing what the problem is. He starts acting out even more.

The day after I turn seventeen, (Mom didn't remember my birthday. Nobody did except Gina who baked me cupcakes and tried to kiss me) I'm getting back home in the morning after crashing at my buddy Dario's. I went over there for a big boxing event that earned me over four grand in profit.

Five minutes after I walk in, I find out Max threw my brother's mattress out the window because he pissed the bed again, threatening to put him in diapers, too.

Things are tense and no one will tell me what's goin' on. Not even Willie, who says nothin' happened other than the mattress being tossed, but he's sulky and it's not easy to make him laugh these days. I know the feeling. I'm pretty damn serious myself nowadays.

I pull my mattress into his room for him. Sleep on the floor most nights anyway.

This goes on for a couple weeks and Willie doesn't piss the bed, probably because I'm there and he feels safe.

Mom gets him a cheap mattress that's barely three inches thick. It's just foam covered by a thin cover that she puts a plastic sheet onto. It doesn't even look new. The church gave her money for a new bed and she bought that secondhand for probably way less, spending the rest.

I take the shitty thing and let Willie continue to use my bed.

A Few Months Later

“Not even thirty bucks?”

She started off asking for sixty and dropped by tens until we got to thirty.

“Got none. And even if I had money, I’m not paying for booze again.”

Her face goes ugly, and I know what’s coming. A tantrum.

“I pay the bills around here, Killy. I’ve given up everything, all my hopes and dreams to be your mom and...”

I bark out a laugh. She pays? More like the government pays.

She keeps going. “I’ve done so much for you and you’re raking in cash and can’t even-”

“Do not start that,” I cut her off. “I’ve paid the electric bill the last few months, or we’d be in the dark. There’s food in the fridge because of me. You sold my brother’s Xbox that I bought for his birthday not two weeks ago, pretending we got broke into. I saw it in the window at Sully’s after Crackhead Joe told me you were the one who brought it in. I’ll pay for stuff for Willie, and I’ll pay for food, but I ain’t giving you cash so you can get drunk or buy booze for your asshole.”

Less than a year left and I’m taking Willie and I’m gone.
Fucking gone.

I’m making good money with my bookie business, though I don’t leave any of that cash lyin’ around here or else she’ll spend it. I learnt that the hard way more than once, and four hundred bucks went missing a month and a half ago from my jeans pocket not two feet away from me while I was fuckin’ sleeping.

She glares at me with hate. Yeah. She hates her own son because he won’t help her get drunk. I give no fucks.

When Max left for that month while she thought she was being evicted, she moped on the couch like she was in a depression

for weeks. Then there was another asshole here for three nights before Max came back and beat up the other asshole.

She took him back. Again. And then got into a fight with Sandra Iadanza over him, accusing her of calling social services.

Today she's got another black eye along with her new 'engagement' ring.

She's calling him her fiancé now; he bought her that cheap, shitty ring with a diamond so small you need a magnifying glass to see it. This was his grand gesture after the black eye. He flirts with everything in a skirt in the building and I've heard their arguments – he's fucking around as much as he wants.

Three days after I saw that ring on my mother's finger, I also saw him staggering out of Iadanza's at one in the morning on the other side of our complex coming back from the pizzeria and there stood Sandra on the doorstep in a slutty outfit with the bandage over her eye where she had to get stitches from a scrap with my mother.

Word is that Raymond's father is in jail again for writing more bad checks. I'm hoping when he gets out, someone tells him about Max, and he kicks Max's head in. Johnny Iadanza is a crazy motherfucker. It'd be fun to watch.

The week before Thanksgiving, I come home after school with my kid brother and it's only because Gina's brother Trey stops Willie in the hallway to show him a new set of Yugioh cards he got that I get the chance to shield him from what's inside the door. My mother dead on the kitchen floor, sink overflowing with the water running, her head caved in because of that fucker's steel-toed boots.

A Month Later

I jog up to the industrial plaza with a line of storage units at the back. It's eleven thirty, but I got the call to come from Dario a half hour ago.

And there's been ice in my blood the whole walk here because I know why he summoned me.

"He's here," Dario says, getting out of his brother's Corvette and shaking my hand.

I shake Tommy Ferrano's hand as well, then I follow them inside, down a long hallway of orange garage doors until we stop at one. Dario lifts it up high enough for us to duck under.

Tommy pulls the door down behind us. The Rossi brothers are already inside and they've done me a solid. A solid I'll surely have to pay back one day. Doesn't matter that I might have to do something I don't like; they've come through for me.

"I appreciate this, you guys," I say, taking in the sight in front of me.

"It's our pleasure," Tino says, grinning.

Tino and his twin brother Nino are like half-Italian ginger-haired guys that look like they could be Hells Angels. And that was no typical *happy* grin. I've known this guy and his brother who are a few years older than me for about a year, and in that time I've gotten to see this grin enough to know it usually means he's happily about to fuck someone up.

In this case, it's me that's going to do the fucking up, but he'll get to watch.

My eyes hit the piece of shit that murdered my mother a month ago. He sits on a folding metal chair, hands bound with zip ties. He's got tape over his mouth and wrapped around his torso holding him to the chair. There's blood on his chin and over his eye.

And I stare coldly at the piece of shit. It's been a month since I found her dead on the kitchen floor, her brains smeared on her caved-in face. It's been a month and a day since I last saw his fuckin' face. He was wise to hide out from the cops. But he

wasn't wise enough to go far away, because Nino and Tino found him.

His eyes widen when they land on me.

He's been roughed up and he probably had the shock of his life when these guys grabbed him and brought him here.

The twins are making a name for themselves as muscle for hire that solve problems. Their rep just got elevated, too, because Nino popped the big question to Bianca Trulia, who'd be *the* mafia princess of Portland if her wise guy father hadn't gotten killed in a car wreck.

While these guys are muscle-for-hire, when they told me they found him for me, they insisted that they didn't want a dime for their efforts. They want me to have justice for my mother. I'd pay whatever the cost for the chance to end this motherfucker.

I hear the sound of a gun being cocked and look over my shoulder at Tommy who has it. He hands it over.

"Know what you're doin'?" he asks me.

My stomach lurches at the weight of it in my hand. I shake my head, not about to bullshit like some guys would.

He gestures for it, so I hand it back.

"When you're ready, point and shoot," he says, pointing the gun at the wall and showing me. "Do whatever you wanna do first. You want help, we help. You want to make this fucker pay all on your own, that's cool too. Using a piece is optional. You got other plans, no worries. Got a set of butcher knives here too if you prefer."

"Or a container of gasoline and a box of matches. We got your back, brother," Dario says from behind me.

Dario told me a while ago that his father's best soldier taught his older brother to shoot. He also invited me to the shooting range next week; he's about to get lessons, too.

Max's eyes bounce between us, and they're wide. He's trying to talk. All I hear are muffled throat noises behind the tape along with him sniffing and snorting like a bull.

Tommy presses the gun into his left palm and holds it out for me. I take it again. I feel the weight of it in my hand and know I won't forget this feeling. I slowly move, extending my arm and pointing it at Max, watching as his bloodshot eyes widen even more. I listen as he grunts harder, trying to plead his case. But only for a beat before I stride two paces forward. This puts the barrel of the gun to his forehead.

And I feel stone cold inside as I stare into the piece of shit's eyes.

All the nights she cried. All the nights Willie did.

All the nights that kid keeps crying, trying to hide it from me, but I know he lies there missing the mother that isn't gonna get undead.

My lip curls and before I think further on it, I flex my finger. It's as easy as that. I'm not a small guy, but I'm surprised at how firing it feels, at the sensation of the recoil, at how he instantly falls back while his head explodes, the chair folding under his weight, making him hit the concrete floor with a thump at the same time as wet hits my face.

There's silence after that hunk of dead, useless flesh hits the floor.

It's over. He's dead. Just like that.

The four guys at my back say nothing while I take my sweatshirt off and use it to wipe the splatter off my face and then turn it inside out and wipe the gun down with the opposite side.

While I do that, I hear a match being struck. I look over my shoulder and see Dario light a cigarette, then use the flame to light the smoke dangling from Tino's lips.

Dario Ferrano, calm as can be at fifteen years old, watching me shoot a man, point blank, no hesitation, like a cold-blooded

killer. Sulphur hangs in the air, mixing with a stench. The stench of things that cannot be undone.

My eyes move to what's left of Max's face.

I take him in for a good minute as I watch the bastard's blood crawl over the plastic tarp taped to the floor under him. The number of trails multiplies, running like little rivers through creases in the plastic. The boys knew that whatever happened tonight, it would stain the concrete floor, so they planned ahead.

I continue to wipe the gun down with my shirt, my hands steady, then using my shirt to hold it, I place it into Max's open palm, closing his fingers around the gun before turning to walk past the four silent guys to the sliding door. Before I lift it, I turn to them.

I don't know if they had plans to stage it like that.

"You're sure you got this, or you need me to do something to help?"

"We got this," Tino confirms.

"Thanks," I say and shake his hand.

I then shake his brother's and then the hands of the two Ferranos before turning to leave.

"You wanna go get a drink or something?" Nino calls out.

"He's not goin' anywhere so we can do that now."

"Gotta get home to my brother," I reply.

"Want a ride?" Tommy asks.

"He needs to be alone," Tino says, like he knows what's going on in my head.

I swallow thickly. "Gonna walk. But guys, from my heart..." I thump my chest with my fist.

"We got your back, Kill," Dario says. "Meet us tomorrow for a beer."

“I’ll see. I think Willie might need me to hang with him for a night. I’ve been busy, but wanna make sure I give Willie time.”

No one says anything else, but reading their eyes, they know I’m grateful.

With their help, I’ve taken out the fucker that took the life of my mother, that has terrorized my brother. She may have been a shit mother, but she was ours – the woman that brought me and Willie into this world. She was also Nan’s child. And Nan deserved justice.

I lift the door with my elbow, not wanting my prints anywhere, and I go.

I walk for a good three blocks before snow starts falling and the shakes kick in. I’m sweating now. Shaking and sweating the rest of the way home. And my chest feels strange.

As I walk the rest of the eight blocks to my new apartment, pictures roll through my head. Mom with brains on her face. The sound of the water dripping onto the floor while I take it in, shielding Will, then the water sound transcending to rain. Rain at her funeral with Willie, crying, holding a rose in his hands. Forgetting to avoid the thorns and getting a bleeding thumb.

Dario’s father passing him a fancy handkerchief to hold onto and stop the bleeding.

Blood trailing through plastic in that storage unit.

The sound of me closing the door.

The sound of Gina’s door squeaking as she opens it, me telling her to call the cops and asking Trey to keep him busy. I then whisper to Gina to tell the cops there’s been a murder.

Sitting outside the apartment door, smelling those fuckin’ awful smells in the hallway until the cops and fire department get there. Me in the funeral home, surrounded by flowers that smell fake, flowers from friends of the Ferranos – most of them unknown to me.

Back to when me and Dario drank in his father's office until five o'clock in the morning until Mr. Ferrano came in and told us to go to sleep. Mr. Ferrano came over with Dario when I called and then he spoke to the cops, told them where we'd be for the foreseeable. The man then woke me four hours after I passed out to go make her arrangements. I sat there looking at coffin catalogues with my friend's connected father. I didn't find out until later that Dario's dad paid without my knowing. When I contacted the funeral home afterwards to ask about paying the bill, they told me he'd covered it.

I've already given Mr. Ferrano half the money and will be paying him back the rest in another week.

The flashbacks continue as I head home. Me and my brother with just two suitcases worth of our own stuff heading into our new place. That's all we took from that filthy shithole. The rest of it went to the dump, not that there was much – she'd sold anything that had any worth. That piece of shit engagement ring wasn't on her finger when I found her dead. Either she pawned it, or he took it after he killed her.

I get to my new building and head to the second-floor apartment. This place smells a lot better than the building we grew up in, but my goal is to get completely out of this hood in the next couple years.

We only stayed in that guest room at the Ferranos' for a week and then I moved us here. Mr. Ferrano suggested this building and his housekeeper introduced us to an older lady that lives next door who babysits for me.

Mrs. Mustaine looks after Willie whenever I need her. She'll also pretend to be his foster mother to the school when needed. So far after just a couple weeks, Mrs. Mustaine is a better mother-figure to him than our mother ever was.

Mr. Ferrano offered us the option to stay with them, be part of their family, but I told him I appreciated this but was ready to be a man, wanted my own place. I think he respects that. He joked that his two daughters didn't want me as a brother,

anyhow – that they both had crushes on me so maybe someday I'd be part of their family anyway.

I won't take that bait, knowing in my gut that though Tom Ferrano is an excellent ally to have, I don't want to be groomed by him or further indebted.

Talking to Nino and Tino just a day before my mother got killed while we were having beers, they talked about the pressure on Tom's sons being heavy. He's a powerful man with high expectations so while they live in that big house, Tommy has a nice car, and they've both got stacks of cash in their pockets, they also work their asses off and deal with a lot of bullshit. Expectations for them are high from their old man.

I've spent my life without a father, with no decent father figures beyond Willie's dad, and have no burning desire to follow in anyone's footsteps. I already know I want to make my own tracks. I've been respectful every time Dario's father offers me any advice, and he's often helped me, but I'm set on doing things my way. I don't want more debts than necessary, but the kind of help he's given to me, I'll be in debt with him anyway.

He offered money to get us set up in this apartment, but it wasn't necessary; I'd been saving. I asked if he could give me any advice to keep Child Protective Services off our backs and he told me he'd already greased a palm, but wouldn't let me pay him back for that.

I told the Ferranos from night one that it had to be Max, and I wanted to get my hands on him. They knew that night when I emerged from their guest room after getting Willie to sleep that I would not rest until Max paid.

It's been a busy four weeks, settling into a new routine, trying to take care of Willie not just with the necessities of life but being there for him, too. And despite that I've had all that going on, I was looking for Max every chance I got.

When I finally walk into my place, I grab a hot shower before I head down the hall to get Willie from Mrs. Mustaine who

happily took him when I got the call to meet the guys. On my way there, I drop my bloody sweatshirt down the garbage chute.

She opens her door and tells me it's okay, he's sound asleep in her spare room and she'll take him to school in the morning. I go home and grab his backpack and another change of clothes for her and thank her for her help.

She looks at me with a sad smile, almost like she can guess what kind of a night I've had.

"Do you want something to eat? I made some soup. Baked some cookies."

"Thanks anyway, Mrs. M. I'll pick Willie up from school and stay in with him tomorrow night."

"Okay, Killian. I'm here if you need me." She pats my arm.

"Thanks, Mrs. M," I say and walk back to my place with a hollow feeling inside.

As soon as my head hits the pillow, I feel a strange sensation clawing up my throat.

I'm seventeen and haven't cried, haven't felt anything close to the sensation of crying since I was four or five years old.

I don't want to lose it now.

I push it away, don't let myself cave to weakness.

It's the next day, after school. We've just gotten home, so I look my brother in the eyes and tell him that he doesn't need details, but the guy who hurt Mom is no longer gonna terrorize anyone. I tell Willie he can't tell a soul I've said that to him.

My kid brother looks me in the eyes with wisdom beyond his years and nods. I tell him I'll stay in with him and we'll watch something or play a game.

He looks me in the eye again and puts his hand on my shoulder like he's wise beyond even my years.

“You got business to take care of Kill. I’ll be good. Can I go to the neighbor’s place for dinner? They got a kid my age and we like the same things. They asked me over for macaronis.”

The family is nice; he gets along with their two kids and tells me the dad never yells. He doesn’t know what it’s like to have men around who don’t yell. He needs buds, so I agree, dropping him off before I walk down to the pizza place.

I walk in to Nino and Tommy sitting there at the best table in the house. Bianca is on Nino’s lap, putting a Santa hat on his head while he grins at her. He sees me and lifts his chin in greeting.

A waitress named Carla that I dated last summer is leaned over Tommy, pouring beer into a glass and doing her best to flash her cleavage in his face.

Dario comes out of the men’s room and jerks his chin up at me. We walk to the table together and I pull a chair over from the next table.

“How’s things, boys?” I ask, casually.

“Things are good,” Nino says. “Everything’s good.”

And he doesn’t have to explain further that Max’s body is looked after.

Gina from my old building walks in with two friends. And she’s wearing a halter top with her tits half hanging out, in November for fuck’s sake. She’s also got an inch of makeup on her face. I don’t hide my annoyance when I make eye contact.

She looks at me with longing.

“Help yourself,” Nino invites, gesturing to the pizza and jug of beer on the table. “Carla, grab him a glass.”

“Sure,” she says. “Hi Kill.”

“Hey,” I say, turning my back on Gina.

“How are you doing?” Bianca asks me.

“I’m good. Thanks, Bee,” I say.

Mr. V, the owner of the pizza joint comes over and slaps my back. “Ima so sorry for your pain, Killian,” he says in his thick Italian accent.

Again.

“Thanks, Mr. V.” He’s seen me at least five times in the past month but says it every time.

“You better? You wear it in your eyes. But you have it a little less today. Today is better?”

“Yeah,” I reply, “gettin’ a little better.”

My eyes slide to make brief contact with each of the three guys at the table. They’re all watching me, and they all know I’m better than yesterday because of their help.

“Thazza good.” Mr. V. slaps my back again. “You wanna come back and work, you can come if you follow my rules.”

He fired me a few months ago for taking bets while on the job. He didn’t suffer for it, either; people bought slices and drinks when they stopped in. Or ordered food to go. But he was old-school and didn’t like it. I respected that. It’s his business and he can make the rules. I don’t need his job anymore; people who want to bet know how to find me. Business had been good before, but it’s been even better working as part of the bookie crew Mr. Ferrano put me on and having my schedule more open. More customers, more time on my hands, paying up a share of my profit but resulting in way more cash in my pocket.

“I think I’ll be okay, but thanks, Mr. V.”

“Okay. You change-a you mind, you lemme know.” He walks away.

“Be back,” Bianca gets off Nino’s lap and goes to the bathroom.

It’s just us guys at the table now.

“Handled yourself well last night. Respect, Kill,” Tommy says quietly. “I’d probably have made him suffer for a while first, but you did good. Handled it like a man.”

He shakes my hand.

Dario takes the new glass from Carla who approaches, waving her away before he pours me a beer from the jug. Mr. V lets us drink here, regardless that some of us are under twenty-one.

I take a long drink and then stare into my glass for a minute.

“Could’ve made him suffer more,” I say finally.

“Doesn’t matter, brother,” Nino leans forward and looks me in the eyes. “All that matters is you dealt. That’s done. Bottom line. No good for anyone to look backwards when lookin’ back makes no diff.” He slaps my back.

“This is true,” Tommy says. “Not meaning to make you question yourself, man.”

“Yeah,” I say, “It’s done.” I take another long drink, emptying my glass.

But he’s said something I’ve already been thinking and now that I’ve acknowledged it, I know it’ll nag at me even more.

Nino then leans over and tells me I had my shit together so well, I could be a contract killer if I wanted. He then tells me that if it’s something I want, he knows someone who can make that happen for me.

The day after I shot Max, when I told my kid brother he didn’t have to have nightmares anymore, mine started. Willie stopped pissing the bed and slept good at night.

I was happy to take that burden from him, but I missed being able to sleep straight through the night, missed the days when I didn’t remember what I dreamt about.

I didn’t have to sleep in his room. He didn’t try to sleep in mine. And it was good to see the kid start to excel. Do better in school. Laugh. Make some friends. Gain some weight. He went

heavy for a while, so obsessed with getting to eat when he was hungry, but then he got into girls and became a fitness junkie and got buff.

He still went quiet sometimes and I knew it was on his mind. He was trying to man-up, knowing I was working hard to make sure we were all right.

Every once in a while, I wake up on his bedroom floor, not remembering how I got there.

We never talk about it, though.

We've both had to grow up too fast, but I was glad to take care of him, give him a chance to be a kid a little longer. As much as he could be, given the shit he'd seen and been through.

During the day, I keep my shit tight.

But night times are when it gets rough. Wishing I'd planned what I'd do to him instead of rushing for the end result I wanted.

Because the haunting feeling that I should not have let him get off so easily gnawed. Nagged at me like the gnashing of teeth in the dark, just above my head.

I should've made that asshole suffer. Max got off too easy.

During the day, I worked to finish high school. I took care of Willie as best I could with the help of Mrs. Mustaine, and I made money taking bets.

When I graduate, Tom Ferrano is sitting there with Mrs. Mustaine watching me get my diploma.

We live in a clean apartment with decent furniture. Willie never gets hassled for having dirty clothes or cheap shoes again.

Life after Brianne Coulter is better for the bastard Coulter boys. Sad, but true. And I suspect it was better for her, too, wherever she was.

Late at night, when the over-thinking hits, the self-loathing? I run through regrets, thoughts that I handled it wrong. Thinking

on how I could've made him suffer. Suffer like my little brother suffered in fear. Suffered like my mother suffered at the mercy of the asshole on the floor as he hooped her in the face with his construction boots on that he wore all day every day unless he was in bed.

I should've hooped his face. He died with those boots on his feet. He should've died staring at dirty boots like she did.

I didn't realize when I took that gun and shot Max in the face that I would regret, for years, that I didn't take my time, that I wasn't patient. That I made it easy for him instead of making him suffer. That I hadn't been the patient guy my grandmother told me to try to be.

And I vowed that if anyone ever made me feel the way Max did again, they would not get off easily.

Me and my little brother lived in that other building for a couple years while I continued to build my business.

At twenty-one, I bought a little house for us in a nicer hood.

Along the way, I sometimes have to do small favors for Tom Ferrano, but thanks to him, I learn business lessons while I build connections and wealth.

By age twenty-four, I hit a personal net worth of a million bucks and do it ahead of my goal. I vow to spend my life trying to not only achieve my goals but to beat them.

2

Killian

The Week Before

Dario Ferrano's Wedding

This is familiar. Eerily.

Dario and Tommy Ferrano aren't here this time, but Tino and Nino Rossi are. Again, it's just before midnight and they've delivered someone to me who's bound and gagged with zip ties and duct tape.

Raymond *Shit Stain Ass Wipe* Iadanza.

We're not at the storage unit though. We're at my place by the ocean. Violet is at home in my bed.

It's been a few days of my head being fucked. Severely fucked. Because with the reveal of the trick coins, my mind has been whirling. Anger. Disbelief. Regrets. Playing the 'what if' game that I already know isn't good to play.

I play it too much.

Thinkin' on the fact that I got scammed by Raymond Iadanza of all people. That he scammed me and took Violet from me. That she could've been mine. That I should've been smarter. That she could've avoided three years of being fucked over by him, of ever even being touched, let alone fucked by him. That I should never have taken the bet. That his hands should never *fucking ever* have touched even a hair on her head.

I should not have taken that goddamn bet. Regardless of being cheated or not, it shouldn't have happened.

I know she wants me to let it go. I know she doesn't want violence. I know I want to be the man she's falling for, a man that rescued her and lets karma deal, but although I'd already

taken steps to let karma deal with him after what he did to that old lady with dementia – it's not enough. This shit will *not fucking* stand.

Finding out he cheated changes things. It doesn't change how I feel about her; if anything my feelings are stronger because it didn't have to be this way. She didn't have to go through *that*. But it changes things for him. I can barely think of anything besides revenge. It's been eating at me.

He fucked me. He knows he fucked me. He's walked around for three years after fucking cheating me, getting Violet as his reward. And ruining her life.

She hasn't seen how much it's gotten to me because it's been a busy few days dealing with the bullshit revolving around my former employee Amber, her thug boyfriend Felix Hoffman and all that bullshit at the clubs and Will's house Sunday night.

I needed to put a stop to this bullshit. It's piddly shit that I don't have time for, but I had some muscle pay that cockroach Hoffman a visit and teach him a lesson he won't soon forget for fucking with me.

I've also had Alana and Tony pay a friendlier visit to Amber's mother with an offer to pay to put her into rehab one more time with a subtle warning that she and her boyfriend should cease fucking with me immediately. Amber's mother insists that she's a good girl, that any bullshit was all on Hoffman, not her daughter.

The Raymond shit has swirled around in my brain, taunting me. My regrets. My anger. Things Violet said about Iadanza using intimidation, screaming in her face, hitting walls, frightening her, terrorizing her. Putting his filthy fucking mitts on her.

That piece of garbage did those things to her and then lay beside her at night with the knowledge that he cheated me in order to have her.

So Monday, I had a drink with and made arrangements with Henny, offering him stakes in a second online casino I'm

planning to launch, leveling with him that Violet used to be with Iadanza and that it happened because he fucked me over. Henny loves women, sleeps around even though he has a wife. But the man loves his woman and has three daughters with another on the way. He was only too happy to wade in, knowing he'd get a piece of my next business venture for what he was about to help orchestrate.

Later that same day he approached Sandra Iadanza with money and the offer to get Raymond out, telling me he doesn't want no part in what I do to Iadanza, just wants to know that whatever it is, it'll hurt.

I assure him that yes, it will hurt.

Henny's kind-hearted and does shit for the neighborhood, so if word got out he was helping out, most people wouldn't bat an eye. Sandra Iadanza cares about herself and I don't know how he framed the offer to her, but he told me he told her there was money in it for her after the court date. I don't know the rest of the details and don't care.

The waiting game of just a couple days was still too long of feeling like I wanted to crawl out of my skin with the urge to inflict pain on that fucker. My patience has been tried and tested and now it's time.

Now... knowing he's here, I should be about to start feeling right again. Sleeping again. Getting the fucked-up dreams to stop.

I descend the stairs into the basement to meet up with the Rossi brothers. The light is on, but I see nobody when I get to the bottom of the stairs because it's filled with construction materials as well as debris. By design. Looks like a basement in the midst of being renovated.

Deeper into the space and around a corner that blocks the view to the stairs, I see them standing outside the open door to the cold cellar room. Nino hands me the spare keys. I know that this time – the second time I'm going to take a life out of

vengeance, it's not going to *fucking* go quickly. Oh no. It's going to be slow. Extra-slow.

This piece of shit is going to pay for what he's taken from me and for what he's done to her – my beautiful girl.

Mine. She should've been mine from the start.

I won't be lying awake the next ten years wishing I hadn't let him off so easily. I'm not going to marinate in my remorse over not making it hurt as much as possible. I will not look my beautiful Violet in the face and see that damage he's done to her without knowing down to my depths I made sure he paid for what he did, for the three years he took from us. The three years he hurt her.

There's no way this debt will be cleared. Not even with death. But I'm going to do my *fucking* best to get it down to as close to zero as I can by taking days, weeks, or even longer to make him pay.

You do not fuck a bookmaker around with cheating at a game of chance. Not ever. And you do not fuck *me* around by keeping the woman who is everything I want away from me for three long years, hurting her, damaging her sense of self-worth while you do it.

I do not *fucking* think so.

The rage I've felt the last few days has been worse than anything I've felt. Even when I found my mother dead.

Every time Violet jolted in fear, every *fucking* time she scratched at her neck freaking out because of stress, it was because of that fucker.

“You need anything else, bro, you know who to call,” Tino says, shaking my hand.

Nino gives me a back slap and I hand him an envelope of cash.

“Thanks again guys. Appreciated.”

They know without being told that I don't need anyone's presence this time.

I've been friends with these guys since I was sixteen years old. We don't go for beers so often these days, don't have dinner at one another's houses, but I know who they are deep down and I trust them.

I eyeball the cold storage space. It'll need more fortification. A strong door. I'll figure that out later.

I step inside. He's there in the corner, mouth taped, wrists and feet secured, eyes reminiscent of Max's that night.

The fear in this fucker's eyes is mildly satisfying.

That night with Max, I felt cold, detached.

Tonight, I'm feeling a fuck of a lot different.

"Raymond."

He's scared. Good.

"Figured I'd gone soft, eh?" I ask, scratching my jaw thoughtfully, leaning against the doorframe. "Figured you were gettin' away with fucking me over when I gave you chance after chance?"

He's visibly shaking.

"Shoulda known, Ass-wipe. Makes sense to play the long game. You sure did, didn't you? Played for three years."

His eyes search my face, and it's clear he doesn't know that I know. Not yet.

"Three fucking years," I repeat, then shove my hand in my pocket and pull out a coin. Holding it up between my thumb and index finger, I stare at it, knowing his eyes are on it, too.

"It started with a coin. Didn't it? Fuck, she was beautiful that night, wasn't she? On that dance floor. Not a care in the world. In that sexy little wine-colored dress? Those curls? Fuck." I shake my head and then I flip the coin and catch it, cupping it over my other wrist.

"But then you *won* her in a bet and her life went to shit."

I moisten my lips. "Heads or tails, Raymond?"

His eyes have changed.

“Doesn’t matter, does it? Yeah. Didn’t matter what was called that night either, did it?” I lift my cupped hand and glance underneath before I shake my head in disappointment. “Didn’t matter because you saw me lookin’ at her, decided you wanted to have one up on me somewhere, anywhere in your shitty, small life, and the only way you could do that was to fucking cheat. Right?”

He shakes his head vigorously.

“Didn’t matter how that coin flip went with me because you planned it so you’d win. Didn’t you?”

More vigorous head-shaking.

“Didn’t you?” I roar.

He’s trembling. Hard.

Good.

I lower my voice, go back to regular volume with little to no inflection.

“I told her how it could’ve gone, how it could’ve been her and I from that night, how I took a bet that wasn’t my style and she tsk’d and then... then... you know what comes next don’t you, Ray?”

He shakes his head frantically.

“You know. Think for a second. She knew about those coins. She enlightened me about how she found ‘em in your laundry. She told me a lot of shit about you. How much she loved you, and believed in you. How you hurt her over and over.”

I snicker and shake my head.

“Had the love of a woman with a heart of gold. The body of a goddess. And brains in her head, too. But guess what, shit stain? She’s mine now. Yeah, she’s mine now, but she coulda been mine back then. And her life is gonna be very fuckin’ different from what it was with you, man. And you know what

else? Your life from now on? It's gonna be very fuckin' different, too."

I stuff the coin back into my pocket, walk over and squat in front of the fucker who is trying to shrink against the wall.

"The night you handed me the money? Man, she climbed into bed with me that night in a tiny little nightie... fuck, she's amazing. And I know it – she's mine until the day I die. That girl is perfect for me."

He stares helpless.

"Coulda left you in that jail to rot. Coulda done just that, make her happy. She didn't want you hurt. All the hurt you caused her, and she requested I not hurt you. Such a sweet girl. I almost listened. Almost. She's a fucking angel, isn't she? All that shit and she just wanted you out of her life. No payback. No punishment. Just a life free of Raymond. Well, her life *is* gonna be free of you. Though not because you'll rot in a jail cell for stealing money from an old lady like the lowlife degenerate you've always been. Didn't I try to teach you a lesson about stealing from old ladies when we were kids, Iadanza? Guess it didn't work. Too bad about that."

I smell the fear on him. And it reeks. But something about it gets me amped. Gives me a rush.

I keep going. "But now this isn't just about what she wants, it's about what you did to her. And what you fucking took..." I thump my chest with my fist, grinding out, "from *me*."

I lean in and he cowers like I'm gonna strike, but instead I rip the tape off his mouth.

He hisses.

"You took her from me. She could've been mine three years back, could've avoided you and your sorry bullshit. Right?"

"Kill... Man... Pl-please." He drags in a breath and shakes his head, whimpering.

"I don't even know where to fucking start. Just looking at you? I wanna gut you. Slowly. I wanna watch every red drop

flow out of your sorry sack-of-shit body and then staple you back together with rusty metal so I can watch every inch of you fester. You touched what could've been mine from that night. Could've escaped all your bullshit. Could've been warming my bed, being treated like a queen. Instead, she worked herself sick to take care of your sorry ass."

"Kill, you don't understand," he rasps.

"Explain it to me." I rise and stare down at him, arms folded across my chest.

I wait.

His eyes are wild with fear. He's sweating. He's dirty. Smells like he's pissed himself.

I jerk my chin up. "Help me understand. Go ahead."

"I never used those coins that night," he says quickly, breathlessly. "Didn't even have 'em then. That was an honest bet, Kill. It was a coin flip and you lost. I mean, it was just as p-plain as that. I did not cheat you, man. I didn't."

"You're a fuckin' liar. I replayed that toss in my head after Violet told me about those coins, how you had two of 'em. One in each pocket. You knew what the fuck you were doing. Exactly what you were doing. See, I don't usually play games when I have a fifty per cent chance of losing. But I didn't have a 50/50 shot, did I, Ass-wipe?"

I lean over and backhand him. His head hits the concrete wall.

But it feels like swatting a fly. Not remotely satisfying.

I wanna hear bones crunch. I want to see blood, gore, veins, tears.

"Cheat," I say through tight teeth.

And then I hoof him in the gut almost as hard as I'd have kicked if I were trying for a sixty-four-yard field goal. He grunts as he folds forward, turning red before his color drains and he pukes all over himself.

I step back and watch him groan.

And then I hoof him a second time.

“I need to go home to *my* woman, climb in my bed where she’s all warm and soft, probably wearing one of her little nighties with no panties. She does that so I get easy access when I come home to her late at night.” I lean over and brush his hair out of his eyes. He gawks in shock. “She’s so thoughtful that way, you know? Though you shouldn’t, should you? You shouldn’t have a fuckin’ clue.”

I kick him again.

“And you’re gonna pay for that. Dearly. But I’ll be back, Raymond. I need to clear my head and figure out all the ways you’re gonna pay before I end your sorry ass. This time, it’s gonna be a long game for me, too, man.” I flash him a grin.

“Killian,” he grunts, painfully. “Please.”

“Fuck you, Ass-wipe. You’ve underestimated me and overestimated yourself. I’ve given you all the chances you’re gonna get; I’ve heard all the excuses. Bottom line: you cheated, you took her, you hurt her, you put your fucking hands on her, and now... I get to hurt you.” I smile wide. “And I’m feelin’ like it’s gonna be creative.”

I guess I like it when people underestimate me. When I get to see the look in their face when realization dawns – it feels like a gift.

I turn to go, but before I do, I turn around and kick him in the chest. Hard. I then squat and put the tape back onto his mouth. Slapping it hard to make sure it sticks.

Then I drag my zipper down and take a piss, aiming it at him.

He curls into a ball and like the fucking turd he is, he sobs like a baby.

I leave, locking up.

When I get outside, the Rossi brothers are still here, so I approach their car. Tino rolls the driver’s side window down.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“Figured we’d hang back for a bit in case you want us to get rid immediately.”

“No,” I say. “But thanks. This time, it’s gonna be a little slower.”

Tino smiles wide. “Can I ask? What he do?”

“He cheated in a game.”

“Yeah?” Tino asks, intrigued.

“Yeah. And that game caused the woman I love three years of pain and kept me from having her in my life.”

Nino grinds his teeth.

“Thanks for having my back, guys.”

“It’s what you pay us for,” Tino shrugs.

“Yeah, but I haven’t always had to pay,” I say.

The twins shrug in an identical manner before Tino speaks again.

“We’re friends. Friends take one another’s backs. Money isn’t always required between friends.”

“Happy to take your backs if you ever need it. You know that, right?”

“We do,” Nino confirms.

“What’d you do with Max Amos?” I ask.

Tino looks surprised. “You’re asking this now? Been a long time, Kill.”

“Wondering if the same will do for this one when I’m done,” I shrug.

“Got someone in the family that runs a funeral biz. Crematorium on site,” he says.

I nod. “Interesting.”

Yeah. Maybe when I’m done he’ll get put into that oven while he’s still alive. Who knows? I’ve got time to figure that out.

Like Nan tried to teach me, I'll exhibit patience this time around and I'm thinking it'll pay off.

"Interesting, too," Nino says, "is the fact that we nabbed Iadanza for you from the same place we got Amos back in the day. Comin' out of Sandra Iadanza's apartment."

I scoff. I never asked where Max had been hiding. Doesn't surprise me that he was shackled up with Raymond's mother. Wouldn't surprise me if she knew what he did to my mother, too. Or at least suspected it.

I shake both of their hands and then get back into my car. They follow me back to Portland.

I climb into bed with Violet, who's warm and smells like coconuts. I kiss her shoulder. She turns into me.

"Mm, hi," she says sleepily.

I tangle my fingers into her hair.

"You just take a shower?" she asks. "You smell good."

"Yeah," I whisper. "Sorry to wake you up."

"What time is it?"

"Around three."

She snuggles in. "Late night."

"Yeah," I agree and my hand slides down her back. I pull her nightie up and cup her ass cheek. No panties.

She cocks her leg, giving me perfect access to slide my fingers between those cheeks until my fingertips skate through silky heat while I inhale at her throat.

Two strokes of my fingers and she's wetter. Ready. Running her hand up my chest and purring for me.

She puts her fingertips to my jaw and caresses it sweetly before she turns me to my back and climbs up to straddle me.

I feed my cock into her tight heat as she lets out a sweet little whimper and squeezes around me, holding my shoulders.

Watching her ride me in the moonlight is a beautiful sight. Seeing the curve of her throat, the swell of her gorgeous tits. I soak in the sensation of her tight walls squeezing me. After hooking my fingers into the straps of her nightgown and dragging them down so that I can see her beautiful body, I use one hand on her hip and put the thumb of my other hand to her clit. I encourage her to ride me until she comes. The sound of her breathing, her little whimpers, the feel of her convulsing around me makes me follow directly afterwards.

I drift off to sleep with a smile on my face, holding her close and thinking about the fact that while I'm here with my cock coated in Violet, her beautiful hair on me, her hand hooked around my neck and the sounds of her breathing softly while she sleeps in my arms, Iadanza is in my cold, dark basement, lying in a puddle of his puke along with my piss and wondering what sort of hell will come to him tomorrow at my hands.

3

Violet

Las Vegas

Several Weeks Later

“So, when are you gonna show me that kinky side I’ve heard rumors about?” I inquire, poking my dangly earring through my lobe.

“Forget about the shit you heard, baby. Seriously. She was exaggerating. Chick was into one position and only when she absolutely felt like putting out would benefit her. She would’ve thought anything but missionary was kinky.”

“I’m not afraid of more adventurous sex, Killian. Are you afraid I’m too fragile? Because Ray didn’t sexually abuse me.”

“This has nothing to do with him. This is just about us. We’ll have plenty of time to work up to kink if that’s what we both want. Believe me.”

“Maybe I want some now.”

He laughs.

“Really. With Ray, it was just sort of a duty. It was lackluster. It became a chore because I fell out of love with him because of how he treated me. In the beginning, it was good. Actually, it –”

“Somebody better tell my wife to shut up right now because I don’t wanna be the one to do it.”

I pause and then wince as heat floods my face. “Oh. Sorry.”

“Yeah. Sorry,” he grumbles.

“It’s a million years ago and I barely remember it because he piled so much bad on me that I forgot the good. My point is, don’t feel like you have to treat me like I’m breakable because of him. I don’t want him to be between us. Let’s start this conversation over.”

“Consider the last minute forgotten.” He waves his hand dismissively.

“Unless you wanna spank me,” I offer, “you know, for punishment.”

“That look on your face? The way you’re breathing? Tells me spanking would be the opposite to a punishment and I’m not about to reward you and risk you committing the same crime, baby.”

I pout. “Boo. You’re no fun.”

“Oh, I’m fun. Believe me. I plan to show you some fun.”

“Sooo…” I flash a smile and then ask the question I just asked as if I didn’t already ask it. “When are you gonna show me that kinky side I’ve heard about?”

“Tonight,” Killian whispers against my bare shoulder. “In this dress? It was already part of the plan.”

“This old thing?”

“This old thing,” he confirms, taking a handful of the fabric at the hem and smiling.

“You like this dress? It’s ancient; I’ve had it for eons,” I say, smiling, too.

“I know. You were wearing this dress the night I first saw you,” he says against the skin behind my ear, making me shiver.

I guess I shiver for two reasons. His mouth, for one. But also, if this is the dress I had on when Killian first saw me, this is also the dress I had on when Ray first saw me.

I remember a lot about that night. What Killian wore. What Ray wore. How they looked together both dressed in black,

eyeballing me while I danced with my friends. I hadn't thought much about what I was wearing.

The dress is definitely sexy. It's burgundy. Short and clingy velvet. Cleavage. It makes my butt pop out, too. I've always liked it.

"I bought this on sale for, like... twenty-nine dollars when I was just barely old enough to drink."

"Well, it was money well spent, Dimples."

We're going to a dinner theater tonight and this was the dress he asked me to wear, something he packed when he quickly threw together stuff picking me up from work the other day so that he could whisk me to Vegas, so he could propose on the airplane, so I could gain entry into the mile-high club before landing in Sin City and tying the knot.

"Did you and I join the mile high club together or were you already a member?" I ask.

He's behind me at the mirror, fixing his collar.

He smiles devilishly.

I wait.

He says nothing, so my eyebrows rise. I'm suddenly feeling a pang of regret for even asking.

"You really wanna know?"

My expression drops. Heat floods my face and I'm about to shake my head.

"I joined it with you," he finally says.

My mouth splits into a smile as I empty my lungs.

"Was that two point five seconds of misery, Mrs. Coulter?"

"It was," I admit. "Somebody better tell my husband not to tease me like that. I can be very jealous and possessive."

He winks, then turns and heads out of the bathroom, leaving the door open, so I continue to watch the mirror, seeing him

lift his glass of bourbon before he looks out at the strip from the floor-to-ceiling window.

This hotel suite is gorgeous. Lavish. Luxurious. And it's been a fun few days.

We got married Friday night, a few hours after we arrived. Killian had the hotel concierge find me a salon that took care of my makeup, hair, nails, and that had three choices for beautiful white dresses for me to choose from. The dress is a dream and fit me like it was custom-made. Lace top, off the shoulder, with a full organza skirt. Corset back so a perfect fit. It couldn't have been more perfect. We had it sent home so I can put it and the gorgeous floor-length veil on again when we do the family wedding.

According to my bestie, who called me the next day to talk about the photos I sent her, we could not have found a more perfect wedding gown if we had gone on a months-long hunt for it. It felt like fate.

She's already shopping for her flower girl dress and says she's stoked about the fact that she doesn't have to do all the maid-of-honor stuff since we're already hitched.

Before we got off the phone, she had me put it on speaker and asked Killian his favorite color. He told her it was burgundy and she then asked if he preferred satin or lace. He said he had no preference and inquired why. Susanna told Killian that her wedding gift to him was that she was going to do the one thing she dreaded and throw me a bridal shower. When he asked what that would do for him, she revealed that it was going to be a lingerie shower.

This was how she would show him her gratitude for making her best friend happy. He immediately offered to foot the bill for the booze and catering, and we all laughed.

I can't believe the whirlwind my life has been the past several weeks. How different life is. How wonderful.

The wedding ceremony itself was simple and almost perfect. We got married in a lovely little chapel that was dripping with

flowers. It was Vegas style in terms of it being quick and having other couples waiting, too, but there was nothing tacky about it. It was fun sitting in a waiting room with other couples who all looked in love. Everyone kept smiling at one another.

I believed that Killian meant every word of his vows and I know I meant mine. The only thing that made me feel a little unusual was that our family and friends weren't there. We got a video so I can show my family, and yes, we're planning to do it again with them present, but I am officially Mrs. Killian Coulter and I am so glad that I took the leap of faith despite how fast all this has happened.

When we do it again, we'll likely do it either at Killian's beach house by the water or it's been offered that we could also do it in my grandfather's backyard. It would be so amazing to say those vows again, to make promises in front of our loved ones directly next to my grandmother's many rosebushes. Or to do it by the ocean with some of those roses in my hair.

When he told me it was up to me how we did it for the family, he said, "You made my wish come true when you agreed to marry me last night, Violet. I'll be doin' my best to make all your wishes come true for the rest of your life."

God, he's swoony. And now I'm officially Violet Coulter. Which is surreal.

After we tied the knot, the limo took us to our hotel and the room was staged perfectly for a dream wedding night. Flower petals. Candles. A romantic dinner. Champagne.

Killian told me he talked Shara into giving me three weeks off for our honeymoon – one of which she said would be unpaid as that was more vacation than I had accrued, and I had trouble with that, telling him maybe we should trim it so I could be back when I was out of days off, but he's waved it off.

I feel in my heart that I'll only be married this once, so I've decided to just enjoy and live in the moment. I'll work my butt off when we get home to prove I'm still a model employee.

We're here in Vegas for another day and then off to Italy for more honeymooning.

The driver closes the limo door and once he's back inside, the privacy divider goes up and Killian grabs my hand and pulls it to his lips. The way his eyes are sparkling with mischief is a direct line to waking the butterfly nest in my belly as well as my libido.

We've had a great dinner at a dinner theater that put on an awesome show and now, I don't know where we're off to.

"Having a good night?" Killian asks.

"I mean, yeah. Great food. A fun performance to watch. Too bad we couldn't find a bad play though."

"Not for lack of trying. We'll find you a bad play in Italy."

"I don't speak Italian. Do you?"

"No."

"Then how will we know if it's good or bad?"

"Hm. Good question."

"We'll do our own translations," I say. "Make sure we have bad nose-bleeder seats so that we can narrate through it without getting dirty looks for talking."

He smirks. "You're a little crazy, Mrs. Coulter."

I smile at him, but inside, I'm practically panting with excitement. I have been wondering all night how things will go, what sort of kinky business we'll get up to. He's been giving me these saucy looks all night, like he has plans and the anticipation has my insides all aflutter.

"Killian?" I ask.

"Mm hm?" he replies.

"Are we going back to the hotel?"

"Not immediately," he says, smiling.

“Oh... where are we going?”

“You’ll see. Patience please, Mrs. Coulter.”

I smile.

“You always gonna show me those dimples when I say your name?” He kisses me.

“I might for a while. I’m still in awe of my new name.”

He kisses my hand again and plays with my rings. My gorgeous wedding and engagement rings.

“Killian?”

“Hm?”

“I’m ... um... I’m not wearing any underwear.”

His eyes flare for just an instant before he’s on his knees between my calves. He looks over his shoulder, I assume to make sure the divider is up.

It is.

“I wanted you to know that in case you forgot about the plan to be kinky tonight.”

He leans closer. “One thing to know about me, I forget nothing.”

I lick my lips as his head moves down. His lips touch the inside of my right knee. And then they move up and touch down again a little higher up. And I’m jolting like a timid rabbit, but if I had panties on, they’d be soaked right now.

“Open wide, Violet,” Killian orders, eyes on mine. “I need to taste my wife.”

God, this man makes my body quiver.

I have never seen a guy get off so much on giving oral. He gives it to me almost every time we have sex. It’s often the prelude, like Killian likes to taste what he’s about to put his cock into. It’s ridiculously hot.

His hands glide up my thighs, pushing my dress up a little. He then pauses and takes his suit jacket off and slides it under me. “Lift your bottom,” he orders.

“Saving the seat,” I say, lifting up so he can get his jacket under my butt.

“Naw. Fuck the seat, I’m protecting your sweet body,” he corrects before his face descends, and what happens next has me arching my back.

“Ooh.”

“Stand up, Violet.”

“Huh?”

Killian backs off and pushes the button for the sunroof. As it opens, I give him a questioning look.

“I wanna bury my face between your legs while you hang out the sunroof and watch the strip,” he says.

I giggle.

“You down?”

Whoa. “Um... yeah. I think it’s you that’s gonna be... um *down*.”

He wiggles his eyebrows.

I kick my heels off and step up onto the seat.

The hot Nevada air hits me like a wall once my head is out and I’m up to mid-torso out the sunroof when he grabs my ass cheeks and wraps both of my legs over his broad shoulders. I’m straddling his face.

Wow.

His capable hands caress my backside as he kisses between my legs.

And I see lights. Streetlights. Hotel and casino lights. Headlights. Brake lights. The typical Vegas venue lights. And I try to take it all in while looking around, but it isn’t easy because I’m getting lost in sensation.

Insane sensations between my legs and further feelings in my belly, my chest, and my head.

Look at me. I'm in a stretch limo, on the Las Vegas strip, getting eaten out by my gorgeous husband while I hang out the sunroof.

Geez, this is crazy.

People wave from the street, probably thinking I'm being a show-off, riding in style. But they have no idea that I'm actually riding my husband's face while I wave back.

This is such a departure from who I was just weeks ago.

A fierce orgasm rushes through me and while I try to stop myself from visibly shuddering, I'm thinking anyone watching closely probably thinks I'm having a seizure. My body bucks and I whimper, slapping the roof before I'm yanked down.

Killian leans back into the seat, me straddling him, his fingers tangling in my curls while I'm shifted and placed directly onto his hard cock. He pulls me down hard and I whimper into his mouth as he slams inside. Deep. So deep.

I'm still coming down from my climax and these sensations just extend it.

"I'm fuckin' you in this dress," he says, eyes filled with sexy fire.

I nod.

"This dress," he repeats, touching my face.

"Yeah," I agree.

He bares his teeth and pounds harder, hands on my hips, pushing hard up into me from underneath with deep, delicious strokes.

"You're mine."

I nod. God, he's sexy.

"Forever. Mine forever, Violet."

"Yeah, baby."

“Say it, Violet.”

“I’m yours, Kill.”

“Fuck, I love you so much,” he says with absolute emotion in his eyes as he cups my jaw to bring my lips to his again, his tongue is seeking entry.

I open and our tongues tangle up together as I whimper and mutter a garbled phrase that’s me telling him I love him, too, though it probably doesn’t sound like it because I’m all breathy, and filled with his rock-hard cock.

My dress is pulled down my arms until the bodice is down around my stomach. He then hauls the cups of my bra down and his mouth is on one nipple while his fingers pluck at the other and still, the rhythm of deep thrusting does not stop.

My head lolls back and I see more blurry lights and the city move by out the window. Finally, his hands go super-tight on my hips as he spills into me, burying his face into my neck with a sexy moan.

“I had a vision of fucking you in this dress way before we got started. Fucking you rough in this dress. Coming on this dress.”

“Did you come on it?”

“No,” he says, “Felt too good to be inside you.”

“There’s always next time I wear it,” I say, and put my mouth to his.

“Yeah.”

“That was a little kinky,” I inform.

He winks.

Lake Como, Italy

Italy has been everything I’ve dreamt of and more. It’s been an incredible few weeks since that Friday when Killian picked me up at work. We go home tomorrow.

We've shopped until I know he wanted to drop (Killian indulged and spoiled me rotten), we've dined at amazing restaurants, seen museums, landmarks, and shows (including a play that was in Italian, but it wasn't remotely bad, despite my request) as well as danced the night away in an outdoor street party in a little village, the night ending with a light dusting of snow.

We've made love under the stars, in limousines, on a train, and the other day I got felt up in a dark corner booth of a busy restaurant, being told to come quietly. I knocked the saltshaker over and banged my knee a little hard under the table but other than that, I managed to do it without alerting anyone.

We took that little train trip for an afternoon where we had passionate sex in the private berth, but got interrupted by the conductor who wanted us to know about a delay. And we got suitably covered up before Killian let him in but I'm fairly sure my pink-stained cheeks gave away that we'd been up to something naughty.

Yeah, my husband is a little kinky. Totally protective. And absolutely doting. And I find I'm completely on board with all of it.

"Um, so..." I say while zipping up the new, big suitcase. We had to upgrade our luggage after arriving because of all the shopping.

"So?" he prompts a moment later, while fixing the collar of his dress shirt.

"You didn't have me sign any sort of prenup because we did this so fast, so I just want you to know that if you want to get me to do one when we get home... is it called a post-nup?"

"I don't have a clue what it's called but we don't need it," he says, looking at me, eyebrows knitting.

My face goes hot. "I mean, you said yourself you're rich and I don't want you to think I have any designs on-"

He erases the space between us and cradles my jaw with both hands, staring deep, effectively making me shut up.

It takes a minute before he speaks, but his eyes look almost angry and I find myself slumping.

“If I thought I needed a prenup I wouldn’t have married you, Violet.”

I’m biting my lip, so I release it. “You don’t know me all that well yet, Kill, and a prenup isn’t unreasonable in this day and age, especially when I come to the relationship with almost no cash, a six-year-old car, and some old upcycled furniture. You’ve got a whole lot more than that, so –”

“Yeah, it *is* unreasonable. Two things.”

I pull my lips tight and wait.

“We aren’t ever getting a divorce, so it’s a non-issue.”

I smile. “I like the way you think.”

“Yeah and straight up, Violet, I made my money from nothing. If I need to start over, I’ll have no problem doing that. I like having money. I like not going without. And for real, if you for some reason decided you needed to leave me and take all my money with you and I was okay with you leaving? I could give every dime I had to you and start over knowing I could make more money. I’m not afraid of more hard work.”

Wrapping my arms around him, I kiss him. “I don’t want your money; I just want you.”

“You have me. And you have all this money, too. When we get home, we’ll meet with my lawyers about the financial changes.”

“Changes?”

“Yeah. You’ll get the rundown and the list of assets in case anything happens to me and I’ll make changes to my will.”

Now my eyebrows are knitting. “Nothing can happen to you. I just got married to you. Don’t you dare let anything happen to you. I forbid it.”

He smiles and kisses me. “I’m not goin’ anywhere, but if something did happen, you’ll get it all. Mostly. Little bit for

my brother.”

My chin trembles.

“Hey,” he says, cupping my jaw. “Don’t get upset.”

“That night those guys came from nowhere, Killian, I still can’t get it out of my head. I could’ve lost you.”

“That was a case of mistaken identity. That was a one-off. A unique situation. That fucker that ordered that’ll be taken care of, too. And you’ll never have to worry about him again.”

“I don’t know what ‘taken care of’ means. Do I want to know?”

“Probably not.”

“Alrighty then.” My eyes drop to the side.

He tips my chin so that my eyes are back on his face. “Forget all that. Bottom line, if nothing or if anything happens to me you’ll never have to worry about cash again. If I go... it’ll all go to you other than a bit of money set aside for Willie and any kids he has.”

I blow out a breath. “I really don’t like this conversation.”

He fingers a lock of my hair. “You started it.”

“I know. I don’t like it, though.” I exaggerate my pout.

He smiles. “Do you want to come work for me? It’s your company, too, now. What’s mine is yours.”

“I like my job and ditto. You are now the proud co-owner of some really awesome lightsaber chopsticks, you know? And a cuddly red couch.”

He chuckles. “I’m now a wealthier man than I ever was.”

I smile big.

“Wealthier than I ever dreamed now that I have you,” he adds, eyes filled with what I know is authenticity, sincerity .

“Aww, shucks,” I say with an eyelash flutter, but inside, I feel like I’m so warm and glowy, I could just float on my happy

cloud.

“If you want, quit your job and start something new. But if you want to work for me, I have plenty I could use some help with. You could take over managing procurement for all four locations. Or-”

“I like my job. They’re good to me.”

“Your boss was bitchy about giving you this time off.”

“Well, it was out of the blue,” I say. “Besides, I’m in line for a promotion. I like doing my own thing, making my own money. And I want to contribute to the household bills, so-”

He cuts me off. “Forget contributing. And you’ll have access to the money.”

“You want access to mine, too? I’ll add you to my account,” I say.

He smiles indulgently.

“No, for real. I split my account off from... you-know-who... while he was in Atlantic City and figured I’d never have a joint account again in my life because of all that. But I would totally add you to it. As soon as we get home, I’m changing my last name legally to yours and adding you to my bank account.”

“Thanks, baby.” He’s looking at me with love in his eyes. “I’d love it if you’d do that for me.”

God, I love him so much.

“I don’t want to make any career changes right now, Killian.”

“Fine. If you change your mind, sky’s the limit. You have access to money to start a business, buy a business, invest in something. Be the philanthropist you always wanted to be and start-up your own charity. Whatever you want. Your days of struggling are over.”

“What do you get out of this? What can I give you?”

“You,” he whispers.

“You have me,” I say.

“Good. Forever?”

“Forever,” I say.

“I’m holdin’ you to that.”

“Good.”

“And Violet, you have me forever, as well. No more talk about prenups or bullshit like that. You ‘n me always. Till death, Violet. Okay?”

I snuggle into his chest and he kisses the top of my head.

“I know something you might be able to give me, actually,” he says.

“Here it comes...” I say with mock distress.

He chuckles. “Maybe some babies.”

I look up at him. He shrugs and smiles almost boyishly.

I laugh. “We’ll see. Might already be one brewing since *somebody* threw my birth control pills away.”

“Somebody did that?” he asks, fake-shocked.

I roll my eyes.

“Could be one brewing?” he asks.

“Could be,” I say. “Though it might take a little longer since I was on the pill for like, eight years.”

“Hope it doesn’t take long,” he says and puts his hand on my belly. “A little version of you ‘n me? I’d like to meet him.”

“Or her,” I say.

He shrugs. “Or her.”

Yeah. Lots and lots of unprotected sex. Two days after we got married I got my period, which I was expecting after abruptly stopping my birth control pills and figured it’d suck for our honeymoon, but it only lasted for three days and the third day, he didn’t let it stop him from pulling me into the shower for

sex. Since then, we've been aptly at it like honeymooners. Bunny-honeymooners, I'd say, since it happens twice, sometimes three times a day.

"Ready to go?" I ask.

He kisses me in reply and then tugs me toward the door. We head out for our last dinner in Italy.

Not long after we get back, we're sitting on our private terrace with a fire in the chiminea in front of us and a blanket around us. I've got a glass of wine and he's drinking some whisky. We're enjoying the view of the lake and soaking in every minute of our last night of our honeymoon.

And I'm thinking about getting home and getting into life as a married woman. Thinking about family Christmases and my future.

Despite all the good thoughts, my mind strays to the past. I can't help but wonder what's happened while we've been away as far as Ray goes. We left on that Friday. He was due in court on Monday.

Did he show up? Or is he still in hiding? Is he going to rear his head again and try to steal my sunshine?

"Cold?" Killian asks.

"A little." I bunch my shoulders up and shiver.

He leans over and puts another log into the chiminea.

I snuggle in as he settles the blanket back over us.

"What's on your mind?" Killian asks.

"You don't wanna know," I say, sipping my wine.

"I always wanna know what's on your mind."

I sigh heavily.

"What?"

“I’m wondering what the story is with Ray. His court date. If he showed up.”

“I’ll inquire about all that when we get home,” he says, rubbing his forehead. “It’s not something you need to worry about.”

I shrug. “Can’t help but wonder. Is he on the run? Is he gonna show back up and cause trouble at some stage? You know... just wondering.”

“Don’t worry about him,” Killian says. “For real. He’s no longer a factor in your life.”

“Kinda hard after so long, after everything.” I stare into the flames for a minute, lost in thought.

“Violet?”

“Hm?”

“Violet,” he repeats, so I look at him.

He’s got a very serious look on his face.

“I want you to try to let it go,” he says. “I know it’s hard, but I want you to believe he’s no longer something for you to worry about. I’m taking care of that. Raymond is my problem, not yours. Okay? Give it to me.”

I snicker.

“Here.” He holds out his palm. “Give it to me.”

“Give it to you?”

“Yeah. Hand it over.”

“Hand what over?”

“All your worries about Raymond Iadanza. All of them. Give them to me here and now and let me handle them.”

I smile. “You’re pretty amazing, you know that?”

“I try,” he says and there’s a hint of a smile, though he’s still mostly serious. And he’s still holding his hand out.

I put my clenched fist into his palm, fingers pointing down.
And then I unclench, as if I've handed him something.

"Now dust it off," he orders, closing his fist.

I dust my hands off.

He waits, holding his fist closed, as if I really have handed him something.

"Go wash your hands with soap and water."

I laugh.

"I mean it. It's done. It's not your worry any longer. Okay?"
He looks one hundred per cent serious.

"Okay," I whisper, emotion burning in my sinuses.

"Go wash and then come back."

I stare at my hands as I wash them in the bathroom in our hotel suite. Soapy bubbles and hot water. I wring my hands together for a long time until the bubbles have all gone down the drain. And then I look in the mirror and I smile.

It's symbolic, but it actually helps.

I look healthy. I look happy. In love.

I feel great.

After drying off, I make my way back outside, seeing Killian looking like he's in a pose of reflection, too, as he stares into the fire, elbows resting on his knees.

He straightens when he sees me.

"All good?" he asks.

"All perfect," I amend.

"Come here."

"Go wash your hands first. You're not allowed to touch me with residue of that still on your hands. I take it you threw it into the fire, right?"

He gives me half a smile and then goes inside and then when he's back, sitting down, he commands, "Come here right now."

I climb onto his lap and wrap the blanket over us.

"I love you," I tell him, snuggling in.

"I love you, Violet. More than I ever dreamed. More than anything."

He kisses my jaw and then sifts his fingertips through my hair.

"Are you really real?" I ask.

"A hundred per cent," he tells me.

"And you're all mine?" I ask, smiling.

"All yours," he replies, face serious. "Let's go to bed. Enjoy our last night in Italy with me buried inside you."

4

Killian

I tuck my phone into my pocket and put my key into the door, turn it, and say, “Wait right there.”

I disarm the alarm system and shove all the bags inside the door, then I sweep my gorgeous, dimple-cheeked bride into my arms and carry her over the threshold.

She’s smiling so big her face is gonna hurt.

I kick the door shut behind me and carry her to the kitchen counter and set her down on it.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I give her a look of promise that makes her eyes light up with lust. She knows what’s about to happen and she’s hungry for it. My beautiful girl.

Nothing more about christening the counters had been said, but I know she hasn’t forgotten. During the time since she’d officially moved in I’d catch her looking at the countertops with her teeth caught by her lip, with that faraway look that I’ve quickly figured out is her daydreaming, fantasizing.

She hasn’t forgotten my promise to fuck her on these counters at all; she’s been wanting it. And now that she’s a hundred percent mine, more mine than she ever was *his*, that’s just what I’m about to do.

She’s in yoga clothes and I’m in sweats. I don’t typically leave the house dressed like this but when you know you’re gonna be on a plane for half a day, you wanna be comfortable. These clothes are coming off the both of us right now.

I carefully pull her hair tie out and watch her curls spring free to cascade down around her shoulders. I lift the hem of her

hoodie and pull it along with the tank top underneath over her head together. She's not wearing a bra.

Our eyes are locked. One of our typical staring contests. Fuck, she's sexy. She shimmies the yoga pants and her panties down to her knees. After I pull them and her sneakers and socks off, I kick my own shoes off. Violet pulls my hoodie up over my head and a moment later, I'm divesting myself of everything I've got on south of my waist while her hands roam my shoulders and my chest. I jerk her hips toward me and her head rolls back briefly as I grab the back of her neck and pull her mouth to mine. She cries into my mouth as I slam my hips forward and fill her.

Yeah. Fucking her on this kitchen counter. Fucking my wife on this pink marble.

My wife.

I'll be editing the video that's being recorded of this so that all the fuck-wad sees is the expression of ecstasy on her face and the back of my head, knowing that I'm fucking my wife.

Mine.

After fucking Violet on the counter, we take a shower, order in some food, and then fuck again in our bed before she falls asleep.

Tony has been driving back and forth to the beach house to feed and water that piece-of-shit vermin in my basement.

There's been a doctor in once a week to check on Fuckface, too, because I'm not ready for him to be dead yet and the injuries that I've inflicted on him have needed medical attention.

Before we left, I moved him to the cistern while getting Tony to handle making a more secure cell for him. Clearly by the money and the trouble I've spent putting that in, I'm not ready to be done punishing him yet.

He hasn't been physically injured by anyone in almost three weeks. That streak ends the day after tomorrow when I drive out there.

She wants to go visit her parents tomorrow for a big family welcome home dinner with aunts, uncles, and cousins and then she's got a day to rest up before going back to work with plans to spend next weekend in Tillamook. She's excited about going antiquing and treasure hunting to find things to fill our second home with. And I love that.

No, I don't like that I've had to fib to her about the shit-stain in the basement, but I certainly don't want her down there.

It's not my goal to have a marriage built on secrets, but this one secret is a necessity. And it's for the greater good. He gets to suffer, which is good for me, and she doesn't have to worry about him. At all. Better for her.

He was a mess the few days we stayed there after I got jumped. I made sure he knew she was under the same roof. He tried to plug his ears after I played, on a loop, the conversations she and I had where she didn't want to waste any time thinking about him. I beat the shit out of him and then went back to bed and fucked her, recording the sounds of her whimpers and declarations that I'm the best she's ever had, which has come in handy played for him occasionally on a loop.

I enjoyed every minute of our honeymoon, but now that we're back, now that we've christened the countertop, I'm feeling the itch. Itching to go back there, let him know that she's got my name, let him see how happy she is, make him feel a little more hurt, then I might be ready to decide how it ends. Maybe.

The fuckface hasn't yet paid enough. For what he did to me. More than that, for what he did to her for all that time. Maybe I'll make him suffer for the same length of their relationship. We'll see.

5

Violet

A Little More than A Week Later

Tillamook

I'm in the kitchen at the beach house, staring out the window at my insanely hot husband who is outside in jeans and a hoodie, using a chainsaw on some logs so we can have a fire by the water tonight.

It might be crazy to have campfires by the ocean in December when it's cold out, but it's something I'm craving and it seems to be in Killian's nature to cater to my wants. I feel very lucky.

A few days ago, we spent time with his lawyer after he picked me up from work in what he told me was my new wheels. A burgundy Land Rover SUV.

I gave my brother Cody my old car as an early Christmas present, with my parents' permission, and he was absolutely stoked.

After the meeting with the lawyer, I felt numb. I'm still flabbergasted about the amount of wealth he's built up for his age. Beyond the condo, the house his brother lives in, and the beach house, there's the four nightclubs and he owns all the buildings they're in. He's also got a very profitable online gambling website. Profitable is an understatement. That thing is a cash cow.

Beyond the SUV, two sports cars, and a pretty diversified investment portfolio, he's got other property. He's got millions of dollars otherwise. And he wants a life insurance policy on top of it, which is overkill, and also said that as soon as we have kids he wants trust funds set up for them.

As much as I'm not in this for the money, it's sweet that he wants me to know what his assets are, wants me to feel safe and protected. Financially secure. I joked I'd probably still shop the discounts and got a dubious and judgmental look from the lawyer at that comment. Like I'm bullshitting. Like I'm really a gold digger.

His lawyer doesn't like that he didn't make me do a prenup or a post-nup, that Killian said right there that he wanted a seven figure life insurance policy with me as the beneficiary. But it's his job to protect Killian's interests and I said as much when Killian got salty with him about his attitude.

Since getting back from Italy, we've also enjoyed a nice family dinner with my parents, aunts and uncles, plus my cousins and grandfather as well as a night out with Susanna at a fancy restaurant. And while I'd initially said I might want to have our family wedding at Grampa's, Mom talked me into doing it at this house when I showed her the old real estate listing after finding it online.

She fell in love with the possibilities and reasoned that even if we tried to do all the work ourselves or hired professionals to get Grampa's house ready for the party, it'd put undue stress on him. She's right.

And this house is big enough for all of us. Mom promised if we wait until the right time in spring to have the ceremony, she'll get roses from my grandmother's place and make me a bouquet.

After too-long of watching, ogling Killian while daydreaming about the family wedding, I turn around and flick the hand mixer on. Not five seconds later, everything turns off all at once.

Uh oh. What did I do?

I've got the microwave going as well as the oven and the coffee maker along with the radio on, so I've clearly overloaded the circuit.

I call out the back door but since he's running the chainsaw, he doesn't hear me.

This is an old house, so I'm not shocked I've blown a fuse or flipped a breaker or whichever – depending on how ancient the electrical system is.

And being a giant house you'd think the electrical panel could be anywhere, but the most logical place for this kitchen would be somewhere close, like the basement since this is the original part of the structure. I head to the basement door after pulling on my sneakers so I can go down there and investigate.

As I head down the stairs, I'm assuming things are tidier than they were the last time I was down there, when he first showed me this place. He was so angry about the condition his contractor had left it in. When I get to the bottom of the staircase, it doesn't look much different.

There are piles of construction materials. Stacks of drywall sheets. Stacks of bricks. Some lumber. Three doors leaned against one wall. A workbench and a large tool chest.

There's no electrical panel at the bottom of the stairs so it must be deeper into the space.

Unlike last time, there's at least more space to walk around the construction materials to get deeper into the basement.

It's chilly down here and I shiver as I turn around a corner and see the back side of the basement is mostly empty. There's a massive brick enclosure on one side, but past it, I can see my target, the electrical panel on the wall and thankfully, it's one with switches and I can see that only one switch is the wrong way. I peer over the edge of the enclosure as I pass, and it's got to be at least twelve feet deep. A strong bleach odor assaults my nose. Very strong. Is that a water well or something?

I lift my phone out of my pocket and turn the flashlight on and peer down.

There's rubbish at the bottom. The walls are stained. I have to lean back though, as the bleach is overpowering; I feel it in my

sinuses. I back away, thinking this is a hazard with only a slight enclosure of bricks around it, perhaps a foot high. On the floor beside it there's a little projector, I think. Strange. It doesn't look old. It looks new.

Leaned against the wall near it is what looks like a large lid. It should be re-covered until he can get that filled in.

Before I get to the electrical panel straight ahead on the far wall, I see the backside of the basement looks like it might have been finished at one stage, but has been partly demolished. I also spot a large, black steel door with a shiny silver doorknob. It looks new.

I turn the knob, unsurprised it doesn't budge. A big, also new-looking, black wheelie trash bin sits outside of it along with a large toolbox. I'm about to lift the lid of the bin when I hear my name.

"Violet? What the fuck are you doin' down here?"

I spin. Killian is coming toward me with concern on his face.

"Oh." I move to the panel and flick the breaker. "Because of that. I was running too many appliances in the kitchen."

"Should've called me."

"You were busy. Gee, it's freezin' down here." I shudder.

"Plus I found it easily enough. I'm no electrician but I can flip a switch," I quip.

"Let's get back upstairs," he says curtly.

"What's all this?" I ask, gesturing to the door.

"Just some shit I need under lock 'n key. Nothing for you to worry about."

He puts his arm around me and leads me back the way I came.

"And that?" I stop and point to the pit.

"Old cistern. Water storage at some point."

"Reeks of bleach."

“Yeah. Had a smell. Poured bleach down there to try to get rid of it.”

I flash my phone flashlight into it again and stare at the half a dozen bleach bottles sitting down there, finding it odd that he tossed them down there.

“Your man cave needs a lot of work,” I muse.

And then my eye catches on a rust-colored letter V on the wall, and a little lower, a sideways slash.

“Sure does. I put it on the backburner though. I’ll think about resuming soon, when I find a new contractor. Stay up there, okay? No girls allowed.” He swats my butt and steers me the other way. I turn the flashlight off.

“He-man woman haters club?” I inquire.

“Just unsafe. Too filthy for my queen. How’s that lasagna comin’ along? You need some help?”

“No, all under control now that I know not to run that many things at one time. I was... uh... trying to blend the cheesecake batter while too many things were on, I guess.” I shrug.

“I’ll get the electrical upgraded when the new furnace gets put in.”

“Good idea,” I say.

“Lookin’ forward to dinner. And dessert,” he says, nibbling on my throat and making me squirm.

It’s been a good weekend so far. We went to a couple antique stores this morning and though I didn’t find any antiques that screamed ‘buy me’ I did pick up a bunch of paint and stain swatches so we can mull over some colors, as well as a cute welcome mat that’s covered in dandelions gone to seed, which is just so appropriate. We also bought two small space heaters. And the hand mixer so I can make cheesecake. And a television and streaming box for the bedroom. I’m making lasagna for us for dinner and cheesecake for dessert before we

have a campfire and pick a movie to watch. We have plans for more antiquing tomorrow before we head back to the city.

“You need some help?” he asks again.

“Nope. We’ll be eating in about an hour and a half, I think. Does that work for you?”

“Absolutely.” He kisses me and heads to the fridge, opening a beer. “You want me to open a bottle of wine?”

“No. Go finish chopping your wood. I’ll wait for dinner. Gotta use the bathroom.”

I zip to the bathroom to use the facilities and when I come back out, ready to go back to blending my cheesecake, Killian’s already gone outside.

I wake up feeling like I’m baking inside an oven.

The space heater is blowing way too much dry heat at me, so I climb out of bed, flick the lamp on and adjust the heater’s temperature down a little before I move the unit back as far from the bed as it can get.

I’m alone. Where’s Killian?

I put my robe on and head downstairs. The lights are all off except for the lamp in the living room and a light over the stove. No Killian.

I peer outside the kitchen window and don’t see him out there anywhere. My SUV is parked right where we left it earlier.

I go look out the front door. No sign of him that way either. Is he deeper in the house? There’s no working heat anywhere over there so that’s not likely. It’s a cold night and I see no lights on indicating he’s gone that way, either.

I walk over to the basement door and cracking it open, see that the light is on.

I head down the stairs and when I get to the bottom, he appears, coming around the corner.

“What’s up?” he asks, sticking keys into the pocket of his jeans.

“Uh... I should ask you that. I woke up alone, being baked to death and couldn’t find you is what’s up.”

“Oh, sorry.” He shakes his head absently, scrubbing his forehead with his fingers. He meets me at the bottom of the stairs and then spins me by my elbow and guides us back up.

I look over my shoulder at the space and then look into his eyes.

“What were you doing down here?”

“Just sorting through some stuff.”

I frown.

“Let’s get to bed. I’m zonked.”

He’s got a bead of sweat over his upper lip.

And something feels strange with his demeanor.

I don’t like how I’m feeling right now.

When we went to sleep a few hours ago, he was in bed with me in a pair of sleeping pants and a Henley. Now he’s fully dressed, shoes and all. And he doesn’t look happy about me interrupting him.

A moment later, I’m back in bed and he’s taking a shower.

And something in my gut... it feels – wrong.

6

Killian

I've played too fast and loose here. Thankfully, my phone lighting up caught my eye that the kitchen motion detector went off.

Violet's been in this basement twice today and my girl isn't stupid. She's the opposite of stupid. She's sensing something is up and of course she's correct. I'll make an excuse to get us out of here first thing in the morning.

And the next time we're here, he can't be.

I have to think on that. Because I'm playing a dangerous game, a game where I'm letting my anger cloud my vision. Raymond Iadanza needs to be compartmentalized in a way that doesn't affect Violet. I need to be more pragmatic about this. I don't want to be deceptive with her, but about this – it's the one thing that I need to lie about.

Is it time to end this game? To stop playing with him? I've certainly had my fun. Found ways to work out my anger. He's suffered, for sure. He knows he was a fool to underestimate me.

But it still feels like it's not enough.

I've taken the video projector and flashed it on the wall, showing him video of me fucking her on the kitchen counter, edited of course. He doesn't get to see her naked body; not ever again. And as I showed him, I went into a rage thinking about the fact that he has seen her naked, has touched her, has fucked her – all because he cheated me. He got a kick to the teeth for that. I knocked a tooth out and the fucker bawled like a baby.

I put in a little speaker, mounted on the wall out of his reach that's played a few loops including one of us saying our

wedding vows for hours. I gave him no video of that because he doesn't get to set eyes on her the day she married me. That's also sacred.

Fucking her on those counters in my kitchen was also sacred, but I got satisfaction in seeing his face when he watched the edited version. Knowing she's mine. Knowing she's mine forever, that she's taken my name, that she's more mine than she ever was his.

He's losing his grip, though, and I'm wondering if he'll soon shut down and go catatonic, diminishing the fun. This weekend he didn't immediately react when I entered; it has me thinking he's hallucinating and isn't sure what's real and what isn't. All this time alone, all the pain – yeah, it might have fractured his mind.

Tony told me with remorse that he fucked up and forgot to take the lid off a dog food can and so Raymond tried to get creative with the lid to slit his own wrists. This happened in the cistern and he failed at doing more than making a bloody mess. It meant an extra visit from Doc who bandaged him up and suggested the shithead needed to be in a more sterile environment for a few days. I had Tony stay for a couple days and hose him down twice a day.

I've just spent an hour dunking his head in a bucket of water over and over as a consequence for him trying to end his life. This ends when I make that choice, not him.

I told him, "Looks like we're now doing tetra packs of cat food because *someone* is a fucking pussy."

I've had my fun playing poker and doing coin tosses with him. He usually loses poker and faces consequences. Three days without eating. He won once so he got hosed down with the pressure washer only at half strength and was allowed to shampoo his hair and brush his teeth.

The coin tosses. He always loses those because he never gets to see whether it was heads or tails.

He yoyos between pleading for his life to pleading for death.

“How about you kill me? Then you’ll have more free time to fuck my fiancée?” he suggested a few days before we got married and then he flashed a smile at me.

The bastard has balls on him, that’s for sure.

“How about I marry her? How about you stay down here for three years before I end you?”

He thought I went soft when he got away with shit before. Now he knows I’m not too legit to pay back those who fuck me over. I will never be too legit for that.

I told him before I left that I was putting a ring on her finger after putting him in the dark in the cistern so his cell could be upgraded.

He shouted that I’d pay for my sins, that he knew something I didn’t about some payback coming my way.

I then pissed on him in the cistern before putting the lid on it and leaving to go home and make arrangements to marry Violet.

It wasn’t just his comments calling her his fiancée that made me want to marry her immediately. Once I decided I needed to marry her, the urge was fierce. And it might have also had something to do with the fact that it hit me that day that it was the anniversary of my mother’s death. Also that we were only a few days away from Raymond being due in court – that if Violet is my wife and anything gets called into question, if anything goes wrong with the shit I’ve done that she’ll be taken care of? I don’t know, I just knew I didn’t want to wait another day. I also wanted that date on the calendar to stop being about Brianne Coulter’s death so it’s the day I made Violet my bride.

He rarely crossed my mind while we were away on our honeymoon. That was about us. And our last night before heading home when Violet handed me the burden of Raymond Iadanza by the fire, I took that seriously. I’d already decided to take the burden from her but having her hand it to me felt significant. I don’t want her worrying about him. I don’t want

her plagued by the past three years. I want her happy, thinking about the future, I want her forgetting about him more and more every day until days, weeks, months go by without him being as much as a blip on her radar.

The other day I played a video of the back of her and her work friend Cammy talking about her honeymoon, telling Cammy how awesome her husband is. How I'm romantic, caring, how she's happier than she's ever been. Nodding enthusiastically when Cammy asked her if her new husband was also the best lover she's ever had.

Though I enjoyed hearing her talk about me to her friends, I should probably take the cameras out of her office since I can't really justify it anymore.

Violet

Two Days Later

Finally, I've found the right key. The lock turns.

I pull the key out and take a big breath before I pull the large slide-lock across at the top of the door and then the middle one before I squat to do the same at the very bottom.

I shakily turn the doorknob. Do I really want to know what's on the other side of the door?

I have to know.

I have to know that, no, what my gut is telling me is wrong. It has to be wrong.

Ever since I saw inside that cistern, the rust-colored letter *V* and *i*, I've wondered. I've wondered why this old basement has a new-looking door with so many locks. That's why I drove here by myself today. To see for myself. It's been bothering me for two days, so I have to know.

A grotesque odor hits my nose and I'm about to lose the last meal I ate. I hold my breath and flash the light from my phone at the corner in there.

And what I see...

No.

Movement behind me makes me startle before I twist to look behind me.

My husband.

"Baby. You shouldn't be down here," he says.

"I probably shouldn't," I whisper, sadly.

My heart feels like it's splintering apart right now.

“Violet...” Killian tries and hooks his arm around my waist from behind me.

I shouldn’t be surprised he followed me. He’s been looking at me for two days like he knows I suspect something.

My poker face has never been particularly good.

“Turn around and close the door, sweetheart,” he says.

“Believe me, that’s the best thing you can do here. Close it and forget this.”

My eyes follow the light to the corner.

“Is that...” I gasp when I see movement in the corner on the bed that’s there.

“Yeah,” he says, kissing the top of my head.

“Not dead?”

It sure smells like death.

“No. He’s not dead.”

“Vi?” I hear croaked out.

My stomach lurches. It *is* him. His voice is weak, but I know it’s him.

“You’ve had him down here this whole time?”

Killian says nothing.

“How? What the hell? When?” I pull away from him. I’m trembling.

“I had someone give his mother money to bail him out. And then waited to catch him.”

“You’ve had him here this whole time?” I step back. The stench is getting stronger. It smells rotten.

“I have.”

“When? When did you put him here?”

“A few days after you told me about the double-sided coins,” he says.

I gasp. That long ago?

Ray laughs. “I won. I had her first. She loved me first, you piece of shit bastard. ”

I bristle.

Killian doesn't react to Ray's jibes.

“He's been torturing me, Violet,” Ray says weakly from the corner. ”Dunno if you're really here or if I'm dreaming again, but in case you're real... he's been showing me videos of you... Playing videos of you. Making me listen to him fuck you, Vi, on a loop. He feeds me dog food. He beats the fuck outta me. Shot my knee. Pissed on me.”

“Shut your face, Ass-wipe,” Killian snaps.

My eyes travel to Killian. He's staring at Ray's shadow coldly.

“He's got cameras on you all the time, Vi. He shows me footage. Footage of you two fucking.”

“Keep talkin', asshole. See how it goes for you later,” Killian warns. “Don't listen to him, baby, he's skewing things. Like he always has.”

My blood runs to ice at his words, at his demeanor. I back away.

Killian catches my hand. “Baby.”

“You lied,” I say.

“Yes, I did,” he replies matter-of-factly.

I'm in shock. I can't process this, especially not with his green eyes cutting through me, showing me what looks like the epitome of *I give no fucks*.

He has zero remorse. Zero.

Is that possible?

“I can't believe you did that.”

Without hesitation, he replies.

“Believe it. I would lie; I would say anything to protect you. I’ll lie to anybody, you included, to keep you safe. To keep you happy and carefree. To protect you from how I know you feel right now.”

“Killian.” His name sounds like pain. Agony. Like shock.

“Violet,” he replies coolly.

It’s true.

He did this.

He actually did this.

“Let’s go upstairs. I don’t want you breathing this filthy air,” he says calmly, glaring into the space.

And then he reaches for the knob to shut the door and as I hear Ray laughing, Killian casually locks all the locks. Like this is normal. Like it’s not the most fucked up thing ever.

I lift the lid to the trash bin outside the door and see discarded first aid supplies. Bandage wrappers. Antiseptic wipes. I also see dog food cans. Cat food tetra packs. Water bottles. My stomach bottoms out and bile creeps up the back of my throat.

“Let’s go talk.” He reaches for my hand, but I recoil, the taste of vomit in my mouth.

His eyes change and go from cool to concerned, I think. I don’t actually know. I can’t fully seem to... compute.

He takes the lid from me and puts it back on the trash bin, gesturing for me to go.

As much as I suspected something was up, as much as I had the feeling it had to do with that door, as much as something told me it was bad, I wouldn’t let myself ruminate on what it could be. I couldn’t let myself go where my brain was trying to take me. I couldn’t conceive of the notion that Ray would be in that room. I just didn’t let myself get there.

All I knew was that something wasn’t right. But I never realized it was *this* wrong.

But now I'm there.

And the rotten stench, the chill in this basement, I don't think I'll ever be able to forget how I feel in this moment.

As I drove here, as I decided to sneak here and do this, I felt guilty about it. Very. But I also knew that I needed to know what was behind that door.

He rushed us home Sunday morning and while as soon as we got home, he acted normal, I couldn't. I could not stop replaying things from the weekend in my head. The space down here. His reaction. How he was down there dressed in the middle of the night.

So, I took the set of beach house keys this morning. They were sitting there inside his desk drawer in the home office nook of our bedroom with the cute keychain of a lighthouse I'd bought for it from a convenience store just before we went to Vegas. He'd left early for work, so I grabbed them and stuffed them in my purse. I drove to work and then a couple hours into my day I made an excuse that I wasn't feeling well, that I had to leave.

How did Killian know I came here?

From what Ray just said, it's obvious - Killian has been recording me. Spying on me.

I'm led to the kitchen, his hand on the small of my back. I watch him shut the basement door and open the fridge. He gets out two bottles of water, sets one down and opens the other and passes it to me.

I shakily take it from him and down half of it while he opens the other bottle and takes a sip, eyes on me while he drinks.

We stand there for a long moment, eyes on each other and I think I'm processing, computing everything. Feeling everything.

I burst into tears. Emotion, reality, it all hits me like a tsunami.

Immediately, he's lifting me by my hips and setting me on the counter. He stays close, arms tight around me. My face is buried in my hands.

He takes my hands away gently, but I squeeze my eyes shut tight.

“Baby,” he says gruffly.

I open my eyes and stare into his green eyes. Searching.

There’s sadness there now. But the coldness I saw downstairs? Subzero coldness. I don’t think I’ll ever forget what that felt like – seeing his eyes like that. Those eyes told me what he’s capable of. And it’s beyond the worst-case scenario.

“I can’t believe this,” I say. “You... I... holy shit.”

He flexes his jaw muscles.

I need to think. I need to... I don’t even know. Fuck, this hurts.

“He needed to pay, Violet,” he says. “I never wanted you to know. I’m sorry you found out.”

I stare for a moment, just stare incredulously.

He flexes his jaw again and there’s that coldness again.

And something inside me... snaps.

“What?” I cry out incredulously. “He was in jail. He was paying. You bailed him out to... to... torture him?”

He says nothing.

I shake my head and push my way down off the counter, grabbing my water and moving past him. I pace. I pace the length of the kitchen for a minute and then I drink the rest of my water before throwing an arm up in the air, gesturing to the kitchen cupboard.

“Dog food? That dog food I found up in that cupboard.” I point.

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug.

Wow.

My eyes bulge.

“Lies. So many lies,” I choke out.

He says nothing.

“So, is that all this is? Just a way to get him back?” As I gesture between us, my eyes land on my wedding and engagement ring. I flex my fingers staring at it for a second. Killian has erased the space between us, grabbing my face in both hands, making me gasp at the intensity in both his touch and his eyes.

“Not even a fucking little,” he grinds out. Like he’s angry.

Like he’s angry? What?

“Back off. Lemme go,” I say, trying to shrink into the wall.

His eyes go shocked, I think, and then he steps back and swallows.

“I don’t know if this is a lie, too,” I whisper. “Another game.”

“No. Fucking no! No games, baby. I love you, more than anything on this earth. I swear it. You’re everything I want.”

I shake my head in absolute astonishment, staring at the man I love. And I do love him. I’m so in love with him that I went against all my rules about taking time to rebuild my life after that catastrophic relationship with Ray. It happened fast, I know that, but it happened. I fell hard. I believed in him. He made me believe in myself, too. But was it all for this? For revenge?

How could I be so blind?

“How many times did you ask me to trust you? And I did. I trusted you.”

How am I so gullible? Lies. Lies for weeks. Longer. A guy who... my God – all the things Ray just said swim through my mind. The torture. Dog food. Games. What the fuck? I feel queasy. Really queasy. I need air.

I push past him again and wrestle with the lock on the back door to get out. He’s directly behind me.

“Violet, come sit and talk to me.”

“I need air. I need a minute.”

I sit down on the step and stare out at the water. The frigid, angry-looking water. It feels like it’s running through my veins right now.

He lingers beside me for a while. A long while, I think; I’m not really sure because I’m just staring out at the ocean, the angry ocean, going over things in my head.

We were here a couple times. And thinking on the timing, Ray was here too. Kill played dumb when Ray’s mom came to see me. But that day, Ray was here. He was here while we were gone to Vegas, while we said our vows, while we were having sex on that airplane, on our honeymoon. Even when we were in Italy, and I handed him that burden by the fire to help me move on. He was doing this. *This*.

And Ray’s words. Video footage of us having sex? What? Playing videos of us for Ray? Torturing him? He shot him? Peed on him?

“Baby, come inside. It’s freezin’ out here.”

I’m numb. I’m totally numb. Tears are streaming down my cheeks. My hands are freezing. So is my face.

Killian lifts me up, carries me back inside, and puts me on the couch. Then he’s wiping my eyes with a Kleenex, a gentle look on his face.

“Talk to me,” he whispers, stroking my cheekbone with the side of his thumb.

Everything is ruined. Everything.

Everything is a mess.

I can’t believe this.

I can’t believe how stupid I’ve been.

8

Killian

This shit has twisted my gut into knots. These sensations started on the way here. Every fucking red light. Traffic crawled. So much goddamn time in my head. And I knew she was here, and I knew why. I fucked up on the weekend. I fucked up royally.

Why the fuck was I so lax about all this shit? I should've put him somewhere else. Or never brought her here.

I don't check on her constantly on my camera feeds anymore, but something about her demeanor the last two days, instinct told me something wasn't right. She went to bed early Sunday night. But when I came in, it seemed like she wasn't asleep. Like she was restless, something on her mind.

And Monday night, I left late for an after-hours meeting at Exodus, but saw her when she was getting ready for bed. She was distant and then said she had a headache when I tried to get close to her. I teased that it was too early in our marriage for headache excuses, and she didn't laugh – instead acted aloof. I ran her a bath, gave her a massage afterwards and she fell asleep while I did that before heading out. While she let me put my hands on her for the massage, something felt wrong with us.

This morning, I left early and when I called her to say good morning, I found her mood to be chilly with me again. It all nagged at me, so I checked the live camera feed that points at her cubicle and saw her desk was empty. I was then grateful I hadn't yet put in the request to have those cameras removed. At first I figured she was in a meeting, and had initially planned to check later, but then I upped the volume and heard her boss Shara ranting to Violet's friend Cammy. The bitch went off on a tangent about how Violet thought the rules no

longer applied to her since she got a rich new husband. She then muttered about how Violet thinks she's above the rules about office hours now that she's spent a fortune on new clothes and red-bottomed heels with a fancy-ass new car, saying she'd be out on her ass if "this bullshit" didn't stop.

Cammy tried to defend Violet, and then the bitch-boss got pissy with her and stormed off.

Violet didn't tell me she was doing anything out of the office today and hasn't called to say why she left early, so I opened my app to check her phone's location and knew by the road she was on that she was heading for the house.

I called her and knew she declined my call by how it rang one and a half times and then went to voicemail. So I drove home from Genesis and saw that the keys to the beach house were gone.

I hoped I'd miraculously beat her there, but traffic was not on my side. Thankfully though, I wasn't far behind her. I shudder to think about how it could've gone if I hadn't arrived just as she opened that cell door.

I've let my rage at Iadanza cloud my thinking, obviously, and that's not my style. This situation has been fucked up and I've let it fuck *me* up. And now... seeing what it's doing to her?

I have remorse flooding my veins right now. A lot of it. It's weighty. The remorse isn't about anything to do with what I've done to him. This emotion in me is all about how I've handled it with her. I should've made it so she couldn't find out.

He had to pay. He's not done paying yet. But I never wanted her to feel any of it.

I want her to stop crying.

I wanna go down there and put my gun in that fucker's mouth and blow his head off because he spoke to her again. Because he isn't supposed to factor for her anymore and now he does. Because she had to breathe that stench. Because she's now

upset. I'm fucking pissed at myself right now. She's looking at me like I'm a stranger. A stranger who has irreparably hurt her.

I hate that she's been suspicious of me for days, hate that her suspicions are confirmed. And the feel of these knots in my stomach because of the look in her beautiful, sad eyes - I deserve to feel twisted up for not making sure she never found out. She doesn't deserve to feel like this because of my carelessness.

"Baby..." I start.

"What do you expect me to do now, Killian?" she asks, taking the Kleenex from me and blowing her nose.

"I want you to try to forget that shit downstairs. Forget all of it. Pretend it never happened. You were never supposed to know. I swear, I never wanted you to find out."

"How could you lie to me like that? How could you... you showed him videos? Of us?" She flattens her palm against her chest with so much pain on her face that it physically hurts me. I've got a feeling like heartburn.

"Just an edited video of our heads. Some sound from our wedding. Sound from when I fucked you one other time. He's exaggerating about what he saw. It was part of his punishment."

"Part of his..." She shakes her head and lets that hang as she looks at me with shock, with disgust I think. "Making love to me to punish Ray?"

Fuck.

"No. No, baby. But he needed to pay. There was no way around it," I defend. "And I've made him pay with pain, with showing him how happy you are without him. With taunting him. He knows he fucked up. He knows he should never have even--"

"You were gonna let the judge and jury decide his fate. You were gonna let karma do it. You lied to me. Over and over and

over again. And you're trying to make me happy is part of his punishment?"

"No. Making you happy is my priority. Punishing him is just a bonus."

She spears me with a look of disbelief that hits me in the chest.

"I tried. I wanted to be the guy who kept violence out of it like you wanted. I was gonna leave him to rot in jail. I was." I snicker. "I'd have made his life in there difficult, make no mistake. I had plans to make it *very* rough, make sure he knew that was down to me – the guy he underestimated, but yeah... all that changed when I found out he used trick fucking coins on me. You never should've been his."

Her eyes bulge with disbelief. "So, this is my fault then? It's my fault that you broke your word to me?"

"No. His fate is his fucking fault," I clip. "Cocky prick played me so he could one-up me, and then fucked you over for three years. Then he fucked *me* over again in Atlantic City. I give him a chance to make it right, knowing he'd fuck it up again because that's who he is. What does he do? Brings a goddamn gun to my fucking club, and Violet, the way he looked at you the night you let him have it, the night he brought me the cash he scammed? He looked at you like he wanted to hurt you and I was havin' a hard time lettin' that go, too. A very fuckin' hard time. Had a gun right under my knee strapped to my desk like I do my desk in all my offices, and was *this* close to pullin' it then and there."

She gawks.

"He thought I was weak, that my rep was exaggerated or worse, that I'd lost my edge. Now he knows different."

"So you orchestrated this whole thing," she says softly.

"Atlantic City. Moving me in with you. All of it. You tricked me into falling for you, so you'd win and he would lose. And then you've been recording me-"

"No. Uh uh. I orchestrated Atlantic City, yeah, but falling in love with you? That's real. It's real, baby. Believe that."

She scoffs.

“Violet... every single bit of what we have has been real. Seeing what he’d done to you that night we finally met, I knew I had to do something to help you get out of that situation. I slept on that couch that night because I was sure if I left he would knock you around. My plan was to get you free of that piece of shit, and let you move on with your life. I felt partly responsible for your situation because of that stupid bet. And then I fell in love with you.”

She shakes her head like she doesn’t believe me. “You’re tracking me? Following me? Videotaping me at my job? How are you even doing that?”

“Sprinkler inspection, “ I mutter.

She gawks at me. “That’s loving me? Spying on me? Lying to me? Showing him videos of us-” Her voice cracks.

“Whoa. Back up, baby. Did you not just hear me say how I fell in love with you?”

She covers her face again and sobs.

And I try to take her into my arms again, because I can’t not attempt to comfort her when I see her hurting, and she pulls away, which feels like a kick in the chest.

“It started out for one reason that was about getting you free and clear of him and the reasons changed. I didn’t handle it all the right way, but I’m telling you my feelings for you are legit.”

“Huh? So you didn’t use me and my naivety to orchestrate Ray’s downfall? Is that what you’re trying to convince me of right now? I’m supposed to believe that when you’ve had me under surveillance, and-”

“I started watching you, yeah. Surveillance in my apartment. Started the week I was here while you were there alone. And after he brought a gun to my club it helped me know I could use it to keep you safe. At home and at your job. That night the punk drug dealer hit all my clubs and caused mayhem?”

The only thing that kept me sane was being able to look in and see you were safe and sleepin' in my bed.”

“Right,” she drawls. “And it just so happened to be convenient that you could also make recordings of us in that bed, right?”

“Serious. You’re my priority and yeah, I did some spying to see if you were who I thought you were. At first, yeah. Only a short time into watching you, I knew I was falling for you and that you were good, decent. I only kept the surveillance going to keep you safe. To put my mind at ease.”

She scoffs. She doesn’t believe a word out of my mouth.

“Stop,” she snaps. “Stop lying. I’ve heard enough lies to last two lifetimes.”

“I’m not lying. I’ve been distrustful by nature because of the way I grew up, because of things I’ve had to deal with, but I trust you. It took no time for me to be able to trust you completely.”

“Right. And because you kept asking me to trust you, I did. And that was stupid of me, wasn’t it? Because you’ve trusted me so much that you’ve lied to my face nearly every single day.”

“Violet...”

“Because you’ve been so honest to me so I should believe you here and now. Right?”

“Try to understand...”

“I’m sick to my stomach right now, Killian. It feels like it’s all a lie. All of it. Like you’re playing me and all you’ve cared about all along is ruining him. Well, the joke is on me, I guess. And him. Because he’s certainly paying for his arrogance, isn’t he?”

“Swear to you, I love you. I love you more every day. I need you to believe me.”

“I... I need to think.” She heads for the door, pulling her keys out of her pocket.

I quickly block her. “Hey. No. Don’t drive when you’re upset like this.” I take the keys from her and stuff them into my own pocket.

She looks at me with anger etched into her beautiful face. And I fucking hate this. I hate it so much.

“Give me my keys back.” She holds her hand out.

“Not right now. I don’t want you driving while you’re upset. That’s too dangerous.”

She spins away from me, storms up the stairs, and slams the door.

I sit down on the couch and put my head into my hands, blowing out a long breath.

I want to put my fist through a wall. That’s not going to serve a thing.

I give it ten minutes and then I head up the stairs and into the bedroom.

She’s on her phone. My blood runs cold.

“Who the fuck are you talking to?” I demand.

She throws her phone across the room and shouts as it clatters to the floor, “I was checking my voicemail. Did you think I was calling the cops on you? For kidnapping and torture, and... whatever else you’ve done? Driving right now is dangerous? Maybe being here is dangerous.”

I climb onto the bed and pull her to me. She pushes my chest.

“Let me go!”

“Violet, baby, calm down.”

“What are you gonna do with him?”

“Do with him?”

“Yeah.”

I blow out a breath.

“Keep torturing him? Feeding him dog food? Until what? Until you decide you’re done?”

I shrug. “That was the plan.”

“I’m gonna puke.” She wrenches away from me and rushes for the bathroom.

9

Violet

When I come out of the bathroom after having hurled the bagel I scarfed down this morning on the way here, he's sitting on the bed, looking like he's trying to assess me. Do I see remorse? Maybe just regret that I found out. I don't know that he even loves me. I don't know anything, except that I'm absolutely, completely wrecked. And that he's a really convincing liar.

"What are you gonna do to him? To me?"

"You?" He frowns.

I wait.

"I'm gonna be your husband. I'm gonna live my life with you." He looks confused.

He can't be surprised I would ask this.

"Until I do something that makes you wanna lock me down there in that basement?"

He jolts. "Whoa. Hold the fuck up." His back has gone perfectly straight and he's looking at me with alarm and then spits out his next words, "That's un-fucking-thinkable."

"Oh, is it?"

"I'm not the white knight, Violet. Not even close. But not in a million years do you need to fear me. Ever."

"How long would the lies have continued? What else have you lied to me about? Maybe it's better that I don't know."

"Violet, I can't stop thinking about what life would be like for us today if I'd taken my shot with you the night you met that jackass. I should've ignored the coin toss, and-"

“A lot of things you should and shouldn’t have done, I guess,” I say quietly. “Lots of things I should and shouldn’t have done, too.”

He scratches his jaw while blowing out a breath, then rises and takes a step toward me. I retreat.

“No,” I warn, holding my hand up.

“I want you to forget about him. He does not exist for you. Let me worry about him.”

“So you’ve been planning to kill him all this time, eventually, I mean? When you’re done punishing him?” I ask, my back hitting the wall.

“Yes,” he says immediately.

I try to swallow, but it doesn’t happen. I stare for a long moment before the words come, and they come fast.

“We got married too fast. We really don’t know one another.” I cradle my arms and shiver, feeling cold. “This was a mistake.”

“I know you,” he states, green eyes piercing me, looking affronted.

“It was too soon. I was too broken. That’s the only explanation for why I fell for this.”

“Baby... I know you. I love every fucking hair on your head. Every inch of you inside and out. I-”

“Lied to me. You tricked me. And you would’ve kept tricking me. For how long?”

“About this? For the rest of our lives. Damn right. Only about this, though.”

“You can’t kill him,” I blurt.

“I’m sorry, baby, but that’s not your call.” He leans forward, “It’s my job to protect my wife.”

“Your wife,” I whisper.

“Yeah. My wife.”

“I don’t even know you. I married someone I don’t even know. What is wrong with me?”

“You’re getting to parts of me I haven’t let anyone else see. You’re getting to know me very well. Better than anybody.”

I keep talking. “We moved too fast. I let myself get caught up in what it felt like to be...” I shake my head. Normal? Cared for? “It was all smoke and mirrors.”

“No. It was me getting him out of your life like you wanted and then me protecting the woman I was falling in love with.”

“As little as you know me, I’ve been completely transparent about who I am and I’m sure that’s gotta say that I can’t... can’t stand by knowing you’re gonna kill somebody. I need to go. I need to think.”

“No!” He raises his voice.

And now I’m filled with alarm. No? He’s not going to let me leave? What the heck have I done to myself? How could I let myself be taken in like this?

Ray told me he was dangerous. He told me Killian disappeared people. Thinking back to the things I’ve heard him say with my own ears, I know I’ve been foolish.

Threatening to put a bullet in his head for looking at me. The threats when Ray brought the gun to Numbers. How angry he was about me not wanting him to hurt Ray.

The conversations after he got jumped. How I resolved myself to being on a need-to-know basis where criminal elements were concerned. When Ray brought the money he scammed to Genesis and how chilling Killian was.

It’s all been right there staring me in the face, but I was so gullible, so caught up in the attention he was giving me, and the fact that he was solving my Ray problems for me that I neglected to realize that all those things he said, threatened, alluded to – he meant them. Yes, he deals with criminal elements different than average people, but he’s got way more

links to criminal activity than I could've imagined for someone who says he's not mafia.

He's shown me who he is by not just his actions all along, but also by the words that have come out of his mouth.

"I'll give you space. We'll talk some more. Know this while you digest this. He hurt you and he fucked us both over. I couldn't let it stand like that. It fuckin' hurt to know that because he's a cheat, I walked away without a backwards glance and that meant you endured that bullshit he served. Everything I've done, the things I kept from you, were because of that. He doesn't get to hurt us anymore."

"But you're wrong. You've allowed him to keep hurting us by doing what you've done. By lying."

His eyes narrow with what looks like frustration and he thrusts his hand through his hair. "I'll give you space. I'm just downstairs."

"Downstairs torturing him some more?"

"Downstairs on the main floor. By myself."

He leaves the room.

I feel absolutely, utterly destroyed right now. I don't know what to think, what to do. So I fold into myself and curl into a ball, my spine pressed against the wall.

I stay like that for a long time, the devastation washing over me over and over as memories surge through my mind. The lies. So many lies. The deceit.

I make myself crawl up onto the bed. He's left me alone with my phone. Does he trust me not to call for help? But who? Call who? And what would happen then?

I hear him climbing the creaky old stairs. Then he's sitting on the bed beside me, setting down a bottle of water and a steaming cup of tea on the table beside me. He pulls the blanket from the edge of the bed over me, then kisses my temple.

A tear rolls down my cheek slowly before dripping off my chin.

He sits for what feels like a long time, like he wants to talk and doesn't know where to start or like he's waiting to see what I might say, but neither of us speak. And eventually he leaves me alone.

10

Killian

I leave her upstairs until dusk. I've spent the afternoon removing all the baseboards in the living and dining rooms. I've also started on the sanding of the wood mantle over the fireplace she wants to stain. Because I needed to do something while giving her space.

Right now I want to spend more time beating the fucking snot out of the asshole in the basement, but I'll have to refrain for now, because my gut tells me I need to stay close to Violet.

I've already messaged Tony to tell him not to come again until I say so.

I carry a drink and plate of reheated lasagna from the weekend up to her. She'd put the leftover lasagna in the freezer before we left the other morning, so we'd have a meal for another visit. Mine sits on the kitchen table while I head up the stairs knowing she's not likely to come down to share a meal with me.

I find her in the rocking chair by the window, staring out of it, thumbnail between her teeth. I can tell by her eyes that she hasn't stopped crying. I feel it like a sock to the gut, that all her tears today are because of me.

I set the plate and the bottle of water on the nightstand and then scoop her up and sit back down in the chair with her on my lap, holding her close.

She's stiff in my arms, as if trying to shrink into herself.

"Can you eat something? For me? I can leave it here or you can come down and sit with me in the kitchen."

"I'm not hungry," she rasps out, like she's lost her voice.

“You threw up hours ago. You should try.” She hasn’t drank her tea that I made hours ago either.

She shakes her head.

“Wanna talk?” I try.

She clears her throat and turns her head the other way. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I request, putting my lips to her temple.

She recoils again. *Fuck.*

“Please let me get up.”

“Talk about where you’re at right now. I need to know. I need to help you through this.”

She’s trembling.

“Violet?”

“I don’t know how you get out of this without killing him and I don’t want you to kill him.”

“Yeah,” I say softly.

She looks me in the face. “You’ve told me so many lies. I can’t trust you anymore and that hurts. It hurts a lot. Everything just h-hurts. I’m questioning everything. I thought I was getting strong. You were getting me strong, but now I feel like...” She chokes.

As her voice breaks, I’m pulling her tighter against my body, tucking her head under my chin. I move us to the bed, lying down and holding her close.

“I feel like I’m even worse than when I met you. Please let go of me. I can’t do this.”

“Baby...”

“I can’t have your hands on me, knowing you used those hands to torture someone, knowing it’s all fake.”

Again I feel like I’ve been slapped. Hard.

My eyes rove her face, assess the damage that I can see. She was a broken girl with Raymond Iadanza because of the damage he caused. Right now she looks at me like I've ruined her life.

And I find I'm getting angry. How can she look at me like this when all I'm doing is making him pay for what he's done?

"I love you," I grind out, "That's not fake."

"Please," she repeats, chin trembling.

I loosen my hold.

She pulls away and dangles her legs over the edge of the bed, her back to me.

"Please, what? Please let you go or *please* – as in you don't believe what I'm saying."

She doesn't answer.

"I couldn't let it go," I say, staring at the ceiling. "I tried. And I couldn't. I need you to try to understand-"

"All the things he said about you, I thought he was exaggerating. He didn't know the half of the lengths you'd go to for revenge."

"Clearly," I say acidly.

And now she looks over her shoulder at me with an expression like I've slapped her.

I hold her stare and her face crumbles. "I don't know who you are," she whispers brokenly.

I rise to sitting, twist so I can lean in and cup her jaw with one hand, wrapping my other arm around her. Looking directly into her eyes, I say, "You know who I am, Violet. I'm the man who loves you. It's just getting clearer."

"Clearer?"

"Who I am deep down. You're seeing all the parts of me no one sees. The good parts and the dark parts. You're seeing that I'm the man who will make someone who hurts you, who

hurts us... pay. You're looking at the man who should've been given the chance to start something with you three years ago. I'm the man that saw what that waste of space was doing to you, so I did what I had to do to extract you from that situation. And then I made you mine because getting to know you, I know – down to my gut, baby, that you're supposed to be mine. And that he not only cheated in a game to fuck me over, but he did that, then took the prize and did his best to ruin it. He got three years with you. Three years hurting you and thinking he had one up on me. So, yeah, I lied to you. Not to hurt you, to protect you. I tried to do things the way you wanted. But then I found out he cheated and I couldn't let it go. No. Fuck no." I wet my lips with my tongue. "Yeah, I could've let him rot in jail, but that was too good for the likes of him. I tried to let it go because it's what you wanted and that wasn't easy, but I tried for you. I did. Honest to God I was trying to be the man you wanted. But when you told me about those coins, Violet, you don't know what that did to me. What it still does to me." My body shakes with fury; it still makes me tremble with anger to think on what he got away with. "And where it took me. What kind of hellish-prison my head was until I got my hands on him."

"Please let go of me."

"You could've been mine three years ago. You could've avoided him and his bullshit. Imagine where we'd be by now? I'm making him pay for that." I caress her face.

"But torture? For weeks and weeks? And rubbing his nose in our happiness? Like... think hard, Killian. Be honest with yourself about why you married me. You did it so you could show him that you could ruin his life and have me for yourself."

"If you think that, what the fuck?"

She searches my face, eyes filled with pain. I fucking hate this.

"What have you done to him? Did the stuff he said happened really happen? What parts was he exaggerating?"

She waits, relaxing marginally in my arms.

I blow out a breath.

“Tell me. I need to know.”

“You don’t. You already know more than I ever intended.”

“I’m asking you to tell me everything. All of it.”

I drag air into my lungs.

“I have a right to know,” she whispers.

I assess her face a minute, then I do what she’s asked me to do, knowing it’ll make things worse but *fuck* it, she wants the truth, she can have it.

“Fine. I cracked some ribs. Gave him some bruises. A couple cuts with the tip of a blade.”

She bristles.

“Gunshot to the knee. Half drowned him.” I shrug. “Lots of punches. Slaps. Kicks.”

“Gu-gunshot? A blade?”

I nod.

“How can you be so violent? So nonchalant about that violence?”

“Nothing about that was nonchalant, baby. He’s a piece of shit who hurt you. He took you and fucked you and fucked you over, fucked you up, and-”

“Fucked me up.” A crease forms over her beautiful, sad eyes.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fucked up all right.” She stares into space.

I put my fingertips to my temples and sigh.

“By beating him up, you undo the damage? Really? By keeping him a prisoner? By making him live in whatever filth that smell is?”

“That smell is all him. That putrid smell is the pungency of Raymond Iadanza. He likes to flip fake coins and change

peoples' fates, so I flipped some coins, played some games with him, helping decide his fate.”

“And how does that help un-fuck me? Torturing him helps me? Helps you? How can you live with that on your conscience? How can you do that and then come home to me pretending everything is normal?”

“I live with it just fine,” I say, staring directly into her eyes. “Because he’s paying for what he did. Now, instead of him making you cower when he corners you, I corner him and make him cower. He fucked me with a game? Now I fuck him over with games. He gets to play cards, gamble with dice and coins, just like he likes. Instead of money, he gets to eat or to skip a beating. Or get two beatings.” I shrug.

“What were you doing down there on the weekend when I came down?”

I snicker. “You don’t wanna know.”

“Obviously, I do.”

“Dunking his head in water over and over as a punishment for trying to slit his wrists with a dog food can lid.”

Her eyes go wide. “And you think that makes me happy?”

“It’s brought me satisfaction.”

Her face contorts. She’s disgusted with me.

“And you’re planning to kill him?”

“He certainly can’t walk out of here now, can he?” I ask, softly.

She weaves her fingers into her beautiful curly locks on both sides of her head, distraught.

I run my hand up and down her back. “I have to go down there and deal with his injuries. Feed him. So, we’ll talk in a bit. Eat. Then we’ll talk some more?”

“I’m coming with you,” she declares, pulling away.

“No!” I snap. “He does not pollute your ears with his bullshit. He doesn’t look at you. You do not breathe the pungent air he pollutes.”

“I already did! And I’m coming down there! His words can’t hurt me anymore. Certainly not more than yours,” she shouts, lifting her dinner plate, cutlery, and bottle of water.

I grind my teeth while I follow her down the stairs. I expect her to put her plate and water bottle on the table near mine, but she carries it to the basement door instead, tucking the water bottle under her arm, then grabs the knob and flings the door hard, making it crash against the wall before she heads down the basement stairs.

“What are you doing with that plate?” I call down the stairs.

“You’re not giving him dog food, Killian!” she clips.

“He was gonna get cat food today, the fuckin’ pussy,” I mutter.

She glares over her shoulder at me and stumbles, nearly tumbling down the stairs, but catches herself by grasping the railing. The water bottle goes bouncing down the stairs, rolling a few feet away before stopping.

The lasagna has slid halfway across the plate but hasn’t spilled.

“Fuck’s sake, Violet. Careful!”

She stomps down the rest of the way.

Angry is better than crying, I think. She’s showing strength right now and that’s a lot better than seeing her in the fetal position with tears in her eyes. I don’t want her angry at me, but it feels slightly less shitty than seeing her cry. And maybe her getting out this aggression will be the first step in getting beyond this.

She’s waiting by the steel door with the lasagna and the bottle of water when I get there. And she’s staring at the door like it’s gonna bite her. I go to the cistern and behind the cover that’s leaned against the wall near it is the first aid bag, a case of water, and cases of dog and cat food.

I fish the keys out of my pocket and open the door, then hit the switch outside the door that floods the eight-by-eight space with light. He shields his eyes.

Violet gags. The smell is something I've, unfortunately, become accustomed to. I pull a face mask from the first aid bag and pass it to her with a container of Vicks VapoRub.

"Put some of that under your nostrils. It'll act like a stink balm."

She frowns, but follows my directions, then masks up. As she puts it on, she stares at the doorway with what I surmise is disgust. The smell. The situation. Me?

Iadanza squints at us and then laughs. "Hey, babe. Are my eyes failing me or is that really you? Were you here a few days ago or was that another dream?"

"You can't send that cutlery in," I say, ignoring him. "He can eat it with his fingers."

She plonks down, sitting on the toolbox beside the door and sets the plate on her lap, then angrily saws into it.

He's laughing. "What's all this? Is she mad at you? Trouble in paradise?"

"Shut your fucking mouth, Shit-for-Brains."

"We playin' cards so you can decide how to hurt me this time? Or more coin tossing? You tell him about my trick coins, Vi? This is on you, you know. Yer fault."

He sounds stronger today; no mumbling for the first time in a while. He's rallied to pull some strength into his voice, which means he can take more punishment. Much more.

"Shut your fucking mouth. Do not address my wife. You hear me?"

"Hey, can Violet change my bandages? I miss your touch, babe. What fun are we in for tonight, hey, Kill? Please, tell me that me getting to fuck Violet is on the table. Is it?"

I backhand him and his head hits the wall.

“Killian!” she screams, “Stop it!”

He laughs some more while rubbing his head with his palm.

“Ow.”

“He’s broken,” she whispers, staring at me with accusation.

“What’d you expect, Vi?” Raymond asks. “What month is it? How long have I been here?”

“It’s December,” she says.

“Aw, Christmas soon or did I miss it? When is New Year’s Eve?”

“You didn’t miss it,” she says.

“You love Christmas. We had some nice ones.”

“Yeah, before you made her afraid of her own shadow, making her wanna be a turtle hiding in a shell. You’re not done paying for it, either.”

“How you feel about that, Vi?” He jerks a thumb in my direction. “You feel like watching him beat me up? Hey, remember that time we fucked on the floor in front of our first Christmas tree? What’s up this year? You spending it in here with me? We’re gonna be back together in time for the new year. Mark my words, babe.”

He’s angling to get a bullet in his brain, he really is.

She continues cubing the lasagna, but her hands are shaking.

If I had a gun in my hand, it’d be tempting to end this. Flex my finger just like I did with Max. As easy as that. The gun is in the toolbox Violet’s sitting on.

“No? You gonna watch Kill kill me? Ha. Kill kills Ray. Movie at eleven. Knew she’d find out eventually. Hoping and prayin’ for this, man. She’s a sweet girl, our Violet. She won’t be down for this. See, I know her way better than you do.”

I pull disposable gloves on, then roughly rip the bandages off his wrists. He reacts with a hiss, so I yank his forearms

forward, glaring into his eyes. And he's caught in my glare for a minute before he starts laughing again.

I spray his wrists with disinfectant, then after applying a layer of antibiotic cream, I wrap them up with new bandages. I look over the fucker's face and that large cut on his cheekbone is scabbed over good, no longer looks infected. His lip is less swollen today. I pass him a face wipe.

"Wash your face, Ass-wipe."

He takes it and rubs it up and down his face.

The bruising outlining the bandages on his wrists are fading. He's finally come to terms that he can't pull his way out of his restraint, which gets alternated between his left and right wrist and gives him just enough length to get to his toilet-bucket a few feet away.

I take his bucket of piss and shit and walk past Violet to the utility sink on the other side of the wall, then slowly pour the contents of the bucket down, looking the other way to avoid the stench.

I set the bucket in the big sink and pour cleanser into it and then take the spare clean bucket from last time back in and put it in the same spot with another roll of toilet paper.

I'm working on changing his knee bandage when I hear her sniffle. I glance over my shoulder at her sitting there on the tool chest, holding onto the plate of lasagna, shoulders bouncing as she tries to stifle the sobs. It's all cut into little bites for the fucker, so I step over to the doorway and reach out. She hands it to me with the bottle of water, not looking up, but choking on a sob. I hand her back the fork and knife and take the plate to the side of his bed.

"No fork? C'mon, gimme the fork, Kill."

I ignore him.

"No fork?"

"Want a fork in yer eye?" I ask.

He laughs. “Ooh. Your lasagna, babe? Been dreaming about this. Hope this isn’t a dream right now. Hope you didn’t put fuckin’ ricotta in it.” He picks up a piece and examines it. “God damn it, Violet...” He growls at the plate.

The fucking idiot.

“You done?” I ask Violet. “You wanna go upstairs? I’ll be there in a minute.”

She frowns at me and then her eyes are on him again. And then they bounce to the wall by the door and widen.

I follow her gaze. She’s staring at the nail on the wall and what’s dangling from it. The heart necklace I got out of the pawn shop, the one she was gonna throw out because Raymond gave it to her, telling her she had his heart.

Her eyes slide over to him again and I know she’s taking stock of how unwell he looks. He’s lost weight. He’s been beat up repeatedly. He’s wearing just a pair of black basketball shorts and a grey wifebeater. His blond hair is greasy, sticking up everywhere. He smells wretched. His knee is wrapped. And one look at him and it’s obvious that his mind cracked ages ago. Solitary confinement, living in the dark and filth, and ongoing physical pain will do that.

He stuffs some lasagna into his mouth and talks around it. “Of course she’s done. She’s seen enough. Go upstairs, Vi. Go and wait to climb on his cock like the cum slut you are. I heard the way you moan for him. Traitorous whore.”

I haul back and belt him in the mouth.

He moans and then he’s laughing while blood oozes from his mouth.

He spits something out and I hear a ping hit the concrete.

Maybe another tooth.

“Kill me, Kill. Do it.” He snarls at me and has the gumption to take a swing for me, shouting, “Three years!” As he misses, his nose connects with my elbow as I drive it at him and his head hits the back wall before he slumps, dazed.

“Try that again and you don’t eat or get water for three days. You wanna drink your piss outta that bucket, Raymond, swing at me again.”

“Stop!” she cries out.

“Three years we spent together, Coulter,” he pants, “Three years she was mine, man...”

I want that gun. I want to put it in his fucking mouth.

Violet choking on another sob halts me.

I gather up the supplies, head to the trash bin and toss the old stuff out, then squat to pick up the cutlery from the floor on the way to put everything else back in its place.

I look back over my shoulder, assess to make sure I’ve left nothing behind. He’s on his back. He slowly sits up, then he leans over and takes a handful of lasagna and shoves the food in his face like a savage.

“Almost tastes as good as her cunt,” the bastard says around his food, and then he’s laughing, food falling out of his mouth. “Yeah man, I tasted her first. I had that pussy first. Whenever you taste her, know I was there first so really, you’re also gettin’ a taste of me.”

I storm back in, grab the plate and dump the food on the floor and then whack him across the face with the plate. He’s trying to bait me, so I’ll end him.

Violet shrieks.

He can eat off the concrete if he wants it badly enough. I shut and lock the door, then toss the plate toward the sink, missing it so the plate shatters before I dump my gloves in the trash and pump hand sanitizer over my hands and then toss the first aid bag back where I keep it.

She’s running up the stairs.

I follow and catch her by the front door, trying to pull it open. My arm hooks around her waist.

“Baby.”

“Lemme go. I need air. I need air.”

I hesitate.

“Please.” It sounds like her plea is ripped from her, so I release her, then watch as she runs toward the water and wince when she falls to her knees at the rocky shoreline. She’s in her work clothes, a skirt and blouse, no coat on.

I head out there and stand a few feet back listening to her cry, feel the biting cold blowing straight through me. I can’t take the sight and sound of my beautiful wife falling apart on the rocks for more than ten or so helpless seconds before I’m scooping her up into my arms and carrying her back to the house.

“Don’t,” she cries out, trying to pull free.

“Baby, stop.”

“I don’t even know you,” she whispers, staring at me, her eyes glassy with tears.

“It’s me. I’m still me,” I reply, gruffly. “I’m the man you love, the man who is going to spend my life making you happy.”

She looks into my eyes as we enter the house and does it searchingly; it feels like she sees everything ugly inside me. Everything. All of it.

“This is a nightmare. I wanna wake up. I wanna wake up and know that you actually do love me, that you haven’t been lying to me for all this time.”

“I do.”

“And that he isn’t really down there,” she says. “That you haven’t really been torturing him.”

I swallow and as I set her down on the couch, she curls into a ball and buries her face into her knees.

“I do love you. I’ve only lied to protect you.”

She says nothing.

I pull a blanket over her, then put another log on the fire and head to the kitchen.

I wash my hands for a long while before I cut another piece of lasagna from the pan, plate it, and slide it in the microwave. When it's ready, I throw my piece back on for a minute and then grab another bottle of water.

I bring everything to the coffee table and sit.

"Please try to eat," I say.

She says nothing. I take a bite of mine.

She makes a delicious lasagna, but I've got zero appetite.

Setting the fork down, I put my arm around her.

"Don't," she pleads, lifting her face out of her knees and propping her chin on one, tear-filled eyes aimed at the fire. "I don't know you."

"You do know me. Think on it. Think on what he told you. On some of what I've told you. You know me. Deep down, you had to know this was possible."

"I'm so stupid."

"You're not stupid, Violet. I kept shit from you so you wouldn't feel like this. You believed in me because you looked into my eyes and saw me. Now, you see all of me. And once you get a chance to think on it, you'll know everything I've done, it was for a reason and none of those reasons point to me wanting you to hurt."

"I am. I'm so stupid. Been stupid for three years and I'm still..." She shakes her head and shudders.

I empty my lungs of breath and stare into the flames with her.

Have I inadvertently thrown my marriage into the fire.

No. I refuse to believe that.

That fucker downstairs is the bad guy, not me.

"Are you gonna try to eat something?" I ask.

“Am I ever going to be able to eat lasagna again without thinking about that? Without thinking of that smell?” she asks, grabbing a Kleenex. “He spit out a tooth after you hit him. He’s a mess. You’ve... you’ve...” She shakes her head and pulls her lips tight, eyes swimming with more tears.

“You should not give a fucking shit about him,” I growl, then lift both plates and take them into the kitchen.

I eat half of mine before dumping the rest into the garbage. Sticking hers back into the fridge in case she’s hungry later. I didn’t taste what I forced down; I just knew my body needed fuel. When I get back, she’s not on the couch. I rush to the front door to look out, but it’s still locked.

The sound of the taps springing to life upstairs makes me exhale relief. She’s taking a shower or a bath. Looks like we’re spending the night here.

I tap into the camera feed for Raymond’s cell and see he’s lying in the bed, staring into space with a smile on his face. I’ve left his light on. It can stay on indefinitely as far as I’m concerned. Now he gets the opposite of darkness. He gets unending harsh light. He gets to see where his actions have brought him. A cold, dirty cell without comfort. He’s got his cot with the thin mattress, his sub-zero sleeping bag and a bucket to piss and shit in. I slide my finger over to my music app and turn it on to play in that space.

Now he’s got company.

Last time I blasted his ears with music it was 50 Cent. Because it was music that made Violet happy, and I know he knew that when I mentioned it by the look on his face, telling him all about her dancing in the club, teasing me with her swaying hips and come-hither eyes. I looped that playlist for twelve hours.

Tonight, it’s gonna be country. Because he hates it. He hates it because his folks used to fight to it late at night when he was trying to sleep as a kid. The asshole made the mistake of mentioning that over beers that night he fucked me over with

the coin toss when someone requested the DJ play a Shania Twain song. It was a joking comment, one of the guys from the hood saying, *Go tell the DJ to play I Feel Like a Woman*. And Raymond went off on a tangent about being unable to stomach country and western music because that's what his folks fought to when he was a kid.

I hit *play* on the New Country's Greatest Hits playlist before I pour a glass of whiskey and then after downing it, I head upstairs with a glass of wine for her. I doubt she'll drink it, but it's an excuse to see her.

She's still in the bathroom, so I set the wine down on her nightstand and lift her phone from the wireless charger beside the lamp.

I glance at the recent call list and then the recent text messages.

A message from Susanna asking her if they're on for Susanna Sunday this coming weekend. Violet hasn't responded.

A text string with Shara, Violet's boss. I scroll back to the start of the conversation a few hours ago.

Violet: I'm sorry, but I need tomorrow off, too. I've got a personal emergency. I don't have my laptop or I'd work from home.

Shara: Is everything ok?

Violet: Personal emergency. I'm sorry for the short notice.

Shara: ????

Shara: What's happening?

Shara: Are you going to just need the one day off?

Violet: I'm not sure yet but I'll let you know ASAP.

Shara: Pls do. You're out of vacation days, and it's not easy to cover your duties if it's more than one day. Please let me know ASAP what's going on.

Violet: Sorry. I will.

Shara: That's it? No explanation? I'm not sure what's going on but I need to say that if it's more than tomorrow you need off, I'll need a doctor's note or reasonable explanation for this absence and a formal attendance warning will be on your file if not sufficient. Please get in touch with me tomorrow to let me know if you'll be in Friday or not.

That's where it ended. And I'm a little pissed seeing that. She doesn't need her boss hassling her like that. What happened to Shara being supportive? Being Violet's friend? Nosy bitch, trying to get Violet to say what's "going on" and because Violet hasn't, she's getting bitchy. The rant she went on when I looked in on Violet's office today shows the bitch is jealous of Violet and doing a shitty job of hiding it.

When I talked to that woman on the phone to request that Violet have time off for our honeymoon, she was icy with me. Violet had previously said they bonded over her breakup with Raymond as Shara had gone through an ugly breakup also, so maybe she's jealous she doesn't have a break-up buddy since Violet's now happily married. Jealous that Violet married someone with money. Whatever. My wife doesn't even need that job.

She comes into the room, eyebrows jutting up at the sight of me looking at her phone. Her face goes red, her mouth tightening like she's about to reprimand me. She says nothing. Instead, she reaches into the chest of drawers.

When we were here on the weekend, we brought a bag of clothes to leave behind, so we don't have to cart clothes back and forth every time we come. She's currently in a towel and pulling underthings out of the drawer that contains both of our underwear, which she joked about when she put them away, calling it the His and Hers Unmentionables drawer.

"Guess we're staying here tonight?" I set the phone down.

She reaches into another drawer to fetch flannel pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, then she leaves - too angry with me to change in front of me, I guess. Too upset to even answer me.

I decide to change, too. I undo my belt and take off my button-down before dropping my slacks. After I remove my shoes, I yank off my socks and then change into dark lounge pants and a gray Henley.

It's cold in this house right now. I pull on some thick winter socks and as I rise, she's coming back in. Her t-shirt has a cat on it giving the finger. I notch a brow at it as I'm lifting my clothing up off the floor and setting the pile on top of the chest of drawers.

Her eyes land on my face, then quickly bounce away.

"Wanna talk some more?" I jack the heat up on the heater in the corner and then head to the bed.

She looks wrung out. Like she can't handle anything else. She's also looking at me getting into the bed with an expression that tells me she doesn't want me here.

"Or maybe feel like watching something?" I ask. "Table it all until tomorrow?"

She looks at me like I'm an idiot. And I feel like one for even suggesting she could forget all this even for a while.

We bought a television for this room last weekend, and I set it up with a streaming box because that's what we've done when we've come here. Chill out and watch something at night in bed. Cuddled.

Though I'm not a betting man, I would actually wager a guess there won't be cuddling tonight in front of the television. And I'm at a loss. In a short time, we've built up a routine that feels right. It's not always the same, but it includes closeness that I've found addictive. I end my day attached to her and she's receptive, always. At least before all this, and I want that now. I want it – no, *need* it – because I need to know we're going to get past this, get back to where we were.

But judging by her reaction so far, I've got an arduous task ahead of me. I'm willing to put in the work, and it's becoming apparent that I've got a lot of it to do.

And I've never before been in a position where I wanted forgiveness from someone. This is foreign.

"Come here. Let's figure out how to move past this."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Come here, Violet," I try.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" There's fire in her eyes.

"Baby..."

"No. Not coming there. Not if you're staying."

"Not if... what?"

"I can't... I don't know how to even respond to you. I'm still reeling. I need to process this, figure out what to..." She shakes her head, leaving that hang. She swallows hard.

My temper flares a little. "Well, process it then and know that I'd do it again if it meant you breathing easy. Forget he exists. That's how we move past this. Let me worry about him."

"Stealing money from you isn't grounds for...this. Not even with-

"I'm not talking about the money," I growl, "I'm talking about you."

She huffs.

"He stole you from me!" I shout.

"You care more about vengeance than about what I think, clearly. It happened to me, not you." She folds her arms across her chest.

"He hurt you. He fucked us both over repeatedly. I know what you wanted, and I already said I tried. Do you care about what I think, Violet? How I feel? About how I feel about what he did to us? Yeah, he hurt you for all that time, but he also took three years with you away from me. Do I not get a say here?"

I wait. She says nothing so I continue, “You just want me to do what you want me to do, right? That’s unfair, baby. His actions affected both of us.”

She looks away.

“You telling me you’re not ticked it could’ve been us all this time?”

“It’s pointless to get caught up on stuff I can’t change,” she mutters.

“Yeah, but when you find out someone intentionally fucked you, you don’t wanna pay them back for that?”

She says nothing so I continue. “When I found out he played me? When I saw the fuckin’ hurt he caused someone who could’ve been mine three years ago? That shit fucked with me. It fucked with me, Violet, and I had to do something about it.”

“And that’s how you justify your lies? That you’ve been tracking me? That you’ve recorded and then shown him videos of us being intimate?”

I swallow.

“That’s a serious breach of trust. I’m with you, thinking about only you, and you’re, what ... thinking...” She drops her voice an octave, ‘Oh, this’ll make a good shot. Ass-wipe will really not like this. I better get her to moan louder’. Is that what it’s like for you? I’m there with you in the moment, lost in it, and you’re not even fully there with me because you’re thinking about how it’ll punish him?”

“Fuck. Not true, baby.”

“And this might have been our time, Killian. Now. Right now. Not three years ago. I said that to you already. I told you I think maybe all that had to happen for this to happen, for us to be able to appreciate it. But now ... it feels like nothing is real. Nothing is right. And you didn’t give me a chance to learn how you felt. You just decided to deal with it, lie about it, and keep things hidden from me. So don’t give me that bullshit about me making all the decisions here. When I asked you to

keep violence out of it did you sit me down and talk to me about it?”

“Nothing is real? Right? You and me are right, Violet. Real. I’ve never felt more real about somebody. I didn’t want this to have anything to do with you. You’ve gotten what you wanted – him out of your life. And I get what I want. To make him pay.”

“That’s not okay. Not at all.”

“It’s how it is.”

She looks at me incredulously. “What?”

“I’ll go sleep on the couch. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

She gawks at me with shock. “It’s how it is? You’re laying down the law here?”

“That’s right,” I say. “About this? I am. We’ll talk more tomorrow about how to deal with it. I’m going to the couch to sleep unless you tell me you want me here beside you.”

I don’t know if she hears the hope in my voice, the longing I suddenly have for her to ask me to stay.

But she says nothing, just glares at me. I know, before I head out of there that I’ve just played my hand wrong.

I head back down the stairs and stare into the fire for hours before sleep claims me.

Violet

I blink into the darkness for hours before I hear footsteps coming up the stairs. The door creaks open and I see him in the doorway. I remain still, then watch him come in and crawl into bed beside me. He pulls me close and before I'm able to roll away, he's breathing evenly into my hair.

Sleepwalking again?

He does this when things are bothering him. Is he bothered by his conscience here or only by my reaction to what he's done? I already know the answer to that. He doesn't seem at all bothered by what he's done.

I'm about to move away when I'm engulfed tighter into his arms. Tears prick my eyes because this feels like the man I love. The man I've fallen desperately, deeply in love with, the man who has now hurt me with his deception. Maybe even more than Ray hurt me for all that time. Because I can't help but wonder if he really loves me or if he really just wanted to win. And my heart feels like it lies shattered in my chest.

My heart. My hopes. The confidence I'd built up over the last couple of months.

Killian's hand slides up my arm and his fingers find their way into my hair. He tilts my jaw up so he can access my mouth.

"No," I grit out and shove.

"Baby?" he calls out sleepily.

"Either you go back to the couch, or I'll go there."

"Huh?"

"You heard me."

He's disoriented for a moment and then he sits up. "Sorry. Don't know how I got here."

I say nothing.

It wouldn't be the first time he sleepily had sex with me and remarked afterwards that he woke up all over me. It happens a lot. Four or five o'clock in the morning sex and then more sleep. Normally, I like it. I don't know if this is that or if he'd pretend it was in order to justify it. Because I don't know if anything coming from him is the truth.

He leaves the room and I turn over and stare into the darkness. All that wondering I did about how dangerous he was, I had no idea. So naïve.

He wants things to be the same with us, for me to let him just 'deal' with Ray. How can things ever be the same?

I wake with my phone trilling my normal work alarm and feel like I've been run over by a truck. I've probably slept two hours, max, and not even a solid two-hour block, either.

My first thought is the word deceit. My second thought is that Ray is in the basement here at a place that's supposed to be our happy place, our oceanside escape. The place we'd planned to say our vows again in front of my family. His brother. A huge party with everyone we love.

He was planning to... what? Keep lying to me, letting me think life is a dream with Ray down there? Would it have continued even up to and including next spring when we're supposed to say our vows again?

Telling me to decorate the house how I like but let him worry about the basement. To stay out of there because 'no girls allowed'. *Yeah. Right.*

If I hadn't caught on to something being amiss, would he have committed murder before our vow renewal then and I'd never have been the wiser? And if Ray were gone, would he even

keep me around? Because if he can't rub Ray's nose in it, what's the benefit for Killian?

I rise and trudge over to the door that leads to the second-floor deck that looks over the water, but when my hand lands on the knob I see that Killian is outside, standing at the shoreline, no coat on despite that I feel the cold coming through the window. His hands are stuffed into his pockets, and he looks to be in contemplation.

I dress quickly in the pair of jeans I left here on the weekend as well as a hoodie and thick socks. I'll wear my old bum-around sneakers back. I'll go back, change again and then get into the office. That's what I need. Work. Normalcy. Shara was super-cranky about me leaving early yesterday without asking and about not coming in today, not to mention that she's been cranky in general lately, so while work should be the last thing on my mind, it's something I'm gravitating towards. I need to just go in, work for a bit and let my mind out of the prison it's currently in, where I'm thinking only about him, about Ray. About this situation.

I'll get out of here, get to work, and then... then I don't know. My chest feels like it's caving in.

It hurts so much to look at him out there. It hurts so much to think of who is downstairs and what this all means.

It also hurts because my period is due and it's not late yet, but my boobs are tender, and I have this feeling... this hunch about that and I can't even acknowledge it right now.

12

Killian

I'm walking back to the house when Violet steps outside, coat and shoes on, purse over her shoulder. I stop a foot in front of her because she freezes and holds her hand out.

"I need my keys." The wind whips her hair around. She doesn't look at me.

"Why?"

"I have to go to work. Shara is being bitchy about me being AWOL. As you know since you went through my phone. My keys, please."

"Fuck the job. You don't need it. I read her texts and she was a bitch."

Our eyes meet and they match this morning. Bloodshot. Tired. Troubled. No, troubled isn't a strong enough word. Violet's eyes are expressive and what I see? Devastated? Ravaged? Completely wrecked?

And it's my fault.

"I need to go... need to go do my job and... and..." She huffs in frustration.

The sky groans and immediately, the rain is coming down. In buckets.

"I won't let you go off, on no sleep, driving over an hour and a half back to the city, and..." I let that hang.

"And what? Not *let* me go in case I'm gonna tell someone about your... your secret?"

"That's not what I was thinking. I was thinking that I don't want you away from me while you're upset. Let's get inside."

“I need my keys,” she demands.

I wrap my arms around her, not giving two fucks about the rain. We’re both drenched already. I then hold her face and look into her eyes, trying to show her with my expression how I feel about her. She looks at me like she doesn’t know me and that fucking kills.

“I don’t want space between us when you’re like this. I want to make this better. In order to do that, we need to be in the same space. Come inside.”

I open the door and tag her hand, pulling her into the house.

“I don’t wanna be here, Killian.” She stands in the doorway, hair dripping wet, looking like her feet are glued in place.

“Fine. We’ll go home together. We’ll take my car and I’ll get someone to run yours back. I don’t want you driving on no sleep.”

She folds her arms over her chest. “You’ll get someone to come here, feed him dog or cat food and what? Knock him around some more before they drive my car back? That kind of someone? Will they urinate on him too or is that just *your* thing?”

“Try to put him out of your mind. Don’t worry about him. Let it be the way it was supposed to be...you living your life with me, him becoming a more and more distant memory by the day.”

She frowns. “How do you propose that? Got some way to hypnotize what I saw, what I know, what I smelled out of my mind? There’s also what I heard. The things you’ve been doing. All of it...” Her voice breaks and it feels like a punch to the throat.

“Let’s go home. We’ll go home. Sleep a little. And then talk.”

My words feel robotic. Because I know I have not a leg to stand on here, that I can’t hope to win this argument, but I’m trying to stop her from going and short of physically stopping

her which might cross lines permanently, all I have is my fucking mouth.

“I need to go to work!” she shrieks.

“Go to work tomorrow. You already told her you weren’t coming in today.”

“You think we’re going to figure this out in a day? Or at all?” She stomps into the powder room and comes back with a towel, dabbing at her face.

“Is there a way that figuring this out today is conceivable to you?” I ask.

“What? Like if he’s turned back over to the cops, where he should be and then we could what? Pretend it didn’t happen? Pretend you haven’t lied to me for all this time?” She covers her face, dropping the towel. “You lied to me. Over and over and over.”

Ice pierces my veins at that statement. “You think that’s even on the table at this point? Turning him over? If that happens, guess who else goes to jail?”

She looks me in the eyes, and it feels like a sharp hoof to the gut because now that I’ve said it, that’s what she seems to be conveying – that it’s what I deserve. She can’t really think that.

“You don’t think I deserve jail for this.”

She says nothing; points her eyes at her feet.

I move in and tip her chin up. She tries to step back, like she can’t stand my hands on her.

“I don’t deserve to be put away for making him suffer for hurting us, Violet. If you think that…” I let that hang, too. Only because I’m having trouble wrapping my brain around the idea the woman I love could think I should be locked up for making that sonofabitch waste of space suffer.

“I need out of here,” she mutters, jerking away from my touch.

“Let’s go then. I’ll drive.” I pull her SUV key from her keyring and set it down on the table by the door. I’ll get Tony to bring her car back later.

She closes her eyes tight and blows out a long breath before moving outside to my car, getting inside, and folding her arms.

An hour and a half later, we’re back home, no further conversation between us. It was a silent ninety minutes, other than the sound of the wipers. It rained the whole journey, hard, like the sky was weeping for us.

Silence? Loaded silence is more like it. Loaded with distrust and accusations from her. Loaded with anger on my side. She stared out the window, but sadness rolled off her in waves that made me almost seasick.

I need to sleep. Or get drunk. Or go back and beat Raymond Iadanza until he’s an unrecognizable pulp of tepid flesh. Something.

When we get in, she goes to the powder room and I go directly to my home office and open my laptop to get lost in some work while I also fire off a quick text to Tony, telling him to stop in there tomorrow and feed the dickhead. I tell him to pick up a bunch of ricotta cheese and water chestnuts. The fucker can eat that the next three days. I also tell him to change his bandages again and get Violet’s Land Rover here.

Ass-wipe is still listening to country music, still with the lights on. I checked on him first thing this morning and he was beating off.

He now lies there catatonic, eyes open, staring at the ceiling while a country ballad plays. I close the app and go back to my laptop screen.

I head to the kitchen, thinking I should listen to my growling gut even if I feel like eating is tedious right now. Violet’s not

here. I open the butler's kitchen door and walk through to the laundry room. No Violet in there, either. Where is she?

Panic spikes but I find her in the guest room. She's passed out on the bed, holding a crumpled Kleenex in her fist.

I sigh and put a knee to the bed, crawl over, and twirl a curl around my finger. She doesn't rouse, so I curl up behind her, spooning her against me.

She's out, like a light. Doesn't budge. This lets me soak in the feel of her in my arms, the scent of her hair, how perfectly she fits against me.

As I nuzzle my nose behind her ear, remorse floods me. Not remorse for him. Fuck him. But for letting her find out. I fucked up. Bad. What'll it take to fix it?

Feeling her warmth against me, my body finally relaxes. My limbs get heavy and finally my eyes drift closed.

13

Violet

I wake up gasping. I'm in Killian's arms in the dark. The lamp gets flicked on and his eyes are on me with concern.

I roll away so fast, I almost fall, but he catches me and tugs me back to him.

We're in his guest room. We're both fully dressed. I have no idea what time it is, but clearly, we've slept all day.

I was having a terrible dream of him torturing Ray with a horse whip. I could swear I felt every lash of that whip in my dream as if I were the one being whipped.

"Bad dream," he says, giving me a soft look. "I had one, too."

"I dreamt you were torturing him, and I could feel everything you did to him."

His hand goes into my hair as his expression softens even further. I shrug him away, swing my legs over the side of the bed and stare out the window, trying to blink the sensations crawling all over me away.

"This shouldn't have happened; me hurting you. It's not what I wanted," he says softly, touching my back. "At all. I tried to take care of it in the way I felt I had to, not wanting you to know because you didn't need to know. You didn't need that on your mind, or your conscience. But I needed to do what I needed to do."

I say nothing. I'm torn between swatting his hand away and falling into his embrace. Not because I forgive him, but because no one has made me feel safer than he does and I'm craving that right now. Ironically.

"I love you," he says. "I swear I do."

“I think I’m gonna go stay with Susanna or something for a couple days.”

“No. Fuck that.”

I bristle. “What?”

“No, Violet.”

“What do you mean, *no*?” I ask, alarmed.

“Please,” he whispers.

I gulp.

We’re in an eye-lock. With difficulty, I drag my eyes away.

“I’m not sure how to be here right now, Killian. I’m just so...”
My body shudders as tears threaten again. I manage to halt them.

“We’ll figure this out,” he says.

“I think I really need space.”

“No,” he replies gruffly. Stubbornly.

Should I fear him right now?

I turn around fully and take him in. He’s sitting up in bed, arms folded across his chest, a scowl on his face.

“No? So, you’re gonna do to me what he did?”

His scowl slips.

I huff. “You’re gonna refuse to let me leave the way he refused to leave when I tried to end things with him?”

“You think you’re ending things with me?” he demands, gesturing to himself. “Over this?”

He shoots to his feet and I think he’s about to leave the room, but instead he paces it. Angrily. And it’s setting my anxiety on fire.

“You’re comparing us to that shit show with him? That hurts, Violet.”

I pull my lips tight. He continues.

“You think this is a reason for us to be over? No. Not happening. I told you when we met, Violet, I don’t ever let things go. I love you; you’re mine. Do you really expect me to just give up? Let this destroy us? Let him destroy us? That piece of garbage? No. Fuck no.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

He stares at me, flexing his jaw muscles.

“Are you afraid if I leave I’ll go to the police about you?”

He freezes. “I don’t want you to leave because I fuckin’ love you.”

I sigh.

“But will you?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

He laughs sardonically.

“How fuckin’ ironic is this? Just poetic. You’d leave me for *this* after spending three years with a guy who treated you like shit?” He shakes his head and leans toward me, accusation coming at me. “Because I hurt him for hurting you? Because I hurt him for hurting me? Do you realize that’s what you’d be doing? You’d be more loyal to him than you’re being to me, and I’ve only tried to protect you.”

“Protect me? Clearly, your number one goal here was revenge, Killian.”

“Yeah, all right... avenge you and me while giving you a life where revenge and bullshit were out of the picture. I didn’t deceive you to hurt you; I did it in an effort to give you what you deserve – a sweet life.”

I straighten up, summoning strength I really don’t feel. “You said that I shouldn’t give a shit about him, and I don’t. Not that I think kidnapping and torture are okay, they’re not.”

“I did what I had to do.” He shrugs.

I continue. “What I give a shit about is that I don’t know if things between us are even real. I don’t have loyalty to him. I stayed with him because I was too weak to leave. You made me strong enough that I have the courage to leave now. So, thank you for that. Thank you for helping me find my strength.”

“No, Violet.”

I continue. “I can’t... can’t be here right now. Not after all of that. Not after the lies. I don’t know how to feel. I’m just... I’m devastated. I need space.”

“Three years taken from us. Over a thousand days it could’ve been us. Not sure how many more times I’ll be able to defend this before I’m done. Three years you could’ve had me instead of that. Me, loving you, taking care of you, instead of gaslighting you into a state where you went into a shell and couldn’t recognize yourself.”

“If it wasn’t a trick coin – if he’d used a normal one you could’ve lost anyway. It might not have been our time until now. But now...” I let that hang.

I have to leave him. I have no choice. And God, it hurts so much.

“Don’t cut off your nose to spite your face, baby,” he says. “Because I fuckin’ love you. You clearly have no clue how much. I’ll never be able to describe to you just how much.”

“Sometimes, I think people mistake love and possession. Maybe you do think you love me, but really you love that you won me from him, and like that you can keep him alive and rub his nose in it whenever you want. You don’t like being cheated. You don’t like that you lost a bet when betting is your business.”

“I. Love. You. You! Stay. Let me show you.”

“If you love me, really love me, you’ll try to understand why I have to be strong enough right now to walk away.”

“Letting you go isn’t me showing love. It’s giving up. I won’t give up on us.”

“Killian.”

“No. Don’t walk away. Violet, this is us. This is you ‘n me.”
His face is filled with pain. With distress. He eats up the distance and takes my face into his hands, stares directly into my eyes and it hurts. It hurts more than any hurt I’ve ever felt.

“It’s us, baby. You ‘n me. We’re real, you fucking know we are. Just take a beat. A day or two to digest. But here. Let’s figure this out.”

“Let go.”

“Tell me how to fix this,” he demands, angrily.

I try to pry his hands off my face.

“Tell me what to do!” he repeats aggressively, and I back up, but he comes with me because he’s not letting go of my face. He comes with me until my back hits the wall.

His eyes are on fire. He’s so angry. I’ve never seen him so angry. I feel panicked. Claustrophobic.

14

Killian

“What can I do?”

I have to fix this. I have to.

I can't lose her.

I won't.

Over her being upset about that schmuck paying for his deceit?

“Please, back off,” she pleads. “Please.”

“Baby, no.” I continue to cup her face with both hands, making her look into my eyes.

And what I see there? Fear.

She begins clawing at her throat. Raking her fingers up and down her neck, fear in her eyes, her body trembling.

Is she having a panic attack?

She makes a horrible sound of agony and I can see hives rising on her throat, her upper chest, so I take a step back, raising my hands high.

“Violet?” I ask alarmed.

“Please...” she pleads again, continuing to scratch at her neck.

I'm making her react to me the way she reacted to him. That nervous rash. The clawing at her throat.

Fuck, I'm a piece of garbage.

And that makes me want to puke my guts up.

“I have to go,” she whispers.

I fold over, bracing my palms on my thighs. I attempt to drag in a calming breath. And another.

Then I straighten. She's shrunk against the wall, looking at me with fear. She's actually afraid of me right now.

"Stay here tonight. Please. We'll talk tomorrow. I'll leave you alone in here, give you space. Don't go."

"I have to go," she cries out, panicked. "I need to think. I need you to let me go. Please let me go. Please."

The way she says this, I know she needs this. She needs to know she doesn't have to fear me.

I stare.

She does, too. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, she's nearly hyperventilating. *Fuck.*

Fuck, this hurts.

"You should never be afraid of me," I say. "I'm trusting you. I trust you. I'm trusting that you know you need a little space and I'm trusting you to carefully consider everything between us before you make any rash decisions. Everything, Violet. Think long and hard."

She stares, panic-stricken still. I need her to get this. I need her to understand.

"But know this, Violet. We didn't go through all of this to not get our happy ending. We're not done. Do what you need to do right now to get clarity knowing I trust you, but know that I'm not done. Know that I love you and I won't ever be done with you. I meant my vows to you and it felt like you meant yours, too. I did not want to hurt you. I never wanted you to find out. I'm sorry you did."

Her face crumbles even more. Her shoulders shake as she covers her face.

I keep talking. "I love you not because of him, because of you. You and me. I love everything about you. We're gonna have a beautiful life together, baby."

I blow out another breath. “Take the time you need. Be smart. And do not make any decisions about anything without talking to me. Not anybody but me. I trust you, baby.”

She’s stopped clawing at her neck but it’s still out in a mottled pattern of hives and blotches. So is the skin around her collar bones. Her upper chest.

This is my fault.

And I can’t believe she’s reacting this way, but I have to wrap my head around it because that’s the reality.

What was I expecting her to do? Be okay with all of that? I wasn’t expecting anything because she wasn’t supposed to know. My judgement has been clouded by my anger and now here we are. I always calculate risk and factor the outcome in case things go wrong. Except this time. I never factored her finding out. Never thought about how she’d look at it.

“Did you do something to Ray’s mom for showing up at my work?” she asks, not looking at me.

“She’s only being harmed if it’s due to her own doing.”

She frowns.

Another nail in the coffin?

“No more lies, Killian. I need honesty. I really do, no matter how ugly.”

“Okay,” I agree. “She’s been sent away but she’s alive. That’s the truth.”

She looks at me with doubt.

“Didn’t lay a finger on her, baby. But people who could fuck me over have to be dealt with.”

“If I leave right now, am I fucking you over?”

I shake my head. “I’m giving you space. You’re not leaving me. I’m giving you what you need right now because I don’t ever, fucking ever want to cause you to react like that to me again. Reacting to me the way you did to him? Not okay. You

should not be afraid of me. I'm your husband and it's my job to protect you. That's what I've been doing and what I'll keep doing."

Her eyes are filled with sorrow as she swallows hard and blows out a long breath. She thinks she's leaving me.

I fight every urge I've got right now so I can give her what she needs. I fight the urge to hold her tight, to keep her with me. To do whatever it takes to convince her that this is where she belongs.

"Be safe. Be smart, Violet," I say.

Her chin trembles.

Does she take that as a threat?

I don't know; I don't elaborate. Instead, I go against all my instincts and make myself leave the room.

15

Violet

“Going to Susanna’s?” he asks.

He’s on the couch, a glass of booze in his hand, darkness in his expression. It looks and feels ominous. And painful. This hurts so much.

I’m at the doorway with a suitcase and my purse. Enough for a week. I guess I’ll figure the rest out later.

I nod.

“The Rover is still at the beach house. I’ll drive you.”

“I’m taking a rideshare,” I say. “Please stop recording me at work and wherever else.”

“We’ll talk soon,” he says. “I’ll have it parked at your office tomorrow so it’s there when you finish work.”

“You don’t have to,” I whisper. “You shouldn’t have bought it for me. I don’t need it.”

“It’s yours, Violet. I’ll have it parked at your office tomorrow. Come back when you’re ready. I mean it. Don’t stay away a second longer than you need to. I love you.”

“I...”

I don’t know how to finish the sentence. *I love you too* doesn’t feel right, because I don’t know how I feel right now other than devastated and it feels like it’d be a terrible thing to say back to him while he looks at me with all that pain on his face.

The look on his face is the equivalent of a boot grinding my heart into pavement.

Because I can’t figure out what to say, I finish with, “have to go,” then clamp my mouth tight, swallow, and spin away,

scrambling clumsily to get the alarm turned off and myself out the door.

I close it, not letting myself look back. Because if I look over my shoulder, if I see that pain in those piercing green eyes for one more second, I might not go. But, I have to. I have to go, so I can think, so I can breathe, unscramble my brain so that it can make decisions. So I can be true to myself and keep the promises I've made to myself.

After I close the door, I stand there a minute, trying to get my head together so I can make my feet work. I hear glass shattering on the other side. He's whipped his drinking glass.

I stare at the floor for a beat, tears blurring my vision, before I stiffly make my way to the elevator.

16

Killian

“Is she okay?” I ask.

“Who?” Susanna croaks, sounding like I woke her.

It’s midnight and my wife has been gone for a few hours. I’m drunk. Almost blind-drunk; took a minute to find Susanna’s name in my phone and get it dialed.

“Violet. Who ya think I’m talkin’ about? I need to know if she’s okay.”

“What do you mean?” Susanna asks.

“She’s not there?” I demand, feeling like the floor is about to give way under my feet.

“No. What’s wrong?”

“We had a... fight,” I say, putting a shoulder against the wall to steady myself. My vision doubles for a second; I blink a couple times.

A fight. Understatement.

“Where the hell is she?” I demand.

“I’ll call her. I’ll call you back.”

I stare out the window, tempted to track her down on my phone app. But she doesn’t want me to do that stuff, does she?

My eyes move to my phone that’s still in my hand and my thumb hovers over the app on the screen.

I need to know where she is.

A minute later, I’m breathing out relief after processing the location on the screen.

Violet's grandfather's house. I was there once, just before we left to get married.

I sit down and tap out a message to Susanna.

I found her. She's at her grandfather's. Leave her be tonight. Sorry I woke you.

Susanna: I called and it went to voicemail. She's prob asleep.

Me: Sorry I woke you.

Susanna: Bad fight?

Me: Yep.

Susanna: How mad should I be at you? As her bestie, I have to take her side, even if she's in the wrong.

Me: I'm in the wrong. Be mad at me.

Susanna: Make it up to her. Send her flowers. Give her oral. She'll forgive you. Girls can't resist a downstairs kiss apology. <wink>

Susanna: Sorry. Highly inappropriate.

Susanna. < heart emoji>

I'm woken by banging on my bedroom door. I touch my phone to bring the screen to life. A screen full of missed calls and texts. I only take in that none of them are from my wife before I look at the time. Eleven o'clock.

"Killian, can I come in?" Patricia asks urgently, rapping on the door some more.

"What the fuck?" I call out.

My housekeeper pokes her head in.

"Are you sick?" she asks.

"I was asleep," I clip.

She looks dumbfounded. Probably because I never sleep this late.

“The security desk called. The police are on their way up to talk to you.”

“I’ll get dressed,” I say. “Do me a favor and offer them coffee to buy me a minute, please?”

She backs out.

I swing my legs over off the bed and stare into space. The cops.

The cops.

I woodenly walk into the bathroom and take a piss, then turn to the sink and stare at myself as I turn the water on. Her perfume is on the counter, one of her black hair ties wound around my hairbrush. I run the bristles through my hair. I look like shit. I feel like shit. I drank the better part of that big bottle of whiskey and passed out somewhere around dawn. My eyes catch on the thick band of gold on my finger. I flex my fingers and stare at it before soaping up my hands.

The cops.

Fuck, Violet. Baby, fuck.

Her face flashes through my mind. Her face the night we met. The image of her in my bathrobe the morning after we spent our first night together, talking on the phone about me, not knowing I was listening as she beamed with joy at what we were starting. The panic in her eyes at the hospital when I got jumped. Her dimples. Those gorgeous dents in her cheeks that make me happier than a kid on Christmas - the kid on Christmas that got everything he wanted instead of a pile of big fat nothing like I usually got. Happy tears shining in her eyes in Vegas when she listened to me recite my vows. The look on her face and strength in her voice when she vowed her promises to me. There’s a knife in my heart right now. I can’t see it but fuck, do I feel it.

Like a fucking tool. Lovesick sappy tool.

One last image of her assaults me before I clear it away. The look of betrayal in her eyes in that basement the day before yesterday when she said, “You lied.”

I can’t reflect on that right now. Chances are there’ll be plenty of time for reflection later.

I swallow down some invisible broken glass and scrub my face before I swiftly get dressed. I put on a suit. A tie. Nineteen-hundred-dollar Italian leather shoes that Violet picked for me on our honeymoon. I can’t take the time to shower, but no way am I walking out to be arrested in sweats or even jeans. All the shit I’ve done in my life so far and I’ve got no criminal record. No way will I go down looking like the kid that grew up in the projects. Even if I smell like a distillery. Even if my eyes look like two piss-holes in the snow.

After I’m dressed I assess myself in the bathroom mirror while swishing a mouthful of mouthwash. Time to face the music. I step out and greet the two plainclothes detectives sitting at my table.

“Good morning, officers; I’m Killian Coulter.”

They both turn their heads and look at me as I approach.

“What can I do for you today?” I ask calmly.

My head is fucking pounding. And my proverbial heart, the place they say breaks when a loved one betrays you, it’s sitting in my chest, splintered into about a million shards.

“Sorry to come by unannounced, Mr. Coulter,” one of the two men hands me two business cards. I glance at them. Carlson MacDonald. Edward Scottsdale. He continues. “I’m Carlson, this is my partner Ed. We called but there wasn’t an answer and your voicemail box was full. A young woman was found dead in an alley behind a billiards in Mill Park last night. She had your business card in her pocket. No identification, no phone. We’re hoping you can identify her. Can I show you a photograph of the deceased?”

My chest seizes.

I jerk up my chin and hold onto the edge of the pink marble with my right hand. Braced.

The cop who hasn't spoken shows me his screen.

"Amber Buckley," I say immediately. "She used to work for me."

The image is just her face. Eyes closed. Face pale. Lips colorless. There's a bruise over her eyebrow and along her jawline. A scab on her cheekbone and her forehead.

"Used to?" The cop holding the phone asks.

I pull my eyes away and exhale. My heart kicks up, like it's rebooting.

"She was fired for stealing from the till at my club Genesis a couple months ago. Was it homicide or an overdose?"

"We're not certain yet. She's got a drug problem?"

I nod. "It was suspected she had a drug problem, so I offered to send her to rehab. One of my managers visited her mother recently with one last offer of help. Her boyfriend is a known drug dealer and he caused some trouble at my clubs recently, in fact, so the offer was to help her with her problem and encourage her to stop the vendetta she had against me for firing her."

"Can we get her contact details from your personnel files? Ask some questions?"

"Absolutely. Patricia, is there-"

"Coffee right here," Patricia says, passing me a cup.

"Can you gentleman excuse me for a quick moment? I have an appointment I'll have to delay. I'll just slip into my office and make a quick call. And I'll get Amber's details from one of my staff."

"Absolutely, Mr. Coulter."

When I'm behind closed doors, I empty my lungs and give myself a minute to feel all I've been masking the past few

minutes.

That it wasn't Violet found dead somewhere.

That this wasn't Violet reporting me to the cops.

Of course I knew last night it was a possibility she'd feel the need to do the law-abiding thing. Report a crime. But never in a million years did I let myself think she'd actually call them.

Clearly. Or I'd have taken precautions. I think. I don't even fucking know. But with Patricia's knock on the door this morning? Fuck. For a minute there...

I lift my phone and tap to find Violet's location. She's at her office. I login to the camera feed and see the back of her head. She's in her cubicle, a phone to her ear, cradled between her ear and shoulder with both her hands on her keyboard. Her bitchy boss stands behind her with her arms folded, waiting for Violet to get off the phone, I'd guess. I close out of that app and look in on Iadanza. He's asleep in his cell.

I clear the logs out, log out of the apps and delete them for now as a precaution, run my smartphone cleaning software, and then I make a phone call to Alana and tell her to brace, that Amber has been found dead and to head to Genesis early, ready to turn over whatever evidence they want. She says she'll head there now and get Amber's emergency contact information.

Killian

A Week Later

“She’s gonna leave just as soon as your back’s turned. And she’ll tell the cops. She’s just that kinda girl – gotta abide by the law. Won’t even download pirated movies, our Vi - she’s a good girl so you know you ain’t gettin’ away with this unless you lock her up, too. Her conscience’ll drive her nuts. I know! Why don’t you just put her in here with me? We can keep one another company.”

Iadanza’s mouth splits into a wide smile, showing two tooth gaps, one on the upper right beside the canine, the other on the bottom left in the very front. I’ve got a mind to knock the rest of them out, too.

He chants this, not for the first time or even the tenth, while staring at the camera and like every other time he’s said it, he then starts pulling on his cock, taunting me with the fact he’s thinking about Violet while he does it. Talking about her body. About how pretty she looks when she comes.

It’s like he knows that now that Violet knows he’s down there I won’t chop that dick off for the transgression. But fuck am I tempted.

His face is healing. So are his wrists. He limps back and forth to his piss and shit bucket with the permanent knee damage in between jacking his meat and pleading for pain meds. Since shit went down last week, he now gets pain medication every day when Tony stops in.

I haven’t set foot in there since Violet left. He’s had Tony, who only hit him once the day after we left, and I saw it on camera so told Tony to only hit if necessary. After a couple days of

ricotta and water chestnuts, I upgraded his food to frozen dinners done in the microwave and he's got entertainment streaming, television projected on his wall. He gets three meal varieties with no cutlery, but he gets a box of cereal every other day and a couple pieces of fruit. He had the gall to request the TV dinner with the dessert in it with hysterical laughter. Yeah, Iadanza is looking healthier on the outside but he's possibly more cracked than ever.

I haven't tracked Violet much. Not that it hasn't been an exercise in self-discipline to stop myself. I do look in when I wake up and see she's at work and then again before I go to bed at night and see she's at her grandfather's.

She hasn't called. She hasn't sent a text. She hasn't spent a dime from the joint account I fund or used the credit card I gave her. I have access to her bank account as she added me after we got back just like she said she would, and I've logged into them and seen she put gas in her car two days ago and yesterday she spent four hundred dollars at a department store – which is presumably for clothes since she hasn't come back to get any. And there have been some coffee house purchases near her office as well as two trips to the supermarket.

As far as her office goes, I had the camera removed from behind her cubicle a couple days after she left. I watched the final bit of video footage before they went dead and saw her watching the guy who took them out. Her facial expression while she watched felt like a kick in the chest.

She knows they're out.

I've given her space.

And with each passing day, I feel worse.

I sleep like garbage. I'm an asshole whenever I have to talk to any of my employees. I spend my days alone at home, logging in to read emails and making calls when I need to.

I've conversed with the cops a couple times.

Turns out Amber Buckley died of a drug overdose from a cocktail of Fentanyl-laced Xanax and a handful of other drugs

that were all in her system. This same cocktail is responsible for killing two other people in Portland this week, one of them a nineteen-year-old college student, the other a fifty-year-old man.

The cops tell me they're about to get a warrant to arrest Amber's boyfriend, Felix Hoffman, who they want badly. Their investigation has been ongoing, aided by my intel and surveillance I got my hands on of him doing an actual drug deal with a little extra help from a friend connected to the Ferrano organization – or rather the organization they used to be – they're running a lot cleaner these days now that Dario and Tommy are married. A trend among dangerous men I should pay attention to.

My buddy Dex, who also works for the Ferranos helped to connect a large quantity of laced Xanax directly to Hoffman, so he doesn't just go down, he goes down extra hard. Yeah, he's responsible for the bad drugs, though not in the quantity he's about to get busted for. That quantity will ensure he gets put away for a long time.

Apparently he fancies himself some sort of laboratory aficionado and it's been spread far and wide to steer clear of his drugs because they've been fucked with. He experiments. And it often goes wrong.

I could've left that alone, but I intervened partly because Amber's mother contacted Alana after she got the news of her daughter's death and said that the girl had been there just two days before, sobbing, vowing to change her ways and said she planned to call me to take me up on my rehab offer. The mother gave her my business card, which was found in her jeans pocket according to the cops.

Apparently, Amber was on the outs with the boyfriend and the mother thinks the boyfriend was knocking her around and maybe even gave her the bad drugs intentionally.

I should have no loyalty to Amber for the shit she pulled. Besides, the only thing worse than drugs is bad drugs, so less of that on the street is better. Amber was just an employee, not

even someone I was particularly tight with, but she used to serve my table often when we first hired her, and she reminded me of Gina Ricci from the old building who used to help me out with Will.

Gina wound up taking a wrong turn in life and I heard through the grapevine she died of a drug overdose almost two years ago,

Gina showed at my new apartment several months after I moved there. She was wasted and tried throwing herself at me. I shut the door in her face. A few months after that she came to me, telling me she was desperate for money for an abortion. I gave it to her for old times' sake, but told her she should get into rehab. It was obvious she had turned to drugs. She denied having a drug problem. I told her I was done with her, not to come to me for favors again unless she'd been clean a year and if she got there, I'd help her get a job. She flipped me off, told me I was making a mistake, that no one would love me like she could. I never saw her again.

So maybe I'm taking the Amber case a little more personally than I would've otherwise. Because she reminded me of Gina.

Just like maybe I took Violet being abused by Iadanza more personally than I might have if my mother hadn't been knocked around time and time again until her asshole boyfriend kicked her head in.

Yeah. I take things personally. If I believed therapy would help me and actually went, that's bound to be what they'd tell me, that my childhood trauma and the murder of my mother have left me with some issues. Blah, blah, fuck off.

I can see this myself and save myself thousands in therapy. What do I need to do to move on in a healthy way? Maybe that's not having access to Iadanza to work out my frustrations. Is denying myself access to him this past week a step in the right direction for me? That remains to be seen. Maybe the fact that my wife left me will help me find a way to fix my shit. That remains to be seen, too.

My brother has called twice in the past week to try to get together, but I've made excuses. There was supposed to be a family dinner here this week that Violet was organizing so her family and Will could meet. So her family could see where she lives. Obviously, that's not happening right now, either.

I love spending time with my brother and wouldn't generally sluff him off for anything. He's a solid guy with a big heart. But I don't want to make excuses about Violet. I don't want to talk to anybody about her. And I don't feel like being sociable and pretending I'm not the lowest I've ever felt in my fucking life.

Susanna Gagne called me a couple times too and left voicemails about stepping up my game in getting Violet to forgive me for 'whatever the fuck it was' I did.

Then she showed up here two days ago, demanding the answers she wasn't getting through the phone. She slipped in with another building resident, which doesn't make me happy about the security around here (and I called building management to complain about that and tell them to pick up their socks).

"She's looking broken. She's with you so she's not supposed to look broken. What happened?"

"You didn't ask her?"

"She won't talk about it. She says she can't. That she needs me to let it go. She's shutting me out when she promised she'd never do that again, but here she is doing it. She'll go to dinner with me, she'll take my calls, but she's not really there. Why? Why does she look like she's mourning you?"

"I'm not doing this, Susanna. Please, respect what Violet has asked and let it go."

"Are you gonna fix it?"

"I hope so," I said.

Her eyes went alarmed.

“God. You’re broken too. What the fuck happened?”

“Gotta go. If she needs anything, if anything goes wrong or she needs me, call me, okay?”

“She does need you. She’s a mess. You clearly need her, too. Why aren’t you two figuring this out? You’ve been married for a few weeks. What happened, Killian? She told me to cancel the lingerie shower, too, and Dreamboat... you do want her to get showered with beautiful lingerie, don’t you? I spent six hundred bucks on pretty things for her, pretty burgundy things, and have about a dozen of our friends on a list to-”

“Sorry, I have to go.” I closed the door.

That was two days ago.

Now, I’m getting ready to go to bed, it’s only nine thirty but I’ve barely slept, so am about to try despite that it’s another night without Violet.

After I quickly check on *Fuckface*, I look in on Violet’s location, so I can see that she’s safe and sound at her grandfather’s place. As I’m exiting the app, my phone rings while in my hand.

Kevin Gates Calling

It’s my fucking father-in-law.

Wonderful.

Violet’s parents are nice people. I’ve only been around them a handful of times, but they’ve treated me well. They’re good to their daughter; I like them. It was weird going over there for dinner, being around a functional family, but I liked it. Why the fuck is he calling me right now?

I’m tempted to let it go to voicemail so I can see if his message tells me what it’s about, but panic hits me that something might be wrong with my wife, so I answer.

“Hello?”

“Killian, it’s Kev Gates. Meet me for a beer in say... half an hour.”

“Kev, I’m in the middle of something.”

“Killian, respect son, but when your wife’s father asks you to do something, you do it if you can.”

I’m taken aback.

He chuckles. “I’m razzin’ ya. But listen... you didn’t have to go through the whole courtship thing where you got to know the family over time, but the little we know about you, I get the sense you’re a no-nonsense guy. We have that in common. Now, we need to meet for a beer. I’ll be at Callaghan’s Pub in your neighborhood in half an hour. If you can’t do half an hour, do an hour. You know it?”

I rub my forehead. “I do.”

“Be there when? An hour?”

“All right, Kev.”

We say goodbye and I put the phone down.

Fuck.

How the fuck is this supposed to go? What has she told them?

I tap out a message to Violet.

I promised to give you space, but your father demanded I meet him at Callaghan’s Pub tonight. I don’t know how you want to play this. If you have input, reply or call. If not, I’ll play things as carefully as I can.

It takes seconds for me to see the message has been read. It makes my gut drop.

I stare for a long minute, waiting for her reply.

Two minutes go by and nothing, so I take my phone into the bathroom, shed my clothes, and climb into the shower. I wash up in record time, almost the entire time with my eyes aimed

out the glass doors toward the counter by the sink so I can see if the phone screen lights up.

Finally, it does while I'm lathering shampoo, so I rinse quickly, and practically sprint from the shower like a fucking chump.

I miss the call. It wasn't Violet. It was her father. There's a voicemail alert. I play it on speaker.

“Killian, Violet asked me to cancel. At least you two are talking. That's something. I'm pretending I haven't seen her message. She thinks I can't figure out this phone anyway. I'd like you to still meet me at Callaghan's. Call or send me a text and let me know if you're comin'.”

I tap out a text to him.

I got your voicemail. I'll see you at the pub soon.

As I'm getting dressed, my phone makes noise. It's Violet's text alert. She changed it while we were in Vegas to what she told me was the *popcorn* sound, so I'd know it was her without even looking. She changed mine on her phone to a heartbeat sound, which I really fucking liked.

Dimples: I asked my dad to cancel and told him to mind his own business. Hopefully, he does. Feel free to ignore his message.

This is worse than not hearing from her. Because it's cold. It doesn't even feel like Violet.

Me: Come home.

I've hit send before I even let myself think about what I've just written. It's what I want. I want her here. I want to talk to her. Fix this.

She hasn't replied ten minutes later, so I text again.

Me: I'm going to Callaghan's to meet with your father. I want to see you. I've done a lot of thinking. Reflecting. Come over tomorrow. Have dinner with me and let's talk. Please.

She reads it immediately, but doesn't answer me, so I head out.

Kev Gates is sitting in a booth alone. Our eyes meet as I approach, gesturing to the bartender whose eyes are on me.

"I'll have whatever he's having."

I get a nod, so I move the rest of the way toward Kev. He rises as I get there, so I shake his hand and take my coat off before I sit.

"Violet messaged me to tell me not to come, sir. But you requested I be here so I told her I would come out of respect for you."

"I appreciate it. What the fuck is happening with you two?"

I sigh and rub my forehead.

The bartender brings a glass of beer over.

"Thanks," I say as I give him a nod and then my eyes move back to Violet's father.

He raps on the table twice with his fist. "I gave up walking my baby girl down the aisle because I was certain she was tyin' the knot with the right guy. I figured it was much better than being forced to walk her toward that douchebag she dumped. Don't make me regret that decision."

I exhale hard. "I wanna fix it, Kev. She's upset with me, so I'm giving her space like she's asked me to do."

"Stop giving her space. Can't fix it if she's living with her old grandpa."

I take a sip of my beer.

He continues. "Got a message from your mother-in-law, too. She says Christmas is comin' up. You need to be at my house with us. With family. That includes your brother. Whether you and Violet are finished sorting it or not, you're family and you should be there at Christmas."

I'm surprised at this.

“That how you two felt about Iadanza when he was dating your daughter?”

“Fuck no,” he says and takes a healthy sip of his beer.

I do the same.

“I hated that sonofabitch from day one, Killian. So did my wife. And she doesn’t fuckin’ hate anybody. I don’t know what’s goin’ on with you and my daughter but as soon as she started seeing you, she got rid of him and came back into the family fold after a long fuckin’ time of being like a ghost of herself. The difference in her was night and day. And Killian, it’s night again and we don’t like it. My wife has asked Violet to get into counseling. We think she sabotaged things with you because of how damaged that relationship was with that... that slimeball. She’s with us, but she’s not herself. She’s walking around like you died and left her a widow. What gives?”

I look him in the eyes.

“Iadanza *is* the issue between Violet and me. But it’s also about my dishonesty where dealing with him are concerned. I don’t know if you know this, but I grew up with that guy.”

“My brother-in-law Hugh mentioned that when we had our family pow-wow the other day.”

They had a pow-wow about Violet.

This doesn’t surprise me. They saw the difference in their girl and now they’re concerned. They don’t want to see her go back to the Violet they lost.

“It’s a long story, sir, and not something I’m prepared to share all the details of, but...”

“You punch his lights out?” he asks, leaning forward, looking like he’s hoping I’ll say *yes*.

“I lied to Violet about some things in an effort to protect her, and the result is that I broke the trust between us. I told her tonight that I want to talk and she’s not responding. She’s digging her heels in.”

He leans back and gives me a long stare before saying, “That guy used to make her try ‘n act small. Anyone around could see it, but if anyone said a word, she’d get fightin’ mad at first. Then, after a while anyone said anything and she’d hide. Stopped comin’ around. Drove us crazy. Goes to show, you’re the one helping put her back together. Instead of her cowerin’ and puttin’ up with shit, she’s taking a stand. This is one of the reasons you’re healthy for her.”

“I’m afraid she might disagree. She’s pretty angry with me.”

“You look like you’re sufferin’ for it, too.”

“I am. I miss her. I’m devastated that I’ve hurt her.”

“You didn’t cheat? Didn’t hurt her? Didn’t mistreat her?” His back is straight and he’s staring into my eyes, looking for signs of truth or deception.

“I lied to her. But I did it to protect her.”

“About?” he presses.

I shake my head. “Respect, Kev, but I’m not about to go into any details.”

“Work to get her trust back,” he says instantly, not appearing offended I’m not giving him details.

“Dad,” Violet says, from somewhere behind me. I look over my shoulder.

She’s standing to the side of the booth we’re in. She’s positioned so she can talk to her father. But she’s staying at a distance behind me so that... what? So that she doesn’t have to look at me?

Sharp pain spreads through me at the sight of her.

“You sit down and talk to him, munchkin. This is bull-pucky ‘n you know it.” Her father points at her. “If you love him, at least try n’ fix it.”

He gets up and puts his coat on, dropping a twenty and a ten on the table. “Drinks are on me. Something for you too, Violet.

Sit down and talk to your husband. Hope we'll see you at Christmas, Killian." He extends his hand. I rise and take it.

"Thank you, sir."

"Kev. Lose the *sir*."

He kisses Violet on the cheek and then leaves, waving to the bartender on his way out the door.

I reach over and catch her by the hand. I squeeze.

Her hand is freezing. Her expression? Wrecked. She looks at me like she knows how I feel inside, because she feels it, too, and I want to fall to my fucking knees and plead for her to come home, to talk to me. To tell me what to do to get her back.

"Sit for a minute. Please? Let's talk."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she says.

I wrap my arm around her and move her to where her father sat. She doesn't protest. Instead she sits, leaving her coat on. She's wearing a red ski jacket and a white knitted hat with little red rosebuds on it. A matching scarf.

The bartender walks over with his eyebrows up.

"Something to drink? A glass of wine?" I suggest.

She shakes her head.

"Something?" I push.

"Sparkling water with lemon," she relents.

He nods and walks off.

I reach over with both hands and take her hands into mine.

"I miss you," I say. "I miss you so fucking much."

She stares at our hands, biting her lip. Her hands are limp, cold in mine.

I don't like this.

She looks pale, sad. Almost ill. It makes me sick that I've done this to her. To us.

A glass of ice with a lemon wedge and bottle of San Pellegrino are deposited. She uses the opportunity to pull back from me and pour herself a glass.

At least she's still wearing her rings. Seeing this gives me relief.

"I know we can't talk here, not openly. Do you wanna come home so we can do that there?"

She shakes her head.

"The cameras are out of your office," I say.

"I know," she replies.

"I still look up your location twice a day so I know you're safe," I admit.

She says nothing, just bites her lip and stares into her water glass.

"Susanna wants us to fix it. Your parents want us to fix it. I want us to fix it. There's just you."

"There's not just me," she says softly. "There's another factor and you know it."

"I know. We can't talk about that here though. Come home with me and we'll talk there."

She shakes her head, still not making eye contact. "That's not a good idea."

"Come with me. We'll talk and then I can either drive you back to your grandfather's or you can stay, and I'll sleep in the guest room."

She shakes her head. "I have to go. Grampa's expecting me back."

"Talk to me in the car. We'll sit for a minute."

"I have to be up early for work tomorrow. I have an early meeting."

There's no point saying that our condo is closer to her office than her grandfather's. She's looking for any reason to not come home with me.

"How is your grandfather?"

"He's good. He likes having me there."

"I bet he's worried about you too. Like your father is. Your mother. Hugh. They had a pow wow about how worried they are about you."

She rolls her eyes.

"Your family loves you. I love you. I want to fix this. I have some ideas."

"I have to go. This hurts too much." She looks toward the door and the crease over her eyebrows as well as the tremble of her chin make me want more than anything to scoop her up in my arms and hold her close.

"Violet, baby..."

"I can't." She rises.

"Come see me. Tomorrow for dinner. We need to talk."

"Killian..." she whines, wanting me to let it go.

But I'm done letting it go. I've given her time and it's solved nothing. It's made things worse. Space hasn't made either of us feel better. We can't resolve anything if we're apart. She needs to come home.

"Look at me, please?" I request.

Her eyes move slowly to meet with mine, like she's dreading doing this.

"Come home and we'll negotiate about that other factor. I need you home. Come home or I'll make decisions without your input."

She flinches at the way I've said that. Yeah, I'm done fucking around with this. Seeing her like this, seeing her broken and

sad like this? Pale, gaunt, not taking care of herself? It's time for me to kick my own ass into gear and win my wife back.

That's what I'm gonna fucking do.

No matter what it takes.

Violet

“Be there tomorrow. Six thirty,” he says, like it’s a demand with a warning, like I’m the one who has done something wrong.

He then closes my car door and while I start it up, I can’t tear my gaze away from his for a long moment. There’s anger brewing in those eyes and I’m not sure if I should be afraid or not.

I think I am.

Afraid.

I can’t pinpoint the type of fear, because it’s not the kind of fear I’d expect. More like fear for my heart than my safety. But to say the look in his eyes is intense is an understatement.

Finally, I manage to focus on my mirrors, but note from my periphery that he doesn’t take his eyes off me.

I’m trembling all the way back to my grandfather’s house.

I didn’t want to confront Dad and Killian; seeing Killian was the last thing I wanted to do, but since Dad ignored my request to cancel his meeting with Killian and since Killian responded that he was going despite me asking him to ignore my dad, I felt like I had no choice. And as hard as I figured it’d be, it was even worse than that.

I’m trying to manufacture inner strength. And I told myself I should march in there and tell Dad to mind his own business and completely ignore Killian’s presence, just leave. But then I saw him and all my bravado melted.

I saw those piercing green eyes, got locked by them without avoiding reading what was in them. How he assessed me. And God, how it felt when he touched me, guided me to sit, when he held my hands, his wedding ring clinking with mine, making just a small noise that sounded like a gong in my brain.

I felt weak sitting there. Ready to crumble into dust. So much for going in there because I was strong. I walked toward that pub determined to be strong, but now I can't stop shaking, driving back to Grampa's weak and heartsick.

When I showed up at Grampa's, letting myself in with the key I was given when I started helping with the cooking, cleaning, and shopping before we left for Las Vegas, I startled him.

I asked if I could stay for a little while. I asked it with a trembling voice and shaky body. He gave me a panicked look and then it was like he read me, knew what I needed. Space. Solitude with the option to have company.

He offered, "Here if you wanna talk, kiddo. And here if you don't."

He didn't give me the third degree. I knew that his place was the best location for me to get some space. I couldn't fathom going to Susanna's and getting the space I needed. She would've been the exact opposite to what Grampa was.

And this way, I get the benefit of getting to spend time with him, too. I felt a little guilty for it because it was obvious by the way things went that he would've taken me in at any point during my relationship with Ray. If I could've been strong and taken that step, it would've meant very different things for me. And maybe even for his health. But looking back with remorse over what I should have done ages ago doesn't serve much. Though I can't help but replay so many things in my mind. My memories haunt me all day long, and taunt especially at night when I'm alone, without distractions.

Grampa told me to go ahead and sleep in whichever guest room I wanted. But he knew I'd pick Grandma's doll room.

The house has three bedrooms and her doll room was always my favorite as a little girl. It has a pretty purple bedspread, my grandmother's doll collection, and floral wallpaper.

It was also perfect because it was the furthest room away from Grampa's, so he wouldn't hear me crying myself to sleep every night.

That's what I've done. I'm no closer to answers. I'm just numb.

And despite being busy at work during the day, it's like Shara's made it her goal to torture me. Shara has been icy, but worse, she's micromanaging me, at my cubicle five times a day with questions, with second-guessing me. And I'm doing a terrible job of hiding that my life is falling apart. It's like she knows and is taking great pleasure in watching me fight to get sentences out without crying.

When I got back from Italy, the girls in the office had a mini shower for me with a cake and a gift card that everyone chipped in on for a housewares store. She wasn't there for more than a minute, eyes on me like she was angry. After I took the two days off when I found out Killian's secrets, it got worse. She grilled me about a particular order with a supply problem extra-hard. Like I'm the reason the manufacturer has the products on limited allocation. It feels like she's putting me through my paces, second-guessing stuff, and giving me dirty looks whenever we pass one another in the office.

But I've been working hard and showing up every day on time, staying late, and going out of my way to be the model employee so I'm hoping she'll thaw eventually.

She's been weird with me since I got back from my honeymoon, in fact. It was like she liked me best when I was fresh off my breakup with Ray, but lately, it's like she's my bully and won't leave me in peace.

God knows how she's going to react when she finds out I'm pregnant.

Ugh.

Yeah. I haven't taken a test yet, but my period is a week late, my breasts are beyond sore, for the past few days I can't tolerate the smell of coffee or almost any food, and I've had no appetite. This morning I tried to eat an apple, but after one bite I threw up over and over until I was just vomiting air.

Stress tends to eliminate my appetite, but being off the pill and the other symptoms, plus all the honeymoon sex – it's pretty obvious.

Today, on my way back to Grampa's after work, I even bought prenatal vitamins. No pregnancy test, but vitamins, which is silly.

I'm not getting confirmation but I'm behaving like I'm pregnant because in my core I feel like I already know I am.

As for the other people in my life, Cammy looks at me like she can see through me. I've avoided going to lunch with the girls. I haven't avoided Susanna, but I've been getting interrogated repeatedly because apparently Killian phoned her, looking for me the night I left, and she direly told me that he sounded like someone ran over his dog when he called. I guess my reaction told her just how seriously wrong things are in my marriage, so she got panicked, tried to pry, and when she kept failing to get answers, told me she paid him a visit. She complained about the fact that he's as tight-lipped about what's going on as I am.

Of course he is. It's not like he's about to tell anybody what he's been doing.

Susanna guilted me for closing up on her so soon after we've reconnected, after how much I apologized for closing up on her before. And this made me burst into tears and cry into her beautiful curls as she hugged me, letting me cry it out for what felt like an hour before I pleaded for her to just try to understand that I can't talk about the problems in my marriage, but that I want her in my life. That I need her more than ever.

"What did he do? Please tell me. Should I hate him? Because I saw him and he looks like you look, sad-sauce faced, so it's

hard to hate someone who clearly loves you so much.”

She let me off the hook. Temporarily, she said. But she warned me that she won't sit back and watch me wither again.

I feel like I *am* withering. Like I'll continue until I fade into nothing. But I can't do that. Because I need to take care of myself and this baby I'm sure I'm carrying.

I'm wrecked. Ruined. And I'm pretty sure I'm going to be coparenting a baby with a man who might have manipulated me into falling in love with him and marrying him just so that he could get revenge on the guy that ruined my life. And the guy that ruined my life is locked up in my new husband's basement, getting tortured and fed pet food. I have no earthly idea what to do about any of this.

So, I'm staying at a place that has always brought me comfort where I can be left mostly alone. I'm going to work every day and doing my job to the best of my ability despite the constant bullying, because work is the only constant for me – like it was when things were at their worst with Ray.

I eat dinner with Grampa and make sure he eats properly. I help around his house and watch TV with him at night. He doesn't hassle me about why I'm not with my brand-new husband. I know he has opinions about it by the look in his eyes, but he's on my side. My parents, my cousins, my aunts, and even Uncle Huey are all trying to find out what's going on with me – why I'm a newlywed staying with my grandfather.

All I've told them is that Killian and I are having problems, that maybe we got married too quickly – before we really knew one another and that I'm taking a minute and to please just give me that minute.

I don't know anything except that I'm just trying to continue to remember to keep inhaling and exhaling, do my job, and make myself get out of bed every morning. Because without those reminders, it really feels like I could just curl up and do none of that. I have to try to focus on the things I can focus on, so I don't give in to allowing my brain to torture me with

thoughts about all the lies and deceit and uncertainty about Killian's true motivations. And the not insignificant fact that Ray is still locked in a room in his basement.

It's hard. Very.

It hurts. Excruciatingly.

He wants me to come to dinner tomorrow and I don't want to go. I don't want to sit across from him at a table again, looking into those eyes. Seeing that pain in his amplifies my own pain.

Maybe he thinks he loves me. Or maybe he really does. I have no idea. All I know is that I was lied to, feel like I was manipulated, and that the man I love more than I ever thought possible has spent weeks torturing my ex in his basement like a psychopath while pretending everything is absolutely okay. While using my happiness as a weapon against Ray.

And I can't take more hurt right now.

I crawl into the daybed in my grandmother's doll room just in time for more nausea to kick in. I keep one foot on the floor in the hopes it'll stop the room from spinning. It doesn't. I barely make it to the bathroom before I'm throwing up again.

I'll have to make a doctor's appointment for Saturday when I'm off work to do a pregnancy test. Or just get one at a drug store. And then... and then, I have no idea what then.

Killian

I prepare a steak stir fry. I set the table with the light-up chopsticks. And she doesn't show.

I tap into her phone location on my screen and she's at her parents' house. I call her. Two rings and then voicemail – declined call. I try a text message.

Dinner is ready. On your way?

Ten minutes later she hasn't answered, and I haven't gotten a read receipt either, so I cover the food, put it in the fridge, grab my keys, and head out.

I ring the doorbell and I'm greeted by Cody Gates.

"Hey, man!" Violet's little brother exclaims, "Where you been? What's happenin'? Things cool?"

"Hey, brother. Good to see you," I say.

He shakes my hand while opening the door wide, giving me a direct line of sight into the kitchen where Violet stands at the counter with a potato masher and a pot. Her eyes widen when she sees me.

"Killian, hi!" Daphne Gates rushes toward me with her arms open. She hugs me, wide-eyed surprise on her face. "We're just working on dinner. Are you here for dinner too? Kevin's almost home from the garage. My dad is here, too and we'll be eating in about five or ten minutes." She cups her hand at the side of her mouth and raises her voice, "Dad! Violet's Killian is here."

"Actually, I made plans with Violet for tonight at our place and I'm thinking she forgot. I wasn't able to reach her by

phone.”

Daphne’s mouth drops open and she pivots sideways to look at her daughter, who still stands in the same spot, now with a tea towel in her hand, alarm on her face.

“I have plans with my parents tonight,” Violet states, staring at her hands as she dries them.

“It’s okay. Go ahead, sweetie,” Violet’s mom suggests, “We’ll do it another night. It’s only meatloaf.”

Violet’s grandfather appears in the doorway to the family room, near the kitchen.

“Best meatloaf around. Hello Killian,” he greets with a stern look in his eyes.

I’ve only met him twice before tonight, but got the impression he liked me. Or that he did, but suspect now he’s not so sure.

“Hello Mr. Gabriel, how are you keeping?” I extend my hand.

He shakes it. “Doin’ great. Got my granddaughter takin’ care of me. She’s a good cook, great company. But why is that, Killian? Shouldn’t you be taking care of her?”

“That’s what I wanna do, sir,” I say softly.

And now no one can possibly miss that the air is heavier.

“Hm.” He slaps my arm good-naturedly before giving Violet a raised brow look and then the old man’s eyes bounce to Daphne as he rolls them before he ambles back into the room he came from.

“Killian, this isn’t a good time.” Violet’s eyes are now lit with a bit of fire.

A direct stare makes her flinch. I regret that because she looks away.

“You can go ahead, honey. We’ll drive Grampa home afterwards. Go with Kilian. You two should talk. Besides,” she lowers her voice, “You probably don’t wanna be here when

Grampa finds out I altered my meatloaf recipe to make it healthier.” Daphne smiles brightly.

“Mom,” she grinds out angrily, eyes pointed at the floor.

“Go on, sis,” her kid brother interjects. “You two are honeymooners. Gotta work out your problems.”

Her eyes widen as she stares at her brother. “You’re all ganging up on me.”

“We are,” Cody confirms. “Unless there’s a reason we should gang up on him?” He snickers as he jerks his thumb in my direction before folding his lanky arms across his chest. And then he reads something between us and straightens up.

“Should we, Killian?”

This kid is gonna be a force to be reckoned with when he finishes growing.

“Not if I can help it,” I say. “C’mon, baby. Let’s go talk. I’ll drive you back here or to your grandfather’s afterwards if that’s what you want.”

“I can drive.” She flings the towel to the counter, grabs her coat and purse and storms ahead of me without saying another word to anyone.

They’ve all got concerned looks on their faces.

“Go fix things,” Daphne whispers even though Violet’s already outside.

“I’m tryin’, Mrs. Gates.”

“Mom,” she corrects. “And we expect you and your brother William here on Christmas, right?”

“I’m not about to ruin your holiday if Violet doesn’t want me here.” I raise my hands defensively.

“Then best get to fixin’ things before Christmas,” Violet’s grandfather calls from the other room.

I attempt a smile for these nice people, people I’ve hoped would eventually feel like family to me. I head out the door

after saying goodbye.

Violet stands in the driveway talking to her father. He's parked behind her Land Rover, and it looks like they're in a stand-off. Violet's hands are propped on her hips.

"Go on. Leave the keys 'n we'll drop your car off wherever it needs to go later on. Hey Kill." He greets me as I head down the driveway.

"Just move your car, please, Dad. Then I won't need anyone to drop the car off to me."

"Stop bein' difficult. It's clear you're not plannin' on going with him, that you're planning on doin' a runner. Why couldn't you have had this much sass when you were with that knucklehead? That's what I wanna know!"

Violet's expression drops and Kev's fire dims a little. He looks at her with remorse.

I wrap an arm around her and that's when her father reaches out and snatches the keys from her hand.

"Hey!" she cries out.

"Hey, baby... just come to dinner and I'll drive you back later. I'm not tryin' to stress you out or make you fight with your family. Just dinner and a conversation, then I'll drive you back unless you decide differently."

Violet lets out a frustrated growl and aims her stare at the pavement. "If you're not trying to stress me out, why are you here? Why aren't you just giving this up and leaving instead of trying to corner me in front of them?"

I raise my hands defensively. "I'm sorry. Sorry, baby." I back away. "I apologize, Kev. It wasn't my intention to cause problems. I'll go."

"Oh for fuck's sake." Kev mutters, grabbing Violet's hand.

He then marches her to the passenger door of my SUV and pulls the handle. "Get in there and go have dinner and a

conversation with your fuckin' husband. If you need, I'll come pick you up. All right?" He glares at his daughter.

Her jaw goes slack in shock.

"Have a conversation, munchkin. If you're done with him, you're done but at least talk about it. She hasn't told me she's done, Kill, and I just asked point-blank before you walked out here, so there seems to be a chance here."

"Dad!" Violet gasps.

"Get in, kiddo. Unless you're done. Are you done? If you're done, say so and this conversation is over and he'll leave."

She climbs into the passenger seat and puts her seatbelt on, then shuts the door and folds her arms across her chest.

Hm. Hope flares in me.

Kev huffs impatiently. "There. Done. Have a good evening." He slaps my back.

"Thank you, Kev," I say, rounding my hood. "I owe you."

"I like expensive cigars," he says, winking at me.

Violet stares straight ahead, arms folded, lips pursed.

"Remind me to do something nice for your parents later," I joke as I close my door and reach for my seatbelt. "They still have a mortgage? Maybe I'll pay it off."

She glares straight ahead. "The only reason they're on your side is because I've downplayed things. If they had any idea..."

She lets that hang, her tone filled with accusation.

My smirk falls off. "Fair enough. I just want some time to talk."

"Whatever."

It's good seeing fire in her right now. It's better than broken, like last night.

And obviously her family isn't willing to be quiet bystanders after what happened with Violet and Fuckface. Seems multiple lessons have been gleaned from the Ass-wipe era.

It's a quick and silent drive back home, but the tension is crackling between us in the elevator heading up.

Everything about her body language bothers me. She cradles her elbows. Her shoulders are slumped. Her eyes are pointed at her feet.

When we get inside, it takes everything in my power to stop myself from taking her into my arms and carrying her to bed so I can hold her close. God, I've missed her so fucking much.

She shrugs her coat off and drapes it and the strap of her bag over a dining chair. Her eyes are pointed at the table. I'd left the candles burning while I was gone. She eyeballs the chopsticks.

"I'll heat the food up."

She scratches at her neck. "I'm not hungry. Just say what you have to say, please." She folds her arms over her chest.

I pour us both some wine from the bottle I'd opened before I left. I carry both glasses to the coffee table. She sits, hands folded in her lap.

I hold out her glass and she shakily takes it but doesn't sip it, she sets it on a coaster on the table and waits, eyes pointed in my direction, but at my shoulder instead of my face. She claws at her neck again.

Fuck. She's sinking into one of those panic episodes.

I moisten my lips, about to launch into my speech when she speaks first.

"I think I *am* done. I... we should probably get a divorce," she says.

"Absofuckinglutely not!" I roar.

Her body jolts. Shock? Fear? I don't know, but instead of figuring that out, I'm immediately on my knees in front of her,

wrapping my arms around her middle, burying my face in her chest.

“Fuck baby, don’t ever say those words again. Never.” I hold her tighter.

I can feel her trembling, and it’s fuckin’ shredding me.

“Don’t be scared of me, please. Don’t. We need to fix this. Tell me how.”

“You broke me.”

Her words are a red, glowing knife sinking into my chest.

She continues, “First Ray did and then you put me back together. But when you take something that’s already broken and it’s barely holding together with glue and then you smash it – it gets destroyed.”

I look up into her eyes. Her sad, beautiful eyes.

“You’re not destroyed. Look how strong you are. You’re strong enough to have convinced me I’ve been a fuckin’ selfish asshole. Give me a chance to fix it. I swear I’ll never let you down again.” I cup her jaw.

She shrugs me off and covers her face with both hands.

I move from the floor to sit beside her, pulling her to me.

She doesn’t resist. Instead, she goes limp and cries in my arms.

Fuck.

And then her arms wrap around me, and she clings to me like she needs me, like she wants comfort from me, but it lasts only an instant before she tries to shove again – as if remembering she shouldn’t. And this right here sets off emotions in me that feel about to bubble over, so I grip her tighter, wanting to give her the comfort she’s craving. She grunts in protest.

“I haven’t been back there,” I whisper into her hair. “He’s still there, he’s getting medical attention, and regular food. There’s

been no more punishments and I haven't gone there since you left me. I want you to know that."

She stops struggling and goes lax in my arms again.

I stroke her hair. "I'm sorry. Lying to you was wrong, but I tried to protect you. It meant I fucked up and hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you. Never fucking *ever*. I was blinded by my need for revenge. I know that now. I couldn't... couldn't let it go." I shake my head and grind my teeth. "When I found out he'd fucked me over with that coin toss, it sent me into a rage. An absolute fury. I couldn't let it go; had to make him pay." I swallow and take a big breath. "I'm sorry my lying about things made you question how I feel about you. Believe me, what I feel for you is real. I only wanted you happy, safe, mine. I wanted you to be happy and to spoil you and erase every fucked-up thing he did to you. Because..."

She's shaking in my arms, sniffing. It fucking kills.

"Baby," I breathe, "it felt like my fault for getting cheated by that scumbag. I let that happen and you wound up getting taken in by him, hurt by him. So I had to do something because I love you that fucking much. And it's not just about you. I know it's also about some shit I've had buried. My mother getting murdered by a bastard that abused her. I walk in to find her dead with her brains on her face, and knowin' how Raymond treated you – I think you get where I'm goin' with that."

She looks up at me with tears in her eyes.

I grab her hand and put it to my mouth, kissing each of her knuckles. "So I tried to compartmentalize it. I justified it. And I see now how much it hurt you. I want you. I need you, Violet. You and me – I didn't marry you to get back at him. I married you so I can spend my life with you. So I can give you everything. And so I can have you for myself, the way it was supposed to be. Fake coin or not, I know it was supposed to be you 'n me. How do I fix this? I'll break my back to fix this, baby. Swear to you."

“I don’t know,” she says.

My shirt is drenched with her tears.

“I got angry with you for being angry at me, too, Violet. But I get it. I’m most pissed at myself for putting what we have at risk. If I thought for a second... I don’t know. I guess I was cocky. Then, I thought you called the cops on me.”

She tilts her beautiful head and frowns. Confusion. I fucking love this girl even more now than I did a second ago, and I never would’ve thought that was possible. But it is. Because I can see in her eyes that the idea of calling the cops on me is unthinkable. She never considered that. Not fully.

Hope – I’ve got it in spades now.

“What do you mean?” she asks, tipping her chin up. Our mouths are close enough that I touch my lips to hers just briefly.

She bites her lip and goes stiff, so instead of deepening the kiss, I run my fingertips along her jaw. She forgets to shrivel away this time.

“The cops showed up here the day after you left, and I thought they were here to arrest me. But a former employee was found dead and she had my business card on her.”

Violet straightens. “What?”

“Amber. The one I fired the first night I took you to Genesis. She overdosed. They said bad drugs. They wanted my help ID’ing her. Hoped that because she had the business card on her, that I’d have a clue who she was.”

Violet looks confused, searches my face, and then her expression changes.

“Anyway, that’s irrelevant. But it was a wake-up call. You leaving, you being afraid of me, having a panic attack, it hit hard, baby, and I’ve –”

“I need to go to the bathroom.” She shoots to her feet and rushes into the powder room.

I wait. It feels like I'm waiting a long time.

She has zero color in her face at all when she emerges. Instead of coming back to me on the couch, she rushes toward her coat and then she's pulling it on. "I need to go."

I straighten up.

"I'll call a cab. I need to go," she repeats, trying to do her coat up, but fumbling. Her fingers are trembling as she hooks her purse over her shoulder.

"Violet?"

She shakes her head, opening her mouth but nothing comes out.

"You think I'm bullshitting you? After all I just said to you, you think I'm bullshitting and that I had Amber killed? That's what you think?"

She shakes her head. "I just need to go."

"No. You need to sit your ass down so we can hash this out. I had nothing to do with Amber's death. In fact, I'm helping the cops go after the guy responsible."

"This isn't..." She shakes her head, "isn't about that."

"Bullshit!" I storm for her, taking her into my arms. "I didn't hurt her, didn't have her hurt. I swear to you. I fucking swear."

"I need to go!" she shouts, panicked, then lowers her voice.

"I'm... I'm sorry but I need to g-go." She covers her face and bursts into tears.

"Baby." My heart sinks. "Please."

She doesn't trust me at all. And it's my fucking fault.

"I need the bathroom again." She pulls away from me and rushes to the powder room again and slams the door.

She's immediately vomiting.

I stand there processing, feeling a mild vertigo sensation listening to the water run, to the sound of her spitting, until she comes out of the bathroom a moment later, looking distraught.

I've upset her so much, I've made her sick. I make the woman I love vomit. I make her claw at her throat like *he* did. The hope is fading. She doesn't believe a word out of my mouth and maybe never will again.

No. I'm not giving up. *Fucking no.*

"I have to go."

"Don't go. Talk to me."

"I just... I need to-"

"I'll do whatever it takes for us to fix this, Violet. I have ideas for what we can do with the ass-wipe so that-"

She rushes to the door.

I get there first and block her. "Why can't you give me a few minutes and sit and let me fucking talk to you? I can't believe we've devolved to this. I'm not lying about Amber, so just sit down with me and fuckin' listen to me for a-"

She grasps her hair in frustration and growls in my face, which stops me mid-sentence.

"I'm not trying to get away from you because of Amber! Or Ray. Or you. I need to go to the fucking hospital," Her voice chokes and I straighten up, "because when you were talking I could feel something and that something is that I'm bleeding. I'm bleeding and since I'm 99.5% sure I'm pregnant, bleeding is a bad thing. A potentially catastrophic thing, so I have to go to the fucking hospital to find out what's wrong with-" she shoves at my chest - "our baby!"

I blink in shock.

"Please move so I can go to the goddamn hospital," she snaps.

I move two paces away from her to snatch up my keys and phone from the counter and she's pulled the door wide, is already storming down the hall toward the elevator while I lock up. I rush to catch up to her and scoop her up into my arms.

"What are you doing?" she gasps.

“Carrying you.”

“You don’t have to do that, you-”

“Shh, baby. Shh.” I push the already lit elevator button and kiss her temple while I hold onto her.

Fuck. Fuck! Where’s the goddamn elevator?

It dings and opens. Before the doors are all the way open we’re inside and I’m smashing the button repeatedly with my thumb, willing it to fucking hurry so I can get her to the hospital. I stab my key in for an express ride down.

A baby. Our baby.

Fuck.

I stare up at the yellow lights moving as we descend into the garage, closing my eyes and doing what I can only think is a little like praying.

Please.

I’m pacing inside the tiny curtained-off area where she lies on a hospital bed, biting on her lip.

I refused to leave when she had to change into a gown and she got pissy with me about it, but I did not fucking care. I helped her into the gown and I’ve paced.

I have nothing else to do with this excess nervous energy, so that’s what I’m doing. Pacing. Pacing and thinking that if the doctor doesn’t get in here right *fucking* now and do something, I’ll lose my shit.

Who am I kidding? I’ve already lost my goddamned shit.

A young, blonde, ponytailed woman in polka-dot scrubs comes in.

“Hellooo,” she singsongs, “I’m Doctor Anderson. Nice to meet you. Violet Coulter?”

Violet nods.

“Is this daddy?” Dr. Anderson asks.

“Yeah. I’m her husband. What’s going on? You’re the doctor? You’re not an intern, are you?”

“I’m a doctor, yes.” She loses her perkiness and answers with a now-fake smile. “According to the urine dip, you are pregnant, Violet. Congratulations.”

Violet stares, wide-eyed, waiting for the *but*. I’m doing it, too.

“But,” the doctor continues, “we’re going to do an ultrasound to assess and see what’s what and we’re waiting on answers about levels in your bloodwork. Now, because of your dates, it’ll have to be a vaginal ultrasound so we can get a good look. We need to make sure the cervix is closed. If it is, this could be nothing to worry about. It’s quite common and based on your dates, is likely just implantation bleeding. Time will tell. But if the cervix is open, I’m sorry to say that it means miscarriage is imminent, and-”

“What can you do to stop it?” I demand.

Violet’s eyes are wide with fear. And I fucking hate it.

I move toward her and wrap my arm around her shoulders. She grasps my shirt and I’m thinking she’s about to shove me off, but instead, she hangs on.

“If all looks good, then have Violet rest and take it easy and hope it’s nothing. Threatened miscarriages are common, unfortunately frightening, and if the cervix is closed and we see what we need to see from the bloodwork, it’s likely nothing to worry about. If the cervix is open, there’s nothing that can be done. No guarantees, but if your dates are correct and your periods are fairly regular, this is most likely implantation bleeding. You said there was only a bit of blood.”

Violet nods.

“Even a bit of blood can be scary when you’re pregnant; I completely understand. Coming in was a good idea,” the doctor says.

I thrust my hand through my hair and use my free one to detach one of Violet's hands from my shirt to hold it in mine. I kiss it and stare into her eyes, trying to convey with my expression what I'm feeling. Empathy. Fear. Hope.

She looks scared. Terrified. I drag the chair over as close to her as I can get and sit down and kiss her hand again.

"It's gonna be okay, baby. Okay?"

She trembles with her fight to hold a sob back, I can tell. I wrap my hand around the back of her head and pull her a little so I can get my mouth to the top of her head.

"It's gonna be okay," I repeat, hoping I'm not telling my wife more lies.

"We'll get you wheeled down to imaging and get some answers in a couple minutes, okay?" Dr. Anderson asks.

I rise.

"I'm coming," I announce.

"Absolutely," she agrees, opening the curtain. "Just one moment."

Not a minute later, two guys in scrubs are with us, fiddling with the buttons on the side of Violet's bed. I grab our jackets and Violet's bag as well as her shoes and bundle of clothing, then we're on the move down multiple corridors until they've wheeled her into another room.

An older woman in pink scrubs gloves up and then starts to explain to Violet about the internal ultrasound. I bristle when she rolls a condom on a scope attached to the machine beside Violet's bed and then I hold my wife's hand while she winces at the intrusion happening below the blanket.

I feel fucking powerless, and it makes me want to rip the walls down in here.

"Calm down, Daddy," the older lady reprimands, giving me stink-eye. "You can be a calming force for your wife, or you

can be the opposite and make it worse. Stress is the last thing this mommy-to-be needs.”

Daddy. *Fuck.*

I empty my lungs and take a beat to calm myself down.

I inhale and then empty them again and look at my wife, whose hand is gripping mine tight while she stares at the monitor, a monitor whose picture makes no sense to me.

A moment later, the woman in the pink scrubs pulls the scope from under Violet’s blanket and removes the condom from the machine, tossing it in a bin.

“I’ll be right back.”

“What?” I demand.

“One moment, Mr. Coulter.”

I look at Violet, who is biting her nails and still staring at the monitor.

“It’s gonna be okay,” I assure her.

She swallows hard, saying nothing.

Dr. Anderson returns an eternity later and clasps her hands.

“It’s early, but everything looks fine. Your cervix is closed, so that’s good news. Bloodwork came back and HCG levels are consistent with early pregnancy, so I’d say congratulations, you’re pregnant, and everything looks like it’s on track based on your dates.” She smiles.

Violet exhales. So do I.

“There’s no promises that there aren’t complications brewing, but it’s too early to tell, though we see nothing of concern. Could be implantation bleeding but some women simply have a bit of spotting. Take it easy for a bit, and if the bleeding continues, gets heavier, or you start cramping, it might be cause for alarm. Have you seen your family doctor yet?”

“Not yet,” Violet says.

“Well, all he or she would’ve done is tell you what I’m about to tell you. Make an appointment for no later than twelve weeks gestation. You’re about five and a half weeks along right now based on your dates and the lab work. We’ll forward a report. Start on prenatal vitamins.”

“I already did.”

“Are you having nausea or vomiting?”

“I threw up a lot yesterday and this morning. And again tonight.”

“Believe it or not, that’s a good sign. It’s a sign things are happening the way they’re supposed to. I’m not at all worried about your hormone levels. If you want your mind put at ease, get in to see your doctor in a couple weeks and they should be able to pick up a heartbeat and schedule your first ultrasound. Minimizing stress is always a good thing.” She smiles. “Any questions?”

“I don’t think so,” Violet says.

“Thank you,” I say.

She nods. “I’ll have your nurse here in a few minutes with the discharge papers and a pamphlet that’ll help with questions. Best of luck to you. Don’t worry too much if you can’t keep food down through the nausea. Stay hydrated and take those vitamins. This is all par for the course for the first trimester.”

“Thanks,” Violet breathes.

20

Violet

“I guess take me to my grandfather’s,” I say as he pulls out of the hospital parking lot. It’s just about eleven o’clock and obviously, Mom, Dad, or Cody would’ve taken him home by now.

“Not about to try to get you upset here. More stress is the last thing I want for you, the absolute last thing, but I do not *fucking* think so. I’m taking you home with me.”

“Killian-” I start.

He lifts a finger to halt me, then his hand returns to the steering wheel and his knuckles are white, he’s gripping it that hard. “Do not argue with me, Violet. I’m taking you home and I’m looking after you. I’m looking after *the both* of you.”

My throat clogs at the same time as my heart flares at both his words and how he says them.

We stop at a red light and when his eyes hit mine, I see determination and emotion in them. So much emotion, I can’t even form words. Or coherent thoughts. Or tear my eyes away from his.

He swallows thickly and looks back at the light as we wait for the light to change.

I sit quietly, processing.

Processing the guilt most of all.

I don’t know if I’ve stressed myself out to the point of putting my baby in jeopardy or not, if I would’ve had this bleeding anyway, but regardless – this was a wake-up call. This baby is my priority. I am determined I’ll pull my shit together.

I can’t begin to process Killian’s reaction to all this right now. It feels too ... too *raw* . All of it.

He's carrying me again. Refusing to let me walk from the car to the elevator.

"You're being ridiculous," I whisper.

"I'll be ridiculous, all right," he advises like it's a warning of more ridiculousness to come. "Just enjoy the chariot."

Thankfully, there's no one in the elevator or the hallways. But being in his presence has been hard enough, never mind being in his actual embrace. When we're back inside his place, he carries me directly to the bedroom and gently sets me on the bed, then removes my shoes.

His eyes are like liquid green fire. I've had enough trouble looking into them since I found Ray in his basement, but now it feels like they'll singe me to ash if I do it for too long.

"I'll be right back. I'll get you something to drink. What else? Food?"

"Yeah. I need food," I say softly. "I missed dinner. But I might vomit it up. Fair warning."

"Right back," he says, setting my purse down on the nightstand.

I reach in and pull out my phone.

Missed call from Mom. No voicemail message.

I tap out a text to her.

I'm spending the night at Killian's. I'll call you tomorrow. Can you do me a huge favor and call Grampa for me? Sorry to message so late.

She replies right away.

Mom: No problem. Call me tomorrow. Hope things are better. Love you.

Killian is back a few minutes later with two steaming bowls of a steak and rice stir fry. And the chopsticks. The light saber ones.

I'm about to get up and he singles me with a look.

"I just need a fork. I'm not about to attempt chopsticks in bed."

"I'll get it."

He returns with a fork wrapped in a napkin, a glass of milk, and a bottle of beer.

I've never been a milk drinker and a smile almost tugs at my mouth at him bringing that to me. But I halt it and a hollow feeling snakes through me instead.

He kicks his shoes off and climbs into the bed beside me, clicking the television on before he crosses his denim-clad legs at the ankles and lifts his bowl to eat.

I dig into the food and eat a piece of broccoli and a water chestnut.

"When were you gonna tell me?" he asks after he swallows his second bite. He's having no problem using chopsticks.

I sigh.

The silence that follows my sigh hangs heavy.

"I don't know," I finally say.

"My punishment?"

"Huh?"

"A punishment for me keeping things from you? Keeping things from me, too? Important things?"

I shrug and take another bite of food.

He taps his mouth with his index finger for a long moment before digging around in his bowl again. "I'm not trying to pick a fight with you, but this hurts, Violet."

I stare into my own bowl, but I'm hyperaware of every move he makes.

"Why won't you look at me?" he asks.

I shrug.

It hurts too much. It feels like a hot poker slowly sinking into the center of my chest.

“It’s not that I wasn’t gonna tell you *ever*. I just... I was a little late and...” I let that hang.

“But you knew. And you didn’t tell me.” He takes a sip of his beer.

“I...” I sigh.

“You’re back home,” he states after a minute of waiting for me to finish. “I’m taking care of you. We’re fixing this.” He sets the beer bottle on the table and it sounds as if judge has just banged the gavel.

“I’m not sure if-”

“I am. The only way we fix it is if you’re here, so you’re here. After you eat, I’ll run you a bath and then we’ll sleep. We’ll talk more tomorrow. I’ll get your car picked up and I’ll call your job and tell them you’re quitting.”

“Huh?”

He shoots me a dirty look as if to say, *you heard me*.

“You wanna bet?” I raise my voice and glare at him.

He glares back and this makes my heart play hopscotch.

Wow. Poor choice of words, Violet.

My face flames. “I’m not quitting my job,” I still manage to say through clenched teeth.

“Calm down. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.” He flexes his jaw muscles and then takes another bite of food.

I’m exhausted. And emotionally drained. And I don’t want to get myself stressed out in case that’s a factor for the spotting. The last thing I want to do is hurt the baby because I can’t keep my head together. I decide to eat. Focus on just that for now.

Eat. Sleep. I will try to manage at least that.

I get through a few more bites before I reach for the bottle of prenatal vitamins in my purse, shaking one out into my palm and washing it down with a mouthful of milk. Weird, but the milk tastes good to me. I take a second sip.

Killian holds his hand out. I stare at it, confused. He takes the bottle of vitamins from me and looks it over.

“Have you told anyone?” he asks, eyes scanning the label.

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

“At least you told me first. Even if it wasn’t because you planned to. Are you finished? You haven’t eaten much.”

“I ate as much as I can. I haven’t had an appetite. I’ll probably barf it up, but I tried.”

“I’ll run you a bath.” He sets the bottle of pills on his nightstand.

“Not too hot,” I say. “I’ve been doing a bit of reading and I shouldn’t have baths that are too hot.”

He leaves with our dinner dishes. And then he’s back and in the master bathroom.

I meet him in there. He frowns. What – is he annoyed that I walked in instead of letting him carry me?

“I walked slow. I’m not an invalid. I’m not on doctor-ordered bedrest.”

“No, you’re on husband-ordered bedrest until further notice.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Watch me be ridiculous. I give no fucks.”

He approaches me and I stiffen, staring at our feet.

He reaches out and his hand spans my stomach – my stomach dips as my eyes move up to meet his.

He’s staring deep for a long moment and the emotion in his eyes? I can’t look away.

“You’re having my baby,” he says softly, very softly, all traces of anger gone.

This makes me choke up and fail at my attempt to swallow down the choke. An ugly sob comes out.

He pulls me against his body and I can’t help it, I sink in.

We stand there for a moment before he tips my chin up and puts his lips to mine. They touch mine softly, sweetly, and then his mouth is not two inches away, his eyes roving my face for a long minute that makes me feel really self-conscious. It’s hard to avoid that piercing gaze this close.

“I love you,” he says. “We’re gonna fix us. We are. For our baby and for us. Okay? I want this. I want you. So much, Violet.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. You’ve really hurt me, Killian.”

“I know I have. I do. And I wish... I wish I could take that hurt back. But we’re fixing this. Take your bath. I’m just in the bedroom. Call me if you need me. And be careful.”

He goes, leaving the door open a few inches.

I cradle my arms, myself really, tears rolling down my cheeks as I exhale a few times. Big inhale, shallow exhale, repeat. I’m trying to get my heart to slow down.

Much to my relief, there’s been no further bleeding when I get undressed.

The tub is brimming with lavender-scented bubbles and the temperature isn’t as hot as I like it, so that’s a good sign. I get in and resist the urge to add more hot water. It’s warm enough to be comfortable.

It actually feels good to stretch out in here. This bathroom feels like home. His bedroom feels like home, even though it’s only been a short time. But there’s an underlying feeling still,

one I can't deny. Hurt. Disbelief. Me being pregnant doesn't change things. Does it? Should it?

If I open myself up to staying with Killian, will it just be me losing myself the way I did with Ray? Is it me not standing up for myself, just caving to him because he says the right things?

Ray used to say all the right things, too.

I don't know how to feel, what to do. I also don't know how I can possibly trust him. That nagging voice in my head has been telling me things – mean things, like, “See! You knew he couldn't possibly want you for you. He just wanted to take you from Ray.”

I feel like every time I've felt confident or sexy with him, I had no right to feel that way. Like I'm just a big loser for not figuring things out. And I don't know how we move forward from here, especially with the very real problem of Ray being locked up in that basement.

What I do know is that he's tugging hard on my heartstrings. The relief I saw in his eyes when the doctor told us things seem okay. The look of hurt as he asked me if I was punishing him by not telling him about the pregnancy. The determination in his eyes telling me he's going to take care of the both of us. Me and the baby. The way he touched my stomach and looked at me with love.

I'm numb as I lounge in the bubbles. Just numb.

I've been sleeping like garbage, just fraught with worry.

Right now, I'm so bone tired, I feel like I actually *could* sleep.

I dip my head and lay with everything submerged except my face for a few minutes before I sit up and scrub everything with my loofah. When I get out of the tub and quickly dry off, I catch myself shrugging on Killian's blue bathrobe out of habit. I catch myself automatically doing what I always do. Pull the lapel close to my nose and inhale, sinking into that comforting pull because of the scent of him on it.

I head into the walk-in closet, passing him on my way; he's coming into the bedroom with a bottle of water in one hand, a beer bottle in the other. He's in navy blue jersey sleep pants and an AC/DC sleeveless t-shirt.

"Everything okay?" he asks as he sets the drinks down, then puts a knee to the bed and grabs the remote, getting comfortable.

"I'm just getting dressed," I say. "Then I'll be heading to bed."

When I emerge from the closet with an armful of sleeping clothes, I dart back into the bathroom to change and put on a fresh pad so that I can watch for further spotting.

I rub some curl cream through my damp hair and lift my favorite lotion out of the drawer in the bathroom. I bought it in Italy and my skin has been missing this.

Once I'm back at my usual side of the bed, I grab the water he set there for me and stuff my cell into my purse and loop it over my shoulder before heading toward the door.

"Where ya goin'?"

"To the guest room," I say.

"No," he denies.

My eyebrows jut up in response, but he just stares at me.

"Then are *you* going there?" I finally ask, jerking my thumb toward the door.

"No," he says, then pats the bed.

My eyes roll, but before they're done rolling, he's moving impossibly fast in my direction and scooping me into his arms.

"Killian," I squeak.

"Violet," he volleys with an eerie amount of calm.

He's not joking. Not smiling. He looks ready to throw down over this. And I'm tired. And traumatized. I don't want to fight right now.

He throws the comforter back and gently sets me down, taking my purse off my shoulder and setting it on the floor before he rounds the bed, gets in and hauls the blanket up over us both. He flicks his lamp off and fixes his eyes on the news show on the television while downing the rest of his drink back in one gulp.

Defeated, I lay back on the pillows, then turn my back to him and close my eyes.

This bed is a hundred times more comfortable than the twenty plus year old bed in the doll room at Grampa's.

And my pillow smells like Killian has been using it. And that smell has become my favorite. My heart hurts at the truth of that thought, at the possibility that while I've been gone, maybe he's been sleeping on my pillow trying to catch my scent.

Despite the pain, I stifle a yawn and it takes no more than a minute before my eyes are drifting shut. The TV gets shut off, plunging us into silent darkness.

The blankets shift and then he's spooning me, sliding his hand under my pajama shirt and gliding it across my bare belly, where it rests.

Tears pool, stinging my eyes as I stare off in the darkness.

His lips touch my shoulder and one of those salty tears escapes.

Am I weak right now for not pushing him away?

"I don't like sleeping without you," he rumbles gruffly into my hair, making goosebumps emerge. "I don't wanna sleep without you. I love you so much. And I already love this baby. It's all gonna be okay. I'm gonna make it so it's better than okay. I fuckin' promise you that."

He leans farther over and kisses the side of my mouth and then settles in behind me, rubbing my stomach.

More tears roll down my face. I wipe them away with my sleeves and squeeze my eyes tight.

And I miraculously fall asleep.

21

Killian

I jolt awake to the terrible sound of my wife puking. It sounds like she's puking hard. It's five forty-five in the morning. And the time means I've slept more hours straight last night than I have in over a week.

It's not easy to reconcile that vomiting is a good thing like the doctor said. She sounds like she's having it really rough in there. I head out and get some water from the fridge and come back to the sound of the tap running. I go to the bed and grab her phone out of her bag and cancel this morning's alarm, then I tap into her contacts and send a text message to Shara.

Shara, this is Violet's husband. She's sick and she won't be in this morning. Please phone when you get this message. Call this number. I'll watch for your call.

I hear her puking again. Fuck sakes.

Ten minutes go by, and it's been silent for about five, so I knock on the door.

She groans in response, so I open it, feeling panic spike at the sight of her lying on the bathroom floor.

"Violet!" I rush to her. "Why didn't you call me?"

"I'm okay. I just can't stop barfing, so I'll just stay here. Can I have a pillow?"

I carefully lift her and carry her to the bed. She doesn't protest, just flops listlessly.

"Drink some water, baby."

"I don't wanna puke on the bed."

"I'll get a bucket."

"Do we have crackers? I read that crackers help."

“I’ll look,” I say and walk off feeling like I’m on cloud fucking nine because my pregnant wife asked, ‘do *we* have crackers?’

We. Fuck yeah, we’re a *we*.

I hunt through the pantry and find the box of soup crackers so bring them and a cleaning pail in. She’s on the phone when I get in.

“I haven’t even told my family yet. It’s early... I’m just a little scared and it’s probably a good idea to rest today. I’ll work from here, though. Maybe can you courier my laptop over?”

Her eyes bounce up to me as I set the pail on the edge of her nightstand.

“I’ll pick it up,” I say.

“Oh, actually Killian can come pick up my laptop.”

And then her face drops, like whatever her boss has said isn’t good.

I reach for the phone.

She shakes her head. I take it anyway.

“Shara? Killian here. I take it Violet just told you about the scare she had last night? The threatened miscarriage?” I loathe that the word left my mouth, but want this bitch to understand the gravity.

“She did. Congratulations on the pregnancy,” Shara says, but it’s phony as fuck.

“Gimme the phone,” Violet says, reaching for her phone.

I pass her the crackers instead.

“I’ll pick up her laptop when the office opens at 8:30. I’d like a word anyway.”

“Regarding?” Shara inquires.

“Just want to ensure Violet isn’t under stress. That her company does everything possible to ensure stress is kept to a minimum.”

“Noted. A conversation isn’t actually necessary, Killian. I’m sure Violet and I can work together on that front. I’ll have her laptop at reception for you.”

“I’d like to speak to you in person.”

She huffs. “Fine. But I have a busy morning.”

“It’ll only take a minute. I’ll be there at 8:30.”

I end the call.

“What are you doing?” Violet asks, face red.

“Any more bleeding?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Just barfing. What are you doing?”

I breathe out relief and then touch her face.

She flinches. I choose to ignore that despite how it feels.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Why are you talking to my boss? Can you fucking answer me, please?”

“To make sure she knows that if you’re put under any stress whatsoever, you’ll be quitting. And that stress includes being treated like shit by your bitchy boss.”

“She was fine,” Violet defends.

“I don’t buy that. We’ll see how she is when I talk to her face-to-face.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Shh. Rest. Eat some crackers. Drink your water.”

“And don’t tell me to *shh*,” She volleys, but then she bites the cracker.

I head to the kitchen and get myself a cup of coffee. I bring it back with me and walk by the bed toward my desk and Violet makes a gagging sound.

“Get that away from me,” she says, plugging her nose.

“Huh?”

“That.” She gestures to the mug in my hand as if it’s a cup of steaming shit. “That nasty smell makes me wanna hurl.”

She loves coffee. I frown and then take the cup out of the room, depositing it on the dining table before going back for my laptop. She’s putting the cracker box down and putting her head to the pillow.

I sit on the edge of the bed and caress her face. As I lean in for a kiss, catching the mint on her breath, her eyes close as she tries to shrink away.

“I loved having you back in my bed last night. Best sleep I’ve had in a week.” My lips touch hers and I back up.

She looks away from me. *Gut shot.*

“I’ll read my emails, make a couple calls from the dining table, then go get your laptop.”

“Please don’t be rude to my boss.”

“I’ll treat her the way she deserves to be treated. Let’s see how she behaves.”

She huffs. “I need my job.”

“You don’t,” I correct.

“I *want* my job.”

“Okay,” I say softly and lean over, dropping a kiss on her forehead and then another on her cheekbone. “I’ll be nice if she is.”

“I think I wanna just call Dad and get him to bring me back to Grampa’s. I’ll just pick my laptop up on the way.”

“No. You won’t.”

“You’ll take me?” she asks, looking like she’s ready to fight with me.

“I’m not fighting about this. You’re staying here. I’ll call your father and tell him I’m having the Rover picked up.”

“Another prisoner?” she snaps, then immediately looks away, looking like she’s remorseful for the comment.

“If necessary,” I say, but then I smile to lighten the mood.

It doesn't work.

“Not funny,” she scowls, folding her arms over her chest, looking like she wants to throw some sass, but she doesn't. She reaches over and grabs the crackers and stuffs another one into her mouth.

“Want me to make you a doctor's appointment?” I ask.

She chews the cracker in her mouth, swallows, then says, “I'll do that.”

“Be back soon. Want me to pick up anything specific for dinner?”

“Please don't talk to me about food.”

“Need anything else?”

She shakes her head.

Violet

I wake up with a start. Killian is moving toward me. He sits down and kisses my forehead. “Catch some sleep? Still queasy?”

“What time is it?” I ask, looking over at my phone. It falls to the floor when I reach for it, so he leans over and fetches it, glancing at the screen.

“One thirty.”

“Huh?” I scramble to sitting and teeter a little.

Killian steadies me with a “Whoa!”, hands to my shoulders.

“I gotta get logged on and get my work done. Where’s my laptop?”

“There’s no laptop. You’re not goin’ back there.”

I blink and shake off my grogginess. “Huh?”

“You’re officially done. Fuck that shit. That bitch will not be stressing you out.”

“Whoa. Whoa, wait. You can’t quit my job for me. Gimme my phone.” I reach out and his arm goes high. He’s holding it out of my reach, a stern look on his face.

My mouth drops open. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“Forget it. She’s a bitch and she’ll do nothing but stress you out. Fuck that; fuck the job.”

“You’re the one stressing me out!” I cry. “Gimme my phone.”

“Settle down.”

“Give me my fucking phone!” I shout and then I’m on my knees trying to wrestle it off him. It falls and I’m suddenly pinned on my back, him looming over me.

“Settle down and listen to me.”

I growl at him and then blow my hair out of my eyes.

He’s pinning me still. “She was a bitch and she’s gonna take it out on you – that much is obvious. She’s a man-hater that associates herself with other man-haters. She became your friend when you told her you were dumpin’ Iadanza, right? She was full of venom when I got there and made comments about being sure you get back to the office quickly because it’s quarter end, rollin’ her fuckin’ eyes over how now you’ll be havin’ a plethora of doctor’s appointments comin’ up and how they’ll have to hire and train someone for your maternity leave. That shit was not on. You don’t need that job; I don’t want you dealin’ with that stress.”

“Let me up.”

“I already told her that if you went back and anything happened to you or my baby because of her bullshit attitude, they’d be neck deep in lawsuits as well as a rain of hellfire.”

“You what?”

“Yep. Hellfire - Killian-style. You get me?” He stares coldly.

My mouth drops open. I don’t know whether to cry or scream.

“She’s probably not gonna want you back knowing that’s on the line.”

I spit out, “You threatened her? Who does that? What, are you gonna lock her in the basement with Ray? With me? Got lotsa room to build a couple more dungeons down there, right?”

His eyes narrow. “That’s not nice. And calm down.”

“Not nice? Not nice? Pff. And since when does telling a woman to calm down actually calm her down?” I huff.

He leans in.

“God, you’re sexy when you’re sassy.”

I jolt in surprise. What the fuck?

His lips fuse with mine and then something strange surges through me as he kisses me.

Arousal.

Need.

Hunger.

He's cupping the back of my head and slipping his tongue into my mouth.

More than the above sensations, it's all braiding with anger. And much to my dismay, I'm kissing him back.

Angrily.

Suddenly, I'm on my back and he's on me, an erection pressed against me. I've even spread my legs. What the heck?

"I've missed you so fucking much," he says against my lips, fingers tangling into my hair, his erection pressing in the perfect spot.

I push my hips into his and bite his bottom lip.

Whoa. Whoa.

I shove, breathlessly. "No. Off me. Off!"

My heart is racing and my face is hot. And other parts of me are even hotter.

"Gimme my phone, please."

He hands it to me, a little smile tugging at his mouth.

I shake the weird feelings off. What the heck? He's thrown me for a loop.

And then the loop turns to anger. I'm hoppin' mad right now. And part of that is being mad at Killian for interfering with my job. And for making my belly dip like that. I'm astonished at his behavior. And my reaction.

My eyes take in the screen and a text from Shara.

Get ahold of me ASAP and let me know if you're actually resigning or if that was just your husband's

temper flaring. I'm sorry to say this but I need to inform you that he threatened me. Sorry you're not feeling well. Hope you're okay. Don't worry about work today – I'll cover you. If you want to work from home tomorrow too, I'll courier your laptop over. I hope we can make it work. You're a valued employee and I consider you a friend. Call me when you can.

I breathe out relief.

“What?” he asks.

I shake my head and flash the screen.

His nostrils flare as he reads. “She’s protecting her shit in case of a lawsuit. That was not the tone of our conversation whatsoever, but she put in writing that I threatened her to make her point.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” I say. “And maybe her tone was in reaction to you.”

“I logged in the day you went to the beach house to see if you were at your desk and she was shit-talking about you to Cammy. She’s got it in for you. She’s a jealous bitch.”

I growl and get out of the bed.

“Where are you goin’?” he asks.

“I need to pee if you must know,” I snap, before heading to the bathroom.

My heart skips a beat when I wipe because the toilet tissue slides and I’m nervous to look. But sweet relief, no blood, just arousal from being pinned and kissed. Which is mortifying.

When I’m done washing my hands and brushing my teeth again, I decide to strip down and get into the shower.

Halfway through lathering my hair, motion catches my eye and I turn. He’s stepping in.

“Oh no, nuh uh,” I deny and point at him and try to shield my nudity.

“What? It’s big enough for two.” And then he looks down at my torso. “Three.” He smiles.

He wasn’t just looking at my nudity, he was looking at my stomach. I don’t look pregnant yet, obviously, but the look on his face makes me think he’s imagining me big and round. And he has a smile on his face that would give me butterflies if I wasn’t so damn angry.

I quickly work the rest of the shampoo out of my hair and go to move past him, but he’s blocking the exit so catches me by the hips. “Don’t go.” He moves closer, head descending with a look in his eyes that I know very well. It’s the look that he gets whenever he climbs in the shower with me, like he’s counting the water droplets on my naked skin and wants to touch his tongue to every single one of them.

Desire sweeps through me, but I deny the sensation and give a curt shake of my head. “I don’t think so.”

He releases me with a pout. I try to ignore it, wrapping up in a towel quickly, heading out of the bathroom with my hair dripping wet.

Once I’m in the kitchen, phone in hand, I towel dry my head as I call Shara.

She answers.

“Shara, Hi. It’s Violet. I have no desire to quit my job.”

“Really,” she says acidly, “Sounds like it’s a hazard to your health according to him.”

“I had a scare last night, as I told you, and he’s being over-protective. I’ve got morning sickness hitting me and after last night’s scare, a day or two resting wouldn’t be a bad idea, just to make sure there’s no more spotting. But I’d love it if you could courier my laptop over and-”

“Maybe it’s best we put you on unpaid leave of absence for now. Assess once you’re feeling better. Your husband’s threats weren’t taken lightly.”

“Wait. I’ll come in tomorrow. I’ll be there at my desk and I’ll just see how I am. If it’s too much, can we talk about it then?”

She sighs heavily. “Honestly, I’m meeting with HR this afternoon to talk about your ... situation. Legally, they might agree with me – that it’s too risky for the company to keep you on right now. You working for us could be a liability that the company deems too risky given your situation. Can I ask how far along you are?”

“I’m ... five or six weeks.”

“Right,” she says snidely. “So eight months of this and then maternity leave. But already you can’t balance work and your pregnancy, so honestly, Violet, I don’t see good things at this juncture. The company needs someone with time and energy to help us grow. I got word we’re about to merge and it’s going to mean real upheaval and pressure for the next six months or longer.”

“Whoa. Wait. I didn’t say I couldn’t handle my job or balance my pregnancy with it. I wanted to work from home for a day or two because I had a scare and the doctor told me to take it easy. I can do my job from here if you send the laptop over. If you don’t want me to do that, I’ll come to work, but be aware I might spend a chunk of the day in the bathroom throwing up.”

She sighs like I’m exasperating her. “Come in tomorrow and we’ll talk. By then I’ll have had a conversation with the higher-ups, and we’ll see where things are at.”

“I’ll be there at 8:30,” I say.

“Fine.” She ends the call without a goodbye.

And Killian was right. She’s being a super-bitch. For some reason, her tone in the text message was completely different. Is that her covering her ass?

Killian approaches me. I’m staring into the fridge, chewing the inside of my cheek.

“Hungry?” he asks.

“I don’t know if I’m speaking to you.”

His eyebrows rise. “No?”

I ignore him and stare into the fridge. Lots of choices, but which one will hurt the least when I throw it up?

I sigh. “I’m going into work tomorrow to talk about my situation with them. But you might have messed that up for me, which makes me want to yell at you, but I’ve chosen instead to not get angry, not shout and get myself worked up, but believe me, I’m not happy. They might not want me on their team anymore because of your threats.”

He shrugs. “Better for you. You don’t need that bullshit.”

I slam the fridge and spin to face him. “I need some normalcy in my life. I need to have something in my brain besides all the torturous thoughts for company!”

His expression drops and he moves toward me, which makes my heart race. I lift my hands to block him, but it doesn’t work and he engulfs me in his arms, putting his mouth to my forehead.

“Let’s sit down and talk this out then. Get to the bottom of it, get a plan in place, and then move forward, putting it behind us.”

“Behind us? How? How can I possibly ever put this behind me if you’re still in my life?”

He looks deep into my eyes with anger. “I’m always gonna be in your life. You’re having my baby.”

I look away.

“Do you want this baby?” he asks quietly.

I gulp down a painful swallow.

He puts his index finger under my chin, then tilts it so our eyes meet again. And I see fear in his.

He’s afraid I don’t want it. That I’ll – what – get rid of it so I can get him out of my life?

I'm locked in that gaze, feeling pain at his expression and I feel myself almost melting, wanting to take that pain away.

But then he lifts me by the hips and sets me on the counter and immediately I get a flashback to him fucking me the day we got back from our honeymoon. And that memory should make me happy, make me swoon. Instead, I'm thinking about how he recorded it and played it for Ray.

"Let me down."

He lifts me down and sets me on my feet, waiting for my answer.

"This baby is here. Growing inside me. How could you ask that? Were you there last night? Did you see how scared I was?"

His expression clears. "You're pretty angry with me. Not sure if you're more angry at me than feelin' anything else. Let's work this out."

"Work it out? You just put me on that counter and instead of thinking about that moment between us the day we came back from Italy and how much I loved it, how much I'd been wanting it, I'm thinking about how you showed that to him! My ex. Who is in your basement with a gunshot wound, with teeth knocked out, with, with..."

His expression drops and his hold on me loosens.

"And now you've made me stay here last night, which hurts because I don't know how to be around you right now. And you've probably just cost me my job. How do I work that out? And how do I work any of it out? If you let him go, you go to jail. If you keep him in there, that's wrong too. And I'm certainly not gonna say the best thing to do is get rid of that problem, because no matter what Ray did to me or to you, I can't ever justify murder. And how can we talk it out and me remain calm? I don't wanna hurt the baby by getting upset, but all the things in my head are gonna do that anyway."

He stares for a long minute and I can't read his expression. I'm not sure if I even have the ability to accurately read him.

I finish with, “I don’t know if I can ever trust you again. If I can even believe that you really love me.”

His eyes flash with anger. “I can’t believe you’re questioning that. Has our relationship been plastic and superficial? Or has it felt real?”

“It felt real,” I whisper. “So real.”

“Because it was. It is.”

“But that’s why this hurts so much. Did it feel real because I’m a loser who didn’t see the truth staring me in the face?”

“Stop that. The truth? The truth is that I married you because I want to spend my life with you. I threw out your birth control pills because I want a family with you. I told your boss off because it’s my job as your husband to protect you and that bitch was gonna stress you out and cause you and our unborn child potential harm.”

“Maybe you don’t even realize that you just started something with me because you wanted to hurt him, flaunt in his face that you had me in your bed, that your rings are on my finger.”

“No.” He tugs my hand. “Come sit down.”

He pulls me onto the nearest couch. “My hate for him is separate from my love for you. I told you – I compartmentalized as best as I could to keep you in the dark because the last thing I want is to cause you pain.”

“Do you routinely hurt people?” I ask. “Have you killed anyone?”

His eyes search my face.

He says nothing.

“You have. You’ve killed people. Oh my God.”

“Calm down.”

“I’m calm. As calm as I can be under the circumstances, I mean...” I shake my head, “I can’t be an ostrich. If I don’t

know what's going on, it'd probably be more stressful than hearing the truth and trying to come to terms with it."

"Once."

I swallow hard. And I gawk. Because as much as I asked, hearing the answer and having it be a yes is harder to take in than I would've expected.

"I killed someone once. But I have had people hurt. And when I was younger, I hurt a few people under orders."

"You said you're not in the mafia. That was obviously a lie, too."

"I can't talk about any of that with you, but I will say I'm not in the mafia. I had a mentor that was powerful, connected in the criminal underworld. Dario's father. I got invited over after we started hanging out, and it was soon evident Mr. F wanted to pick my brain, figure out what I was all about. Over time, he offered advice and then made an offer that would help me get to my goals sooner. I wasn't down at first, but it was a means to an end and I needed it, for me and my little brother to get out of our living situation, which was always neglectful and sometimes abusive. He agreed to let me in with a clear exit in mind. At no time did I wanna join a gang or get on the ladder of a syndicate. I was upfront with him, and he agreed to a temporary situation and he let me move on – something he might not have done for most people, and I respected it. A lot. He was also there for me in a lot of ways when my mother was murdered. I have ties and allegiances to people in gray areas and that are linked to organized crime, but I'm not part of that world on a day-to-day basis. That said, I have hurt people that didn't do anything to me to deserve that because of alliances or to pay back favors owed. I've made it a policy to leave violence as a last resort."

"But you've killed?"

He shuts his eyes and blows out a breath, sifting both hands through his hair in exasperation.

“You haven’t had nothing but crackers today. And did you hold those down?” He touches my face.

I flinch.

He frowns.

“Killian... You said you wanted to talk. Work it out. And you’re deflecting right now. You’re closing down on me.”

“I don’t want to burden you with shit. It’s my job as your husband to look after you, to make your life better.”

“And is it my job as your wife to ask no questions so you don’t have to tell me any lies? Because I don’t want to live like that.”

“Let’s get some food and then we’ll talk some more about some heavier stuff. I wanna make sure you eat.”

He goes into the fridge and pulls out some sandwich fixings. Roast beef. A tomato. Condiments. Cheese.

“Let me clarify. Not only do I not want to live like that, I won’t,” I call out.

I stare at his hands as he makes us sandwiches. He plates them and brings me a glass of milk.

And I’m wondering by his expression, by the heaviness in the air if he’s also trying to figure out how to tell me things.

I stare warily at the food on the plate. My stomach rumbles. I really don’t wanna barf again.

Killian

It stings, seeing the woman you love shrink away at your touch. Because you've made her question everything in your relationship.

If I could go back, would I do things differently?

If I could go back, I'd still do what I did to the ass-wipe, but I'd be much more cautious, so she never found out. She won't like it, but I know myself. I know I had to do what I did.

I also know we're forever. I know it's worth it. And I'll break my back if necessary to get back what I've put on the line with her.

The way she reacted to me in bed a while ago, then clearly scolded herself – I easily read her. Her expressions are an open book and the fact that any mention of us being over doesn't come with steely determination, it comes with the poker face I see straight through – she loves me. She wants me. She's just afraid and she's hurt. She's feeling betrayed, but I don't consider what I've done a betrayal that's unforgivable. I was trying to protect her.

Violet swallows her first bite of the sandwich and takes a sip of milk.

We eat in silence for a moment before she, looking out the window instead of at me, says, "I can't believe you tried to quit *my* job."

I drop my napkin on my plate. "Well, believe it. You don't get mistreated by anyone. I won't allow it."

She rolls her eyes. She's been sassy today. And that's a good thing. Way better than sullen and teary eyed. And I'm not trying to stress her out – I just want her to know she's covered.

She doesn't have to get mistreated at a job she doesn't need. She doesn't have to worry about a paycheck. She won't get bullied by anyone if I have a say in it.

She blows out a long breath, then takes another bite. After she swallows, I speak. "What's it gonna take to prove myself to you?"

"I don't know. But maybe start with the truth. All of it."

"Can you take it?" I ask.

"I don't know. But I know I can't handle any more lies."

"But the truth, Violet? Do you want it or are you asking me to be someone I'm not? Don't ask for the truth if you aren't prepared to face facts. I am who I am."

"And who is that?"

"A man who won't sit back and get fucked over. A man who won't hesitate to play dirty to get what he wants. And Violet... that man wants you."

She stares at me, eyes roving over my face, and I don't know if she's ready to face those facts yet.

Her phone rings and it breaks the spell. We both glance at it. Susanna.

She winces and flips it face-down.

If Susanna knows Violet's carrying my baby, she could be a help to me. The girl who didn't hesitate to tase that shit-stain fucker might not take as much issue as Violet did with my brand of retribution.

Though maybe even she'd think I'd gone too far. Do I think I've gone too far? Not at all. In fact, I'd like it if I had access to him right now without having to leave her alone. Lucky for him that I don't.

"I don't know if I can take it. I don't know anything right now." She massages her temples with her fingertips.

“You’re my wife. You’ve got me at your back. Nobody fucks with you without paying for it. That’s just how it is. You don’t have to eat shit, ever. I don’t want you to feel stressed, scared, or worried. I want you to know you’ve got me to do any and all heavy lifting and dirty work. We’re gonna get through this and you’re gonna see... you and our baby are my priority.”

“What about with you, though? You’re trying to strongarm me here. Which is a bit like you making me eat shit, isn’t it?”

“I wanna talk to you. That’s what I want. I want you to know that while I can’t say I regret giving that piece of shit payback, I hate that I was careless enough that you suspected betrayal from me, that you’ve carried any burden the last week. That I’ve hurt the trust between us. I fuckin’ despise that you’re second-guessing my feelings for you because baby, they’re genuine. I want the stress off your plate so you can grow our baby knowing you’ve got everything you need. Financially, emotionally, all of it.”

“What about Ray though? What happens to him?”

“Are you saying you’re willing to talk this out? It’s not gonna stress you out to do that?”

“I want to know what you think is the resolution there. Because I can’t think of any and that’s gonna stress me out.”

“On the surface, it looks like I have a couple choices. Though because not all of them are guaranteed to work, that narrows it. Anything not a hundred per cent guaranteed is off the table for me. I don’t hedge bets without the right odds.”

She scoffs. Yeah, I get the irony of my statement, but don’t bother to comment on that.

“What won’t work,” I continue, “turning him in to the cops and hoping he’ll keep his mouth shut. I can’t put faith in any promises he would do that. Can’t chance he won’t try to get back at me later. His word means nothing.”

She sips her milk and takes another bite of her sandwich. Reading her body language and facial expression, I know she doesn’t disagree.

I continue, “I *could* get rid of that problem permanently. But you’ve made it clear you’re not okay with that.”

“So what’s left?” she asks, staring out the window. “Keeping him imprisoned indefinitely? That’s not okay with me and knowledge of it also makes me an accomplice. Is that why you married me, so I wouldn’t be forced to testify against you?”

Now I’m the one who scoffs. Though it’s not like that didn’t cross my mind. I don’t bother to say that and cloud the waters because bottom line, I didn’t marry her for any reason other than the desire to spend the rest of my life with her.

“Because...” she raises her voice, “I’m not okay with that option either.”

“I could send him somewhere – he lives but he doesn’t cause problems because it’s impossible for him to do so. His life won’t be easy there, though.”

Violet frowns and our eyes meet.

“There’s a place that’s jail-like,” I explain, “A sort-of labor camp. It’s a place he won’t be able to leave or communicate with the outside world. A place where there are people worse than me to contend with if he gets outta line.”

“Oh my God.”

“You said you wanted honesty. I don’t want my honesty here with you to bite me in the ass. So, if I’m gonna tell you everything, Violet, I’m a hundred per cent honest and you’ve gotta deal with whatever that means.”

“Deal with it? Meaning what? I can’t make any promises that I won’t get angry at your honesty. That the things you’ve done won’t upset me. The things you’ve done that I know about already upset me. Upset is an understatement.”

“Sandra is already there.”

“Sandra? Ray’s mom?”

“Believe me, she’s better off where she is. She’s a risk otherwise. With a bad track record and a heavy addiction. I

won't take risks with her."

She huffs. "She's collateral damage and that's not cool. She didn't fuck you over. My God, what else?"

"Baby, I'm not asking for unconditional forgiveness of shit you don't know yet. I know that's not realistic. I'm asking you to think things through before you condemn me for my choices. The things I do, I do because I make calculated decisions. And believe me, after losing out on three years with the love of my life in a rigged coin toss, I calculate more carefully now than I did before."

Her gaze softens briefly, and she moistens her lips.

"So? Honesty," I start.

She shakes her head. "You calculated decisions? You calculated deception. Against me. What if whatever you tell me makes me decide we can't ever come back from this? I'm not saying I haven't already come to that conclusion. I'm also not saying I have. I'm still reeling from everything. It's a lot. So, I just want you to know that even if you're honest here, that doesn't mean everything is suddenly resolved."

"Well, I'll level with you and you'll get input into his fate, but I get final say based on our safety, and I want an agreement from you."

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat but says nothing, so I continue.

"I'll be a hundred percent transparent about it all and you agree that no matter how you feel, you stay. You stay with me until after this baby is born at a minimum. For the next eight months, minimum, you let me take care of you. If when the baby comes you still can't see your way to a future with me, we'll work to come up with a mutually beneficial alternative."

"Like what? Like I leave you and we share custody and you promise not to lock me up so I can't leave?"

"Something like that," I joke.

Mistake, because she doesn't think it's funny.

She scowls at me, then sighs, rubbing her eyes. “Or you send me to wherever you’ve sent Ray and his mom?”

“No baby. Fuck. You’re not in the same league as those people.”

“Even if I don’t wanna be with you?”

I can’t help it, just the words out of her mouth make me seethe with anger. Frustration.

“It feels like you’re talking in circles, Killian. What if I don’t want your transparency? What if I think it’s best that we just end things now?”

“That’s not an option for me,” I admit.

She frowns. “What if I insist?”

“Then I’ll have to work to change your mind. Baby, when I bought this place, I bought it with my future wife in mind. I wanted someone in my bed, in my kitchen, in my life who would fit. I’ve had women here. A couple of them.”

Her eyes narrow. I like that she doesn’t like this.

“But none of them fit. Kenya had Tampax and toothbrushes get thrown out each time she tried to leave them. One look at you in this space, I saw it. You fit in that kitchen. On those counters. In the visions I had of me on the deck grilling with a mystery woman in that kitchen, as soon as you were in this space, I knew it was you. You even said as much when you told me the place was perfect, but I needed a grill on that balcony.”

The wall phone by the alarm system rings. It’s the phone for the front desk in the lobby, which only rings if someone is at that desk requesting entry. And I’m not expecting anyone.

I answer it.

“Yeah?” I clip, thrusting a hand through my hair.

“Mr. Coulter? Jessa Carson is here to see you,” the male voice informs.

“Tell her I’m busy. She can make an appointment.”

“One moment, sir.”

Fuck. I can’t believe that bitch and her timing.

“Mr. Coulter, she asked me to say she insists on talking to you.”

Fucking figures.

“Keep her there. I’ll come down.”

I hang up.

“I’ll be back.”

“Who is that?” Violet asks.

“Just Jag’s sister; I’ll be back.” I head to her and take her face into my hands. “Stay put. Eat. I’ll only be a minute.” I drop a kiss on her lips.

Violet shivers, so I grab the blanket from the back of the couch opposite to her and drape it over her, drop another kiss on her mouth, and then grab my phone and keys and head for the door.

As I leave, I look over my shoulder and she’s watching me. She’s watching me with sadness rolling off her that makes my gut churn.

Jessa stands in the lobby with a metallic green box with a silver bow on it. She holds it out, fluttering her eyelashes.

She’s dressed like a Christmas elf. A slutty one in a tight red dress. A green fur-like shawl, elf hat, and sparkles on her face.

“Merry Ho Ho, Pooky,” she says. “Why didn’t you send me up?”

Is this chick whacked or what? I already knew the answer to that but it’s even more obvious now.

“C’mon, Ho. You know better than this. Showin’ up without an invite?”

She snickers. “Ha ha; very funny. Called the clubs first, hoping to run into you in one of those, but everyone said you weren’t in. So, I took a chance and...” Her expression drops. “Is that...” She shakes her head and blinks a couple times, “is that ring on your finger a joke?”

“It’s real.” I flex my hand and the light catches, making the wedding ring glimmer.

Jessa’s head jerks back like she can’t believe it even though she can plainly see it.

“When did you get married? To who?”

“Outrage? Really?”

She glares at me.

“You met the woman who became Mrs. Coulter at the Numbers opening,” I say.

She slouches and then leans back for the wall like she’s about to lose her balance. Drama queen.

“Now, fuck off, would you?” I add, smiling wide.

“Does Jagger know?” Jessa asks.

“I told him.”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“That doesn’t make it any less of a fact.”

Jagger was one of a few calls I made to announce I’d gotten hitched. After he gave his congrats, he hissed and grumbled that his twin sister would *have a cow* when she found out. I didn’t concern myself with that. Jessa’s mood swings haven’t ever been something I considered to be my problem – not when I was sleeping with her, so certainly not now.

“What’s with the box?” I ask. “No boiled bunnies in there are there?”

“Just a box.” She lifts the lid, showing that it’s empty. “I grabbed it from the mall Santa. One of his props.” She shrugs. “I thought we could spend the evening together. Maybe

Christmas, too. Hoped you'd take me to Vail or something. I have no plans."

"Don't you and Jag usually do the family thing?" Not that I care.

"Jagger's bitch uninvited me to Christmas dinner so I figured maybe we could spend it together."

I chuckle. "What did you do? Wait, no. I don't care. I'm in the middle of something upstairs, so I'm gonna go. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, Jess."

I press the elevator button.

"Married?" she whines and stomps a foot.

I get into the elevator.

"Congratulations. I guess," she mutters, and then sticks her hand in at the last minute so the door doesn't close.

I exhale some frustration as it opens wide.

She leans in.

"If you ever get bored of that, don't hesitate to call me." She spins, strutting the other way, obviously hoping to tease with her walk. But my eyes aren't on Jessa's ass as she struts away while the doors are about to close. I spot Susanna Gagne at the desk, eyes on us with obvious interest in what's happening, so I stick my hand in the door and it opens again.

24

Violet

When the door opens, Killian isn't alone. Susanna is behind him.

My lips part in surprise and before I can get a word out, she's coming for me, rushing to flop on the couch beside me and throwing her arms around me.

"I'm here to save the day. Pour us some wine and skedaddle somewhere, Killer." She drops her big purse on the floor.

"Killer?" I mumble, my face going hot.

"Killer smile. Killer abs. Just... a total lady killer. And he's all yours, you lucky bitch."

Killian quirks up his eyebrows and then his eyes graze me before he smiles at Susanna. "You're kicking me out of my own home?"

"If you want me to straighten up the little missus here, you'll leave me to do my work." She gestures toward the door. "No, wait. Wine first."

He goes to the wine wall and pulls down a bottle, then grabs a glass from the cupboard.

"You're not even dressed," she remarks, looking me over. "I'd guess you're disheveled because of hot-stuff lover boy over there, but by the fact he told me my help was necessary, that's probably not the case."

I'm sort of dressed. I'm wearing a tracksuit. But it's old and raggedy and I probably look like lukewarm garbage with no makeup on and hair that I've done nothing with today.

"Where's Violet's glass?" she asks as Killian hands her a glass of red.

Killian's eyes bounce to me, and his eyebrows bounce up.

"I'm not drinking," I say quickly.

"Why not? It's after five."

"I'm ..."

Her eyebrows go up and her eyes bounce to the coffee table where there's a three quarters empty milk glass and then her eyes light up.

"Pregnant?" she asks.

"Pregnant," I breathe.

It takes about a millisecond before she squeals and throws her arms around me again.

Killian's face lights up as he takes in me being squished in my bestie's embrace.

"There was a scare last night, so I'm taking it easy though," I add. "It's early and nobody knows yet. Nobody at all but the people in this room. And my bitchy boss, but that's another story."

She lets go of me, concern flooding her face. "A scare? Okay, start at the beginning. You... congrats. But go." She waves at him and his shoulders jiggle with amusement.

"I'll go work for a bit in the other room." He leans over and kisses my forehead.

I say nothing.

Susanna gets to her feet and throws her arms around him once he's straightened back up.

"Congrats," she says. "You're gonna be one helluva DILF."

"Thanks, I think," he says. "I'm gonna go phone my brother and give him the good news. Then we should tell your folks, baby."

I let out a nervous laugh. My folks. God, I feel overwhelmed right now. If they were on Killian's side yesterday, I can't

imagine how much more support they'll give him. My mom will be over the moon.

"N-no. Not yet," I whisper.

He gives me a long stare and then turns and goes.

"God, he smells good," Susanna muses, fanning herself while sitting back down.

I do my best to hold myself together as Susanna sips her wine and watches him leave before she turns her eyes to me. "Are you guys figuring things out then? What's been going on?"

I shake my head. "My head's all over the place."

"But you're happy about the pregnancy?"

"I'm... cautious," I say.

"What's the scare? Cramping? Bleeding?"

"Bleeding. But just a little and we went to the hospital, and they said everything's looking okay. It's probably implantation bleeding, which I didn't know was a thing, but in case it's not, I should rest for a bit and watch my symptoms."

"Nothing like the risk of losing it to make you realize you want it, right? I'm guessing the pregnancy is what put you two on the outs this past week?"

"It's a long story, Suse."

"I got time."

"I'm just... ugh." I put my palms to my cheeks.

"It's too bad I can't ply you with wine until you share. So guess what? I'm gonna ply *me* with wine until you share." She tips her glass in my direction and takes another sip.

"You know what I think?" she asks and slaps my knee. "I think you've been through a shit-ton in a short amount of time and you need to just pause," she pushes her palm toward me, "breathe," she pulls her hand down, fingertips against her thumbs in a meditative gesture, "and take a day at a time." She puts her wineglass down and grasps both my hands. "You've

been through a lot. A *lot*, a lot. And marriage is said to be hard. Not that I know, but it's an adjustment, right? The fact is, you didn't get a lot of time to heal from DeathRay and that doesn't mean you got married to Killer too fast, the man is the catch of the century and you should not have passed that up, but you're probably coming to delayed reaction terms with healing from the jerk-face and you can't let it get in the way of your happiness with your dreamboat. Have you considered counseling?"

"For the love of all that's holy, please don't call him Killer. And have you been talking to my mom?"

"Honestly, yes."

I snicker.

"It's because we care. What's the latest with DeathRay, anyway? Any news?"

"Please. Don't even ask," I say.

She shrugs. "Enough said. Damn, your husband has good taste in wine." She sips more wine. "And women. I caught sight of his ex downstairs."

My back goes straight.

Jessa. Right.

Susanna leans in. "A bombshell dressed in a sexy Christmas elf outfit with a gift in her hands. I don't think that box was the only thing she wanted to give your husband, by the by, if you get what I'm sayin'. Her... *box*." She makes an extreme facial expression with her eyes bugged out. "But I walked in, and she was pouting and he was very obviously giving her the brush off before he even spotted me."

I blow out a breath.

"He saw me and immediately brought me up," she adds.

"What did he say to you?"

"After he ignored her like she wasn't standing there looking like a Christmas dessert covered in free cash, which is exactly

what she looked like, and saw me he called me over to come up, then told me she was someone he used to fling with and that it was never even serious, that he just finished telling her he's not interested and is off the market permanently. And then on the way up he tells me he needs my help, needs me to take his back while he works to convince you he really does love you." She puts her hand against her chest for effect. "Hey? Do you have imposter syndrome? Are you thinkin' he's not really into you? It's just the fear talkin', baby girl. And the crap that bozo put in your brain for all that time. You're a catch. You're beautiful and you've got a heart of gold. You've also got brains and that ass that's poppin' as well as the fact that you cook, you clean, you take care of yourself and treat your man like gold. You have what it takes to not only get but also keep a man, Violet. So, you just need to stop listening to that evil little voice in your head telling you that it's not safe to let yourself be happy."

I sigh. *Damn it, Killian.* Getting everyone to gang up on me.

"Am I getting through to you?"

I sigh again.

She hugs me. "Or is that pretty bitch causing you self-doubt? Because I'll take my earrings off and teach that bitch a lesson."

"No. It's got nothing to do with her," I say.

"Okay, well I just wanted to come by and see you. Your mom said you stayed here last night, and I was hesitant on interrupting in case you two were busy making up, but took my chances since I was in your hood for a manicure. I was gonna text from the lobby, prepared to go if you two were busy, but there he was and now here I am."

"I'm glad you're here."

"You're gonna be a mommy!" she says, hugging me again.

I smile. "Yeah."

“God, that’ll be one beautiful baby. With the hottest Auntie Suse there ever was. Did you see my nails?” She flashes them. “Before I got here I tried that new place down the street from you. Coraline was booked.”

I smile. “Gorgeous.”

Killian comes out.

“There they are,” he says, smiling at me.

“Who? Where?” Susanna asks.

“Those dimples.” He leans over and kisses the side of my mouth. “Been missin’ these.”

I don’t react. Well, I try not to, but it feels like there’s suddenly a hundred pounds on my chest.

“I hope you have a girl. I’m taking her for her first manicure,” Suse says, then perks up. “Or if it’s a boy, I’m taking him for his first tattoo. And hey, great wine choice, Killer.”

“Stop calling him Killer.”

“Tell him to stop making my ovaries go boom then.”

I laugh.

Killian smiles wide, shaking his head at Susanna. “I’m gonna take this opportunity to go out for a couple hours and do some surprise visits to my clubs. Can you stay, Susanna? Spend the night in the guest room if you want. Order in some food, Dimples.” He twirls one of my curls around his finger.

“Sleepover! I’d love that,” Susanna says, “I’ll borrow something of Vi’s for work tomorrow.”

Work tomorrow. Ugh. At least tomorrow is Friday. I just have to get through whatever that looks like tomorrow and then I can rest this weekend. Or try.

“But we were in a conversation,” I say to him.

No, I felt like I wasn’t ready for the conversation we were having, but we certainly weren’t done talking. There was a lot on the table and no resolution. No way for me to begin to draw

conclusions because I'm now left dangling on a number of issues.

"I'll be back later," he says softly and kisses me again. "And we'll finish our conversation tomorrow. I'd much rather you just relax tonight with your girl. We'll figure it all out. Okay, baby?"

I give him a tight smile. "I'm going to the office in the morning."

He smiles. "I'll have your Rover dropped off tonight."

"Gotta powder my nose," Susanna says.

"Later." Killian promises with a wave, and then he's out the door before I get a chance to say anything else.

I take the opportunity to phone Grampa to check in as well as tell him about what I'd planned for dinner that evening.

"Don't want no grilled fish and salad. I'm goin' out for a burger and beers with my buddy," he says, "After that fiasco your mother served me last night? Damn straight. I'll eat something grilled or steamed tomorrow. Are you stayin' there?"

"I don't know, honestly," I say. "But I think so."

I might not have a choice. My husband has effectively kidnapped me.

"Okay, well you're welcome here, love havin' ya, you know that, Violet. But if you're there workin' it out, that's gonna mean a better chance of workin' it out. Not good to go to bed angry. Even worse to go to sleep in different beds. Your grandmother and me didn't have a perfect marriage but we always kept trying. As long as you both are willing to try, I say give it a go. So long as he's good to you and makes you happy. Don't wanna see you like you were with that blond fella. He was no good. Much prefer how you've been these last coupla months."

"Thanks, Grampa. I'll keep you posted. Love you. Thanks for being there for me and for being you... not hassling me."

“You know it. Love you too, kiddo. Bye now.” He hangs up.

Just him giving me his opinion like that is a surprise. He must actually like Killian.

I call my mother as Susanna is back and heading to the kitchen counter. She empties her wine glass into her mouth as she lifts the wine bottle off the counter.

Mom doesn't answer so I send her a text.

I'm just checking in. I'll call you tomorrow. Love you.

“So, first of all,” Susanna says, “How can you be physically cringing like that when that beautiful man of yours touches you?”

I sigh. “Can we change the subject, please?”

She frowns.

“Please,” I beg.

“I had a date last night and it went pretty amazing,” Susanna says.

“Oh yeah? Fill me in.”

A distraction sounds ideal.

“I will. Let's get food. I'm thinkin' Mexican?”

“Perfect,” I say and scroll to my food delivery app.

Killian

I'm taking Susanna's visit as an opportunity to make surprise appearances at all four locations tonight. Showing up unannounced on occasion keeps staff on their toes and helps them not get too complacent about quality. I wouldn't have left Violet alone tonight otherwise.

I'm stopping by Genesis first, though I'm not at all concerned about the running of my first club since I have every confidence in Alana. When I get to the parking lot and lift my phone from the inside pocket of my leather jacket, I spot a missed text from Violet.

Dimples: Why did you tell Susanna to stay over? Was it so we wouldn't have a guest bed? Because you can sleep on the couch or the floor, you know.

Feisty.

Dimples: Or she could sleep with me, and you take the guest room.

I tap out a reply.

Me: I think we both know that if I try to sleep in the guest room what'll happen. You'll wake up with me climbing in bed with both you and your best friend. Is my wife still feeling possessive and jealous?

She responds immediately.

Dimples: Haha. Very funny. I ordered you a burrito. Not that it means I think you deserve one.

Me: Funny haha. Thanks baby. Be home later. I'm doing surprise visits at all 4 clubs tonight so I'll be in late.

I guess I tell her this so she won't wonder if I'm gone to the house, won't wonder if I'm off causing Iadanza bodily harm, even though the thought is tempting.

Violet reads my text message immediately but doesn't reply.

I'm leaving Exodus.

I'm not happy with two of the three locations I've visited so far tonight. The Numbers manager Craig is getting a call in the morning as I wasn't happy with some of what I saw including the fact that he wasn't around, he was short-staffed, and his assistant manager Jose was closing. Thursday nights are one of the busiest nights of the week.

I didn't like the condition of Law's kitchen, so I read the manager, Blake, the riot act about that.

Before I drive off from Exodus, I pull my phone out to check on the apartment's surveillance app. Violet and Susanna are sitting on a couch together. Violet's sideways with her feet on Susanna's lap while Susanna paints Violet's toenails.

My body tightens because Violet dabs at her eyes with a Kleenex. I shouldn't eavesdrop, shouldn't even have opened the app, but I can't help myself.

"I don't wanna talk about it anymore," Violet says. "I said more than I wanted to say."

"You can say anything to me. Anything," Susanna tells her.

My gut pitches. What has Violet said?

"We'll just have to wait and see, I guess." Violet shrugs. "But let's just say that among other things, those extreme stalker tendencies of his have put me on edge. How do I trust him?"

I bristle.

"Trust is huge in a marriage. I get it though," Susanna says, dipping the brush into the bottle, "Devil's advocate?" she asks.

Violet rolls her eyes and Susanna must take this as a green light.

“A guy like that with all that money and those looks, of course it makes sense he’d look into you. Do some tracing, and spying on you. See if you are who you seem to be. I bet gold-diggers are lined up for miles to get a taste of *all* that’s Killian Coulter.”

Violet lets out a heavy sigh and reaches for the teacup on the coffee table.

Susanna keeps talking. “The fact that he didn’t even want a prenup though, girlfriend? That shows you something, doesn’t it? Shows that all the following, tracking, and spying on you put his mind at ease. And you said he took the cameras out.”

“He said he took them out of my job, but I don’t know if he’s watching us right now. There might still be cameras here.”

Violet’s eyes scan the room. So do Susanna’s.

“Well, Hot Stuff, Hi, if you’re watching. Bring home ice cream if you’ll be back soon. I like strawberry. Make sure it’s the one with the chunks of strawberries in it. What about you, Violet? Dill pickle? Extra chunky, too?”

Violet sticks her finger in her mouth in a mock-gagging impression and then they both laugh.

“Please don’t make me barf again. Those burritos were such a mistake.”

“Sorry about that. It sounded nasty. Baby doesn’t like burritos.”

I’m thinking I don’t like that she got sick again, but I’m also thinking that my wife is a genius. Using my tracking her, looking into her and acting distrustful as the catalyst of our problems would definitely be a viable argument for why she and I are on the outs and explanation enough for Susanna.

There’s a knock on my window.

Jessa. *For fuck’s sake.*

She stands there smiling.

What the fuck?

I set my phone face down on the passenger seat and hit the button to power the window down a few inches.

“Twice in one day. This is fate,” she greets then puffs on a cigarette.

“It’s not fate if you’re stalking me.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “I’m waiting for a cab to take me to my hotel. Good timing. How about you drive me instead?”

“How ‘bout *fuck off*?”

“Aw, Pooky. You’re so serious these days. Just gimme a ride, will ya? What’s on your screen?”

“None of your business and no. Not interested.”

“Where’s Mrs. Pooky?”

“In bed waiting for me, I’d imagine,” I state.

And I feel a pang because she’s not waiting for me. She’s dreading me. But that’ll change. It has to.

“Wasn’t that her on your screen?” She sucks in a breath with a cringe. “Lettin’ herself go this soon after the wedding? So sorry, Pook.”

“Fuck off, Jess.” I roll my window back up, and peel out of there.

My phone rings as I’m leaving Law at just past midnight.

Alana calling.

I answer via the speaker.

“What’s up?”

“Sorry to call at this hour.”

“It’s all right. I’ve been touring locations. I’m about to head home though. What’s up?”

“Jessa Carson showed up an hour ago, she’s sloppy drunk and asking for you.”

“Like I said, I’m on my way home.”

What the fuck is her game? She just saw me.

“Asking loudly.”

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“So... have Tony get rid of her?”

“Yeah. Do that. Tell him to get her back to whatever hotel she’s staying at. Only because she’s Jag’s sister, otherwise I’d have said just turf her.”

“Will do. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Violet rolls into me when I climb in beside her and I soak it in like rays of sunshine after a long winter of darkness.

I wrap her up tight in my arms, kissing her forehead before tipping her jaw up so I can access her mouth.

As I do, she makes a sexy sound and her knee slides up my thigh to my groin and wakes my cock up.

“Oh,” she says and pulls away.

“Oh no you don’t. Get back here.” I pin her and put my mouth to her throat. I feel her nipples tighten and poke me in the chest. Yes.

My palm skates down her arm.

“Kill,” she mutters, sounding annoyed. She sounds annoyed but she’s got goosebumps on her arms and she’s arching her back.

“Don’t pull away. Let me hold you,” I request, my voice coming out gruff.

I try to ignore how tight her body has gone and run my hand back up to her shoulder, then down again, pausing at her waist, before I tug the back of her knee to shift her body and get her sprawling directly on top of me. My hand ascends up over the curve of her backside and then I take a handful of her nightgown and raise it to get underneath. She's wearing panties tonight. Disappointing, though not surprising. I hook my fingers inside and slide them through wet. Nice. Her underwear feel bulky. And then I come across a sticky flap. It dawns why. She's wearing a pad in her underwear.

I halt my journey.

"Any more bleeding?" I ask.

I feel her shake her head as her legs close tight.

"Any more getting sick?" I ask.

"After burritos," she replies sleepily.

And I feel a pang of guilt, because I asked the question despite knowing what the answer would be.

"I wanna fuck you, Violet. I'll be gentle. Can I fuck you?"

She tries to roll away. I tighten my grip on her so she can't.

"Baby," I whisper and touch my lips to hers.

She's aroused. I feel it. I can almost fucking taste it, but she's not speaking.

I caress her face. "Forget fucking. Just let me make you come," I change tact.

"Killian," she whispers. And I know by her voice that it's not a green light. It's also not feeling like a red. I'll treat it like a yellow.

I carefully roll her to her back and then my lips are on her throat, hungrily, which gets me the exact reaction I want. She loves when I taste her throat. It's instant arousal for my beautiful wife, didn't take me long to figure out when we got started. I nibble down to her breast and she doesn't grab onto me like usual, but also doesn't stop me. When her back arches

as I bite down gently on her left nipple I know the light is changing color.

I drag her panties off and toss them as I bury my face between her legs, tasting her, groaning as I do because I've fucking missed this.

"I haven't shaved," she whispers, panic in her voice.

"Like I give two fucks," I reply and suck hard on her clit and then feel my face split into a smile.

I haven't shaved. She's fucking adorable. And mine. All mine. Forever.

I skate both palms up her hips, fingertips gliding over her ribs, then I'm cupping both of her breasts, twirling my thumbs around the peaks as my tongue follows the same motion around and around her clit.

A moment later, I'm wrapping both of her legs over my shoulders and caressing the goosebumps that've broken out everywhere.

I take full advantage of the fact that she's open, responding, and that she sounds on the cusp of a climax already by the pace of her breathing, by the way she's arching. Again, I trail my tongue through her wetness, tweak her nipples, and do it pushing my hips into the mattress.

I'm rock-hard and want inside her badly.

I'll survive, though. This is about her. Thinking on it, I also don't know if I should be fucking her with the spotting she had the other day. We'll have to ask the doctor about that.

She's carrying my baby; she's tied to me. And I've never been happier about the idea of those kinds of shackles. I'm looking very forward to seeing her belly swell, knowing it's my child in there. The idea of a son. A daughter. Both. Several of each. I want that. All of that. I kiss her hip while teasing her with my fingers, and then I'm lapping at her clit and not a minute later, she comes, legs shaking as I devour her silky, hot pussy. My beautiful girl whimpers softly before going lax.

I climb up onto my knees and first drop a kiss on her stomach, then move up further, dropping more kisses until I can access her mouth, where I linger for a moment because she participates in the kiss. She pulls away and so I roll off and leave the room.

I come back with a glass of apple juice for her, setting it on the table beside her.

She's still on her back, unmoving, nightgown up around her stomach. Wrist covering her eyes. She lifts it to pull the nightgown down over her nudity.

I fix the covers over us.

She rolls over and hesitantly slides her hand up my softening erection. And it feels like her hand is trembling.

"It's okay," I say. "Just wanted to take care of you."

I say this, but I really fucking want this. I don't want her to feel obligated. But fuck, I want this.

She cups her palm over my mouth and then moves it back down, her other hand joining. I relax into it and her fingertips disappear into my sleep pants. She's no longer trembling.

She frees me and starts stroking, squeezing me with both hands as she snuggles into my side, her cheek on my peck. My mouth lands in the top of her hair and I put my arm around her, holding her close, enjoying the feeling of her soft, hot hands working my cock.

A moment later, she shifts and covers my shaft with her body. She holds on with one hand stroking while my cock slides between her tits, then pulls her arms together to tighten those tits around me, continuing to move up and down.

I work down a swallow, absorbing the beautiful sensations while staring at her form in the dim room, making out her sexy, bare, heart-shaped ass up in the air as her nightgown hem slides down toward the bed.

My fingers find their way into her silky-soft hair and she nuzzles into my hand in a way that feels like adoration. It

throws me and I work down another swallow, feeling my balls tighten, feeling the spark of an impending orgasm igniting up my spine. I spill between her tits, coating my stomach while uttering her name.

And then I take a handful of her hair and use it to gently tug her up so I can kiss her mouth. Pulling the nightgown up over her head, I use it to wipe myself away from her chest and my belly before tossing it and pulling her close, kissing her lips softly again. She kisses me back, lips parting, tongue touching mine, erect nipples brushing my chest.

“I love you,” I tell her, enjoying the feel of her warm, naked body against me.

A sob bursts from her.

Fuck.

Fuck!

I pull her trembling body tighter to me and kiss her over and over while she cries, my arms wrapped around her.

“I’m so sorry I hurt you. I love you so fucking much.” My voice is gruff and I’m not a crier, never have been, but fuck if I’m not feeling that distantly familiar sensation sitting in my throat like the levy is about to break. I swallow it down and wrap her up with blankets as tight as I can, kissing her tears as they fall.

“Let me love you. Let me look after you. Let me fix us, okay? Please, Violet. Do you believe me? Do you believe how much I fuckin’ love you? How much I regret hurting you? It’s my job to stop anything and everything in this world from hurting you and that’s all I wanna do. I fucked up. Please forgive me.”

She doesn’t answer me.

But she doesn’t pull away either.

Her trembling slows. The sniffling sounds ebb. And then she pulls away from me and it feels like shit, like I’m sinking into ugliness until I hear her drinking her juice. She sets the glass

down after a few swallows and then she's back in my arms.
Because she moved in and snuggled up to me.

I hold on tight, clenching my teeth together as fierce emotion
moves through me.

I'm not ever, fucking *ever*, letting her go.

26

Violet

My first thought when my eyes pop open at the sound of my phone alarm is, *am I bleeding?*

It's not that I feel like anything is happening down there, but I'm worried about it just the same. I worried about it when Killian put his mouth down there last night, too. But obviously nothing was amiss or he'd have noticed.

Killian's mouth last night. Was that a mistake?

I've rolled out of his arms to reach for the phone already, so I drag the top sheet around me to hide my nudity as I rush across the room, my face burning with shame. He's awake. He's lying there watching me walk to the bathroom. I squat to pick up last night's discarded undies and nightie.

I don't make eye contact but feel his eyes on me, burning through me with something... I don't know what. The word possessiveness comes to mind.

I'm burning with shame because I let that happen last night when nothing has been resolved with us. When I don't know how it can possibly even be resolved. And then I jacked him off and boob-screwed him before bursting into tears!

But the emotion I felt from him as he touched me... I couldn't deny him. I just couldn't. And I couldn't help but think about Suse telling me about him rejecting Jessa in the lobby. It felt like it would've been cruel to deny him.

And I guess that's why I reciprocated. Sort of. Like he needed that connection with us. But maybe I did too – I don't know. Touching him felt right. Perfectly right. Being in his embrace, taking in his scent, being the reason he made those sexy sounds, he felt like *home*. And God, have I been homesick.

A week away from Ray when Killian sent him to Atlantic City helped me feel more like myself. A week away from Killian made me feel lost.

Last night – it was emotional. And real. And I don't know whether it was a mistake.

After I peel yesterday's pad out of my underwear and throw it into the trash, I toss the underwear and nightie into the hamper, then climb into the shower.

As the water pounds down on my sleepy body, I think about the day I've got ahead of me.

Killian and I need to resume yesterday's conversation. We really do. But the break with Suse? I think it actually did me some good. No, I don't have clarity. No, I don't know if my marriage is a lie or not. But maybe it's not. Maybe I'm leaning in that direction more than leaning in the direction of feeling like Killian's feelings for me all come from his anger at Ray.

Ray.

Fucking Ray. Still a thorn in my side. Why couldn't he have been denied bail? Why couldn't he have just run away when his mom bailed him out and gone far, far away before Killian caught him? Why does he still have to be a problem for me? Will he ever *not* be a problem? Am I doomed to have that guy in my life one way or another forever?

I take my frustration out on my body as I angrily scrub with the bath pouf.

I hate what Killian did behind my back. The lies. The torture. That I'm not only married to but madly in love with a person capable of torturing someone else astounds me. I get that he was angry, that he wanted to lash out, but the extremes he's gone to...

Maybe he's also madly in love, but what about the 'madly' part? And is it madness on my side if I consider putting this behind us?

My initial reaction when the truth stared in my face in that basement was that maybe I'd gone from the frying pan straight into the flames. But now? Now, I'm kind of confused.

But bottom line, despite being confused about what's going on with me and the man I married, it's also poignant and hits me hard that Ray tried to separate me from my loved ones and yet Killian orchestrated me having time with my bestie.

I'm relieved when I emerge from the bathroom to see an empty bed. The idea of facing his penetrating gaze unnerves me. I head into the closet and get dressed for work, acting like it's not casual day, then grab some black leggings and a tunic sweater for Susanna.

Killian stands at the pink marble counter smiling, in a white muscle shirt and black trackpants while Susanna sits on the counter in the pair of pink flannel pajamas I lent her. But she's sitting in almost the exact spot where he fucked me. Where he filmed me. And now it feels like my skin is crawling with bugs.

Suse has a big coffee mug to her lips and pulls it away to give me a big smile.

The coffee smell? Is it about to make me hurl? Ugh. I'm not sure.

"Mornin'," I greet, eyes on Susanna. "I got some clothes out for you. I'll go put them in your room."

"This is the life," she answers, smiling wide. "Your mister making me coffee, you laying out clothes for me. Can you two adopt me? Don't tell my mom."

Killian laughs and then he moves around the counter and kisses me, putting his arms around me.

"Morning," he says softly against my neck, making goosebumps break out, "Want coffee today?"

“The c-word. Ugh.”

His body shakes with silent laughter.

“Actually, I think I might want to try a bit of half-caf. Not sure if I’ll get it down or not, but I think I need some wake-up juice.” I say this into his chest and then take a step back, trying to avoid looking at his face.

He rounds the counter and opens the cupboard where the coffee is kept, nabbing the half-caf I bought just before we went to Vegas. I bought it for nighttime coffees so it wouldn’t keep me up all night.

“Giving up coffee? Ugh. That sucks. Bad enough you have to give up wine,” Suse says.

“I can safely have a bit of caffeine if I need it, Withdrawals are real, but the smell of it makes me nauseous.”

I reach into the fridge and grab the bottle of apple juice and pour a small glass so I can take my prenatal vitamin. I forgot to take it last night.

Killian smirks at me and his eyes are twinkling. “Taste good?”

I lift my brows in question and his eyes land on the glass in my hand.

Apple juice.

Yeah. My post-orgasm drink of choice. My cheeks flame.

Susanna pipes up. “I’m gonna go shower. I’ll grab those clothes. Where are they?” She hops down off the counter, much to my relief.

“The bench at the end of the bed. Oh, let me grab you some stuff for the guest bathroom. I don’t know if there’s any conditioner in there.”

“I’m good. I’ve got travel sized stuff in my bag. That’s why I carry the big purse – always prepared for an overnighter. With a clean pair of panties and my hair stuff at minimum.” She winks and flounces off with her mug in hand.

Killian passes me my ceramic travel mug. And as the aroma comes at me, acid bubbles up in my throat. I pop the lid on tight.

“Maybe in a bit,” I say and finish my last sip of apple juice.

He smooths my damp hair behind my ear.

“So, don’t take any shit from them today. Right?”

I sigh. “I wish you wouldn’t have done that yesterday.”

“I know you do. But it’s done.”

I give him a dirty look, annoyance flaring.

“A lot of stuff is done and we need to move forward, right?” he adds.

I swallow and blow out a breath. “Not always that simple.”

“All that matters here with your job situation is that you know you don’t have to put up with shit. You don’t need that job.”

“For the last time, I like working.”

“Then work for me. Or don’t. Start your own business. Whatever makes you happy.”

“Going to my job today and trying to salvage it will make me happy. *If* I manage that. I’ve got over four years in there and I’m good at what I do.”

“I know you are.”

“You don’t, but nice that you think that.”

“No, I do; I know you’re good at your job.”

“How do you know that?” I roll my eyes, because I don’t need empty compliments right now.

“Because...” He looks at my face searchingly and seems to be measuring his words. “Full transparency – when we first connected that night, I told you I had trouble workin’ out how you spent three years with the ass-wipe.”

My eyes widen as I brace for whatever new revelation is about to come at me.

“So, I looked into you,” he admits. “And part of doing that involved me calling your job posing as a recruiter to get a read on what type of employee you are. I did that myself and talked to Shara. She did not want to lose you. The idea of that happening is likely what made her take notice and give you that raise and bonus.”

My mouth drops open in surprise. I don't know whether to be angry or to thank him. Because that bonus and raise – those were instrumental for me in rebuilding my confidence.

He keeps talking. “My opinion? I think she's bullying you here right now because she's an alpha-female and she wants to keep you submissive to her. You finding a new man, gaining new confidence. New clothes, new car, big rock on your finger - maybe she now sees you as a threat. And if you push back and stand your ground with her, letting her know you like working there but don't need it, she's either gonna back down or you'll know for sure where you stand. I also did a bit of extra homework this week, so happen to know that there's a company they're about to merge with and it has a bozo in the role you're doing and my guess - they'd much rather fire him than lose you and have to keep dealing with that guy.”

“Full transparency? A day late and a dollar short, Killian.”

“I'm tryin' Violet. Can you cut me some slack?”

I sigh. “Dare I ask what else you haven't told me?”

“Later. We'll talk more later.” He looks over his shoulder toward the hallway.

That sounds ominous. But, yeah, Susanna probably won't be long coming back out. We need to leave soon so that I get to work on time after dropping her off.

“But Violet,” he continues, grabbing my hand and squeezing it, “Play it like you're holding the good cards, baby. And you are. The worst thing that happens if you walk out of there today without that job is that you look for another one without worry until you find one you're excited about. You can take

your time doing that until you find the right thing for you. You're in a good position."

"Is that what you're doing with me? Playing like you're holding all the aces? Or like you've got a sleeve full of them?"

"Meaning?"

"Acting like we're still us after everything?"

"Aren't we?"

I frown.

"Not the aces. Just the queen of hearts. Queen of *my* heart. I'm still your husband. Nothing has changed for me, not really. I love you. I love you more every day I'm with you. You're coming to terms with things that I already knew while I'm coming to terms with how I hurt you and that's where I have regret. But ultimately, we're still us. And we're even more. You were everything to me before I found out I planted a baby in you, but now? Fuck. I'm stoked for our future. Making a family with you. I mean that."

I exhale hard. For someone who never said the L-word to anyone, he certainly has no trouble saying it to me.

"So, you want some breakfast before you go?"

"Do you want me to hurl before I go?" I return.

He smiles. "Did some pregnancy reading, too. Apparently in a couple months you'll wanna eat everything in sight."

"I'm looking forward to that part."

"I'm lookin' forward to all of it. Except you feeling like shit." He strokes my cheek with the backs of his fingers. "When are we telling your family?"

I stiffen.

"Think about it. Next week? Christmas present? We'll buy your folks *World's Best Grandparents* t-shirts. *Awesome Uncle* shirts for Cody and Will. I tried to call Will yesterday but didn't get him. He's been busy working for Dario's family

lately. I'll probably meet up with him soon, tell him in person. Unless you want us to do the big reveal Christmas day?"

"It's kinda early to tell people. Most people are superstitious about that until the first trimester is over. Besides... I don't even know if-"

"I'm not superstitious. This is meant to be." He puts his hand on my belly, making my heart flare. "This is happening, Violet. And we're gonna be fine."

He's so determined. So sure. It would be so easy to get caught up in it. Way easier than letting my conscience and my doubts nag at me. But do I want easy, or do I want to be smart?

"I'd better finish getting ready," I mumble.

"Okay." He kisses me, then looks deep into my eyes and kisses my nose. "Miss you kissing me back. Last night though, that was nice. Very nice." He drops another kiss on my forehead and then rubs my stomach sweetly before sliding by me, leaving me standing there swaying. Swaying toward him and his magnetic pull.

"Call me after you meet with her," Killian says as he sees us out the door.

Susanna waves at him and we head to the elevator.

"God, girl... if you can't forgive, can I have him?"

"If you're gonna be with Killian, what about the hot veterinarian?" I ask.

Last night she regaled tales of her first date with him and sounded smitten.

She twitches her lips in contemplation as we get into the elevator. "The veterinarian does show promise."

I smile and push the button, wondering what she would say if I told her the truth. All of it. What would Suse do in my shoes?

The thing is, I can't. I just can't tell a soul.

After finding my cubicle devoid of my laptop, I knock on Shara's door. The door is opened by Celine from Human Resources.

"Violet," Celine greets.

My stomach drops.

And then I see Frank, Shara's boss, and Shara. Frank plasters on a smile that strikes me as fake. Shara looks at me and smirks, before examining her manicure. And it doesn't feel good. It feels like she's looking forward to whatever is about to go down.

She's pissed that Killian went off on her yesterday and I'm about to pay for it. She liked me best when I was meek and broken, saw me getting strong and didn't like it, saw me getting happy being in love and hated me for it. And lately has seen me getting meek again and is going for the throat.

"Good. You're actually here," Shara says like she doubted it would happen. "Let's head to the little boardroom."

I'm feeling mildly barfy and am doing my best to hide it.

Celine gives me a tight smile as Frank greets, "How are you doing, Violet?"

"I'm okay so far today, thanks," I say and follow them, knowing down to my gut that this isn't good.

I taste puke at the back of my throat, but I swallow it down as I sit in one of the four chairs of our small boardroom by reception.

I'm about to be fired. And I'm angry about it. Really angry. Because I don't deserve it.

"We'll get right to it, then," Celine says. "Our team has been working hard planning a reorg. We're finalizing an acquisition of a competitor and as a result, we'll have more staff than we do positions. It's going to mean some initial staff cuts. In light of the skillset required as well as the cost of doing business,

we regret to inform you that our new org-chart results in your position being eliminated.” She smiles.

It’s practiced. This is her job, firing people and trying to make it seem like it’s not personal.

But it is personal.

“You’re firing me because I’m pregnant,” I say, immediately.

And seeing their reaction – all three of them flinching – it ignites something in my blood. Anger? Confidence? I don’t know, but I’m gonna go with it.

Celine looks mortified. Her mouth opens, but Frank speaks first.

“No,” Frank corrects. “Not at all. But in light of your pregnancy happening with the timing of the reorganization, this works in your favor because you’ll be getting triple the severance package you’d have gotten otherwise, along with a glowing letter of recommendation that, according to Shara, might not be fully warranted.” He tilts his head and regards me in a way that drips with condescension.

How would Frank even know? He spends a big chunk of his time on the golf course schmoozing and having liquid lunches. I resist the urge to say that. Instead, I grind my teeth. Furious. I shoot a look of indignation at Shara. She smiles at me and shrugs.

“It’s a matter of skills and our short-term needs as well as the expense involved,” Celine says, shooting Frank a disapproving look.

“I have the skills. Shara recently told me how my skills would make me an ideal candidate for an upcoming promotion. The amount of money I saved the company alone last year through second sourcing paid for my salary several times over, and-”

“Things have changed with this merger,” Frank interrupts, doodling on a notebook while he talks. “It’s complex and unfortunately, we’ll have to say goodbye to several of our long-timers. It’s not personal.”

Shara is sitting back in her chair, smiling at me. Her smile drips with evil.

“Not personal? I’m told I’m in line for a promotion just a couple months ago and now this?”

“Things are fluid here,” Frank says. “Our most recent assessment of a variety of factors landed this way.”

“So, you’re not firing me because my husband had words with Shara yesterday? Words of concern only, and based on what he felt was warranted due to her unprofessional and potentially unethical reaction to news of my pregnancy?”

Celine shakes her head. “The reorganization is happening with many factors taken into consideration. But your severance package reflects your unique situation. You’re getting more than you would have gotten otherwise. If you take a look at your information package, you’ll see it’s quite generous. It’s just an unfortunate coincidence that our reorg takes place directly after you’ve informed your manager of your pregnancy, but as Frank said, it works monetarily in your favor.”

“I just find it funny that a few months ago I was given a raise and performance bonus, being told I was up for a promotion and now that I’ve been off work for a day because of morning sickness after a health scare that put my pregnancy in jeopardy I’m suddenly being downsized. Oh, and that this comes directly after Shara argued with my husband.”

I’m sure Killian fanned flames but I’m so angry right now I don’t care about that. Because regardless of that, this is wrong and I refuse to just take this lying down.

“Violet, with all due respect,” Shara says, voice dripping with condescension, “Your head hasn’t been in the game for weeks. Longer. You’ve changed. Your performance even before your husband informed me of your pregnancy while dropping threats by the way ... the past several weeks has been lacking. Sorely. Requesting extra time off when you’re out of vacation and personal days. Working remotely more than anyone has in

the company in the past year – with you doing it repeatedly in the last few months. And I’ve even had concerned calls from suppliers you’ve been off kilter lately. There was also a costly error that was just brought to my attention. That alone would’ve put you on the chopping block.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask. And I’m seething, because she’s encouraged me to work from home. She and I have had multiple conversations about the fact that telecommuting needs to become the norm for our office instead of the exception.

“You placed a rush purchase order last month for an expensive sku. Instead of a hundred and fifty-eight, you ordered eight hundred and fifty-one. We won’t sell them all before they’re discontinued, so to return them, we’ll have to pay a restocking fee. And those items are costly. I haven’t got the math here, but it’s a substantial loss to the company.”

“I have no memory of a P.O. that large. Which vendor? What product?”

“Well, it happened.”

“Which vendor?” I repeat.

“KIT,” Shara says, face going red.

She doesn’t like that I’m directly challenging her.

“No one said anything to me about that. If they had, I’m sure I could’ve negotiated the restocking fee away. KIT Peripherals is a longstanding vendor and we’re one of their largest clients. I could’ve tried.”

“You weren’t here. You were off sick. Or with a personal emergency of which you didn’t explain. I can’t even recall why you were off that day; it’s been happening so often.”

I give my head a shake about to talk about how the only way that order error happened is if it was a sales error instead of purchasing because our system with KIT is automated, but Frank pipes up.

“Semantics. No point arguing those, Shara. A decision was made based on many factors and we’ve got an information package here with the details of your generous severance package. Once you sign it, we can issue your final pay.” He taps the file folder that’s in front of me with his Montblanc pen. He then stands up. This is his way of moving the meeting along, ending it.

“I think I’ll have an employment lawyer look at it before I sign,” I say.

Shara looks at me with surprise. Maybe she does think I’m still a little weak, that she can just push. Maybe I’m not feeling so meek today.

Maybe I’m sick and *fucking* tired of people assuming I’ll react a certain way when they abuse me.

“Seeking legal advice is certainly your prerogative,” Celine pipes up, ”and in light of that, we should stop here and say nothing further until you’ve had a chance to review the contents of that package and seek whatever counsel you choose.”

“We’ve enjoyed having you as part of the team,” Frank says, “Thanks for your years of service.” He reaches out for my hand.

I automatically take it out of reflex, I guess, but I’m thrown.

“Best of luck with your pregnancy. Hopefully having less to feel *stressed out* about will help,” Shara says with saccharine sweetness before she snaps the notebook she brought with her shut and waltzes out.

“I’ll need to accompany you to clean out your desk, Violet,” Celine says with her kind, put-on smile.

“I don’t...” I shake my head. “I’m not in the headspace to do that right now,” I say, tasting sourness in my throat. I might be about to hurl my apple juice up. “Can you ask Cammy to do it? She’ll know what’s personal stuff and what’s... not.”

“Absolutely. I’ll walk you out.”

I want to throw up, but I also want air. And primal scream therapy because this is absolute bullshit.

As we emerge from the boardroom, I see Cammy coming out of the photocopier room just inside the mouth of the hallway beyond Tara's reception desk. Cammy smiles brightly at me and then her smile drops as she watches Celine walk me toward the door. "Cammy? If you wouldn't mind, could you grab Violet's purse and coat, please and run them back?" she asks, over her shoulder.

Cammy's eyes bulge and then she nods. "One sec," she says.

I make eye contact with Tara. Tara's face says it all. She already knows. The receptionist gets cc'd on termination notification emails that go to all the department heads, and she's the one that revokes my building access. I hand her my security badge and her chin wobbles. She holds her pinky to her jaw, her thumb pointing at her ear with the *call me* gesture.

I tip my chin up at her and go to the door.

"Best of luck," Celine says, extending her hand. "Call me when you're ready to sign and we'll set that up. We need to sign together so please don't do that until we meet again."

"Okay," I manage, letting go of her hand.

Cammy hands me my purse and coat, then hugs me. "Phone me."

I nod.

It takes until I get to my car before my emotions get the better of me. I'm angry.

So angry.

No tears come. Not this time. This time, it's rage.

I pick up the phone and ignore the text message from Cammy with nothing but a line of question marks so that I can call Tennille, my contact at the peripheral vendor in question.

Her number is one I've dialed at least once a day for the past four years, so I know it by heart. I've met her every year I've

worked at my job at least four times a year when she's come to take me to our quarterly lunch meeting. And we usually do a Christmas lunch, too. Not just that, we shoot the breeze on the phone at least every few days. I'd hesitantly say we're friends.

She answers and we have a conversation where she not only tells me that her company would waive the restocking fee for us if asked, but also that she'd have second-guessed the order if it landed on her desk for that dollar value. And she didn't see it. She would've, since she gets paid commission on our orders. She promises to look into it and get back to me and then tells me her coworker is retiring in about a year and a half and that if I want to enjoy my pregnancy and some time with my baby before I come work for them then, she'll be happy to recommend me.

“Aren't you worried about losing our... *their* business if you offer me a job?”

“The company they're acquiring? I've heard all about it in the grapevine and I know that douche who's their buyer. That buyer is Shara's ex-fiancé. We figured he'd get canned and you'd get promoted. Since that's not on, no biggie. Because he won't buy anything from me anyway. He takes kickbacks and our company has ethics.”

I'm shocked.

We talk for another minute, where she tells me some of the stuff she's heard about Shara trying to advance herself in the company, how she and Frank supposedly just came off a torrid affair, how Frank won't leave his wife because she's filthy rich. How Shara is taking that out on everyone. I'm shocked she's planning to keep her ex on, though, over me.

Our industry is close-knit, but it's extra obvious just how much people talk by the stuff she knows.

After the enlightening conversation, I begin tapping out a text to Cammy but she calls me while I'm doing that.

I answer.

“Cammy, you shouldn’t talk to me until you’re outside that building.”

“I’m in the bathroom. Did they really fire you? What the heck for?”

“I was downsized due to the reorg. Don’t say anything to anyone. I might be suing them. I think Shara took me out for revenge reasons because my husband got a little snippy with her. Among a general power trip. I don’t know. It’s whacky.”

“Yeah. Your husband was here yesterday. Mr. Hotness himself. But he looked angry. And angry is even hotter on him. Shara was actin’ the rest of the day like she was a spoiled brat who got scolded for the first time in her life. That woman has a Goddess complex. She was poking around in your desk for at least half an hour after your husband left. That woman is a man-hater since her fiancé dumped her. And she’s been on the warpath about you since you took time off to go get married. You’re suing? You definitely should.”

“I don’t know. I need to think. I’m angry. I’m also pregnant. That’s why Killian was talking to her. He was worried about me being stressed out. He’s being protective, but I had a little spotting, so we’ve been ... I’ve been scared. I have a lot to figure out.”

Cammy gasps. “I knew it! I saw how you’ve been the last two weeks looking like death warmed up and poured over sadness and thought you might have a bun in the oven. They fired you knowing you’re pregnant? You definitely should sue.”

“I had the spotting scare the other day and I’ve had wicked morning sickness so I asked if I could work from home for a couple days and Shara has been a nightmare about it. Well, really since I got back from my honeymoon. There’s absolutely no reason for me to be fired like this, but they’re calling it a reorg. Anyway, I have to go. Sorry. I’m just... I’m reeling right now. I have to digest all of this. I’ll stay in touch.”

“Please do. We’re friends, right? Not just coworkers. Right?”

“Absolutely.”

“I want an invite to that beach wedding do-over next spring. And I bought you something gorgeous for your shower. Susanna sending invites out soon?”

“I... I dunno.”

“Okay, well, it’s so hot it oughta earn me forever players cards at Numbers. That’s all I’m sayin’. Tease your hubby with that. It’s got garter belts and...” her voice goes lower, “no crotch.”

I snicker. “Then, where’s my front-bottom supposed to go?”

“In. His. Mouth.”

I bark out a laugh.

Cammy laughs along with me and she sounds positively delighted. Her humor is just what I need right now to take my stress levels down a notch.

I blow out a long breath as reality hits like a rush of cold water.

“You don’t need to worry, Violet,” she says softly, “You’ve got a wonderful husband to support you. You don’t even have to work. But if you want to, he has all those nightclubs, right? You could work for him. But anyway... lots of people in our industry would snap you up too. Esther is amazing at resumes. I’ll get you her email and you can get her to update yours. Don’t worry about it. Just take care of yourself. And the itty bitty mini-bagel in your oven. Okay? We need to do lunch together minimum once a month. And I’m gonna be Auntie Cammy, too.”

“Okay.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Love ya, girl,” Cammy says, “And I’ll miss you.”

“Thanks, Cam. I love you right back. Big hugs.”

I end the call and then put my forehead to the steering wheel.
Time to go home.

Home. To Killian.

Killian, Killian.

I growl in frustration.

I'd rather go to Numbers and take my frustrations out on a Whack-A-Mole game. With replicas of Shara's and Killian's heads instead of poor little moles who have done nothing to me, which I can't say for my husband and my boss. Former boss.

I can't believe I'm unemployed. Pregnant. Well, I guess I'll have time now to sort my brain out since I won't have any distractions at all.

Killian

I'm at my desk, but I'm staring out the window instead of at my laptop screen. Deep in thought. About Violet. About a lot of things.

And then I hear noise, so I head out to investigate. Violet is coming in, tossing her purse and a cream-colored file folder to the counter then unzipping her knee-height boots. She levels me with a glare. An infuriated one.

And as much as I should brace for the fight we're obviously about to have, I'm feeling relief. She's here. Not at her job. And fighting with me is way fucking better than curling into a ball and looking at me like I've broken her heart. Besides, eye contact with her has been rare this past week. I've got it right now, though.

"They fucking fired me. And it's bullshit!" she shouts and kicks a boot off aggressively. My eyes follow the boot as it goes airborne and sails across the room before bowling the remote and an empty mug straight off the coffee table onto the rug.

"What?" she challenges, "No, 'sorry to hear that?' As if you're sorry. Got your wish. Happy now?"

Her eyes blaze at me as she then kicks the other one off. It hits me in the gut. Not hard, but I still grunt in surprise.

And then she gasps, covering her mouth with her palm. "Sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"I deserve a lot more, probably," I shrug. "Talk to me." I sit down on the couch and pat the cushion beside me, leaning over to lift the remote and coffee mug from the rug.

“I’m mad at you,” she clips, pointing at me. “Really, really...ugh.” She stops, shoulders slumping, then breathes deep before jolting while running for the powder room with her hand covering her mouth.

I pull my lips tight and wait.

She has to see my empathy when she comes out a few minutes later.

“I had nothing in me to puke up. So air. Yeah. Vomiting air and getting fired. That’s how *my* day is going.”

I rise, head to the fridge and get her some bottled water.

“I don’t want that,” she snaps.

“You don’t wanna get dehydrated,” I volley, extending my hand.

She snatches it from me. “If I’m not puking it up, I’m peeing it out. I don’t think my body wants to hold any liquid whatsoever.” Despite her arguing, she still opens the bottle of water and takes a long drink.

“What happened?” I ask, “And try to breathe, baby. You’re really worked up.”

She shakes her head. “No. Never mind. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why?”

“Because you...” She points at me and her finger shakes as her eyes narrow. “You might declare revenge on them and lock them in your basement. Forget it. I’ll handle it myself.”

She storms down the hall.

I follow her into our bedroom closet where she’s pulling a hoodie off a hanger, or more like fighting with the hanger.

“Out please, I need to change,” she gestures, red-faced.

“I can handle seeing you in your underwear, baby. I’ll refrain from ravishing you for a minute while you talk to me. Hard as it’ll be.” I smirk at the double-entendre.

Her blistering glare should scorch me, but frankly, it amuses me.

She leans forward and asks, “Did you miss the part where they fired me? And they’re lying about why, but whatever. You got your wish. Happy?”

“No. Not if you’re not happy. What can I do?”

“Buy the company, give it to me, and let me fire them all.”

I raise my brows.

“Or I’ll be like you and keep them working for me but rule with an iron fist and some waterboarding.”

I chuckle. “Now you’re showing you get me.”

“I’m not serious. You can leave me alone; that’s what you can do. I’m gonna take a nap. Because I’m exhausted and I have a headache. And sleeping means not puking or feeling like puking. And then I’m gonna hunt for a lawyer and look into filing a lawsuit for unlawful dismissal. Maybe even sexual discrimination because they are firing me because I’m pregnant. ”

“You want me to-”

“No! I’m doing it myself. Stay out of it.”

“Baby. We have a lawyer, and-”

“Killian, I swear to God if you don’t stay out of it, I’ll be really, really angry. I’m already angry with you for this on top of devastated with you because of all that other stuff.”

I raise my hands defensively. “Understood.”

“I mean it. You do not want to fuck with me right now, trust me on that. *You* might wind up locked in a basement.”

I back away, unable to hide that I’m fending off a grin. “If you need anything, I’ll be in the living room. I’ll just grab my laptop.”

She spins away and begins undressing.

And as I collect my laptop, I'm beaming with pride, surging with affection. Because this woman, *my* woman, she's not weak. She's not broken. She's strong. And maybe I've got a little bit to do with her finding that strength within herself. I'm not about to get cocky and point that out, though, and wind up with another boot in my gut or elsewhere. I'm gonna leave her to her nap.

Violet

I wake up and the first thought I have is, *am I spotting?*

I go to the bathroom, and nothing. Thankfully. Is that fear going to plague me until this baby comes?

This baby is eventually coming. It's early, way early, but at some stage in the not-too-distant future, an actual baby will be here. I count up the months.

August.

I feel a strange sensation, a fiercely protective one. My hand splays over my stomach. This baby is smaller than a grain of rice right now, if I remember right, but we made something that's eventually going to be a person. And it's up to me to protect this person.

Relief swims through me. Thank God Ray never threw away my birth control pills. Thank God I never got pregnant by mistake while I was with him. To be tied to that man that way, especially while I was feeling so broken – it would hurt a lot. To give my child *that* man for a father? Ugh.

They say things happen for a reason. But what reasons are there for me going through that relationship? Did it really have to happen this way for me and Killian to wind up together? Or am I dealing with this relationship with Killian now because it's going to lead me somewhere else entirely? That thought hurts. It hurts a lot. Too much.

Because despite everything, I'm obviously in love with him.

And I don't know if it's healthy for me. I don't know if what he feels for me is real or manufactured from his hatred of my ex.

All I know right now is I'm exhausted.

After using the bathroom, I climb back into bed and sink back into sleep immediately.

I'm woken in the pitch dark by a feather-light kiss on my cheekbone.

"Baby. Are you hungry? It's ten. You didn't eat anything today."

"Sleepy," I say and turn away from him.

God, my boobs hurt. I hug a pillow to my chest and close my eyes.

I open my eyes in the dark and Killian has me. He's got both arms around me and he's breathing evenly, asleep.

I'm hyperaware of him, his arms around me, the sound of his breathing, the way he smells.

I swallow down a lump of pain at the idea of trying to do this without this comforting scent wrapped around me. The idea of not having him hurts so much. But is being with him good for me? Is raising a child with him good for that child?

The instant that thought crosses my mind, I incinerate it. Killian would be an incredible father. Protective. Nurturing. And undoubtedly willing to step in front of a freight train to protect his child. This is a man who at seventeen raised his brother after his mom died. Not a lot of teenagers would do that. An orphan, he built a business from the ground up into an empire after growing up with nothing.

What a difference between him and Ray.

He's going to be a great dad; I know it down to my soul. But can I forgive him for his lies? Can I trust him again? Can I live with it even if we do come to an agreement about what to do about the problem in his basement?

I need to pee. And I'm starving.

It takes some effort moving his heavy arms off me before I get out of bed and find my way to the bathroom.

After a pee that takes half an hour (or so it feels like) I head to the kitchen, stomach growling fiercely.

I'm eating deli meat and cheese like a starving, wild animal while scrambling eggs because it's fast.

And then I'm practically inhaling my scrambled eggs with cheese like they're the best thing I've ever eaten in my life.

But then it hits me that I read something about avoiding deli meat on a list of things not to eat during pregnancy and I'm feeling panicked.

I clean up quickly and vow to avoid the deli meat going forward. As I'm getting ready to go back to bed, I notice it's snowing.

Grabbing a soft throw blanket from the couch, I make my way to the floor-to-ceiling windows by the balcony and stare out as snowflakes tumble down like sparkles. These are defined, fat flakes that melt when they land. But before they blot into water drops that'll quickly freeze, they've got that distinctiveness to them that I've always thought of as Christmas snow.

It's almost Christmas.

And my life is a mess.

My ex is imprisoned in my husband's beach house basement in a cell I'm pretty sure he had built just for him. And I'm pregnant, unemployed, and heartbroken.

"Hey?" Killian calls out.

I look over my shoulder.

The source of my joy for the past few months and my pain for the last week and a bit is erasing the space between us, looking concerned. He's shirtless, in a pair of black boxer briefs. Face scruffy. Dark hair messy. The apartment is dark other than the

light over the stove, but he moves through the shadows like there's an ethereal glow around him.

And then he's spinning one of the club chairs around to face the window before he lifts me up into his arms and sits down in the chair with me on top of him.

I give him a grumpy expression, but don't go to move away. He's warm and toasty. And his eyes are filled with warmth. He looks at me like he loves me, like he can't believe his luck that he's got me in his arms. And it makes me want to choke up.

Before I can turn away, he's kissing my mouth softly. He jerks his chin in the direction of the window. "Fascinated with the white stuff?"

I shrug, finding myself more fascinated with the lines and curves of his biceps.

"What's goin' on?" he asks.

"I was hungry," I say, turning my gaze back to the window.

"You find the food I made?"

"What did you make?"

"Butter chicken, zucchini, mushrooms, and peppers over basmati."

My lower lip protrudes. "Oh. I ate scrambled eggs and a fist full of salami and Havarti. And then I remembered I shouldn't eat deli meat while pregnant. Butter chicken sounds good."

"You want me to warm it up?"

I shake my head. "I'm full."

"Why can't you eat deli meat?" he asks.

I shrug. "Listeria, I think. The risk is small but it's still a risk."

"There's probably enough butter chicken left for dinner tomorrow." He kisses me again.

I stare out the window, covering my mouth. "I probably taste like salami."

I catch his smile from my periphery. “A little.”

“So, you’re mad at me,” he says after a long silence.

I sigh, sucking on the skin of my index finger knuckle.

“Or madder,” he amends. “Do you want my help with whatever happened today?”

“I told you I don’t.”

“Do you wanna *tell* me what happened today?”

“Not particularly.”

“All right. How about this? We continue our conversation from yesterday.”

“It’s like... two in the morning.”

“Right. But neither of us need to get up early.”

“Because you got me fired,” I grumble.

“Also because tomorrow is Saturday,” he corrects.

“Oh.” I lick my lips. “Oh yeah. I’m not sure I’m prepared for this right now.”

“You wanna watch TV?”

I shake my head.

“Wanna go back to bed with me?” he asks, his voice dropping an octave.

I try to ignore the trill up my spine. This man still affects me that way even if I’m angry.

“You can go. I wanna watch it snow.”

“I’ll watch it snow with you,” he says and drops another kiss on my face, this one at the corner of my eye.

And these gestures, this sweetness is one of the things I love about him. But I have this ache in my heart where he’s concerned that’s still sharp.

“If you’re gonna make me sit here this close to you, I should go brush my teeth and get rid of the salami breath,” I say.

“Or I could just eat a salami sandwich, too.”

“Or you could let me sit over there,” I offer.

“No thanks,” he replies.

A smile tugs at my mouth, but I don’t let it fully happen.

I move to get up and his grip on me tightens.

“Let me up if you want your sandwich,” I say.

“Yeah?” he asks. “You’ll make it for me?”

I nod and he grants me release.

He then watches as I make his sandwich. Watches me like I fascinate him.

Why did I offer to make him a sandwich?

To get some distance? Maybe.

Killian

She passes me a sandwich and a beer and then goes back to the fridge and pours herself a glass of milk. She's about to climb in my lap when I see a change on her face. She reaches to turn another of the chairs around. I quickly set my plate down, snatch her up, and put her in my lap. Where she belongs. Where her first instinct was sending her.

She sighs like she's annoyed, but she still relaxes almost instantly into me.

While I eat, she stares out the window at the falling snow while alternating between sipping her milk and nibbling on her finger.

The snow melts as it hits the balcony, but it's pretty. And she seems enamored with it.

"When should we put up a Christmas tree?" I ask. "Christmas Eve or sooner?"

She shrugs. "It hasn't felt very Christmassy."

"Well, there's still time. And it's our first Christmas together; we should decorate. Soon."

"We're not exactly on the same page, Killian. I'm only here because you sorta-kinda kidnapped me."

"Then, let's get there. To the same page. You told me Christmas was a big deal for you. Let's make it a big deal."

She lets out a long breath. "I should probably buy presents for people," she mutters. "Only a couple shopping days left and all I bought so far was those shoes in Milan for my mom. We gave Cody the car but I wanna get him a new game for his PlayStation, too."

“Yeah? What am I getting?”

“A lump of coal,” she says, looking me in the eyes. “Naughty list.”

“If it comes from you, I’ll treasure it,” I say and then take a swig of beer. “Dunno what’s so wrong with a lump of coal, anyway. People needed that back in the day to keep from freezin’ to death in their drafty old houses, right? One year our apartment building had barely any heat all winter. Thing kept goin’ on the fritz. Froze our asses off and had to keep the oven door open all the time. Willie was a toddler and learned real quick what the word ‘hot’ meant. Fuckin’ would’ve been happy if we got something for Christmas that kept us warm.”

“How cold is it in that basement right now?” she asks.

“Probably not bad,” I say, unaffected by the idea of Iadanza shivering down there. “He’s got a subzero sleeping bag and my guy plugged the bedroom’s space heater in the corner down there out of reach. It should help.”

“Guy? Guy knows about that?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Not Guy. One of my security guys – Tony. Only Tony, me, and two other people know he’s there. Besides you.”

“What about Sandy? What’s happening with Ray’s mom?”

“You’re ready to talk about this then?” I ask.

She sighs, but then her eyes are on me, expectantly. “You sent her to a work camp?”

“I sent her someplace where she could make a lot of money in a short amount of time if she was smart. She wasn’t smart.”

“Why am I not surprised? This sounds familiar.”

“She got herself in trouble by stealing. She stole, knowing she was screwing over a powerful criminal. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Raymond’s mother is a snake in the grass who won’t hesitate to shoot her mouth off. Him goin’ missing? Me bein’ with you? She couldn’t be left to her own devices.”

She could've made her money and gone and had a nice life somewhere else where she'd be out of our hair. That didn't happen."

"Ray's mom is a casualty of your war with Ray. This shouldn't have anything to do with her. Because you set her up to fail," she whispers. "Because you're a powerful criminal too and Ray screwed you over? Déjà vu."

"Because neither of them can resist taking something that isn't theirs, consequences be damned. And I've never called myself a criminal, baby. Don't steal; never have. I pay taxes. Did I get my start outside the law? Yeah. The business I started as a teenager wasn't exactly legal, but it put food in my and my brother's bellies and gave me the means to look after us despite neglect. Not to mention after our mother was murdered, if not for my business, we'd have wound up in foster care, probably separated. And Willie would've wound up fucked up. Have I broken the law in the past? Uh huh, there have been occasions, but while I've done what I've had to do, I'm not a thief and other than in returning favors owed, have done my best to not fuck anyone over unless they've fucked me first. Case in point: when someone fucks with me or the woman I love. In cases like that, I will not hesitate to go rogue. And in cases where I'm pretty sure someone's gonna fuck me over, I'll do whatever damage control I feel needs to be done."

I watch a swallow move down her throat.

I lean in close and whisper into her ear. "I'd kill for you."

"I don't want you to kill for me," she whispers back.

"But I would."

"You're scaring me."

"No. You should be the opposite of scared. Three people on this earth I'd kill for. You. My brother. And the third isn't born yet. That should not scare you. You should feel safer because of it."

She says nothing, so I take another bite of my sandwich and wash it down with some beer while she fiddles with her

wedding rings.

“Penny for your thoughts,” I say after a long moment.

She shakes her head and shrugs simultaneously. “Penny? Regular or double-sided?”

“No double-sided coins from me. I’m gonna give you honesty. Learned my lesson. If you ask something, you’ll get the answer. Just know you might not always like it.”

She bites her bottom lip, saying nothing for a minute.

“Talk to me, Mrs. Coulter. Please.”

“Who did you kill?” she asks, voice a whisper. “You said you did it once. What happened?”

My stomach turns at her question, and also at the lack of dimples at me calling her by her new last name. I wish I could take back calling her that, take shit back that has meant she could hear me say that and not smile in response like she did back before everything got fucked.

Is it about to get more fucked? She seems determined to know everything. Can she handle it? She’s gonna have to. Because no way am I letting her go.

Violet

He sighs.

I wait as his eyes work over my face, as I'm sure he's trying to decide whether or not he wants to tell me.

"Are you saying you can handle this?"

"It looks like I have to," I say.

"Yeah, you do. Because till death, Violet."

I frown. "Even if you have to kill me?"

I feel myself shrink at the fire in his eyes. He sets his plate and beer bottle down and then grabs the back of my head to bring my face closer to his.

He grinds his teeth. "Never. Fucking. Ever say that again."

I manage to swallow, but my heart might hammer its way straight out of my chest.

"Never again. Okay?" he asks. "Because that's not fuckin' funny. You can joke about me lockin' people in a basement. About locking me down there too, I give no fucks. But do not fuckin' joke about me harming you because that's not funny."

His eyes work over my face and then they go gentle before he touches his lips to my forehead.

"I won't ever harm a single hair on your head. I fuckin' swear it. Okay?" he demands, voice rough but his touch gentle.

I nod, closing my eyes tight and forcing down a swallow.

"I was kidding. Sort of," I say.

He holds me like that for a minute and I'm thinking our conversation is over. I'm also thinking I want to pull away, but

I also don't. The way he's holding me has me on the edge of emotion again. My throat feels clogged.

"My mother's murderer," he says, finally, then loosens his grip on me.

My heart trips over itself, but honestly, this doesn't totally surprise me.

He stares right into my eyes. "It happened a month after I found her dead."

"How?" I ask. "How did he die?"

Our faces are mere inches apart. He closes his eyes and anguish slashes across his face before he looks at me again.

"First time I held a gun, I put it directly to his forehead and immediately pulled that trigger. No hesitation. Seventeen years old and it was that easy for me." He takes another swig of beer, but as he swallows his expression makes it look like he tastes something foul.

I suddenly feel like I wish I could have alcohol, too. And that's not typically my go-to when I'm stressed or shocked. Having your husband admit cold-blooded murder while looking directly into your eyes can do that, I guess.

His gaze moves to the window. "The men who were with me at the time told me if I wanted to give up the bookie game, I could easily rake in the dough being a contract killer."

And now I've got a little bit of vertigo. I shiver and he notices, gets pulled out of wherever he's gone to in his head. Wherever that murder took place, I'm guessing. Or back to his home where he found his mother.

He tightens the blanket around me, then continues. "I didn't want that life. Hey? I don't want you to feel stressed. This is too much."

I shake my head. Will the truth set me free of the stress or will it make it worse? I don't know. But I feel like I have to hear this.

“I need to know everything,” I say. “So I...” I clear my throat.

“So you can decide whether or not you wanna be tied to me for the rest of your life?”

I search his face and say nothing. His jaw ticks for a minute before he moistens his lips and continues.

“Because you are tied to me. And I’m not giving up on fixing what I broke. Not ever, Violet. That’s not me trying to scare you or upset you. That’s me letting you know how much I love you, how much I want you. I know we can fix what I broke.”

I say, “I’m listening. Is there more?”

“So yeah,” he continues, “I ended him. And then for a long time, for fucking years – it messed with me, the regret that it was over so quick. That I didn’t make it hurt more. That after the years of pain he inflicted on her and my kid brother, I let him off so quick, so easy.”

My throat is a desert right now and my heart feels like it’s beating in my throat. Killian’s gaze is pointed at the window and his eyes are green icebergs. He’s stone-cold right now.

And the chill moves straight through me in slow-motion.

This is why Ray’s still alive.

This is why he’s taken his time hurting him.

Killian is deeply damaged because of his mom’s abuser, because of finding her dead. Because of feeling like he had to commit murder. And at such a young age.

“Did he... hurt you, too?” I ask.

Killian’s eyes move to my face and warmth seeps in.

“Not really. Grew up in a rough neighborhood. Grew up with her for a mother, so I was tough. Hard as nails. He couldn’t penetrate that and he didn’t push his luck with me too often. Not that he didn’t on occasion try to push my buttons. Got into it physically a couple times but I was a match so he backed off. Not like he did with her and Will. She was broken. Never a great mother. Practically raised myself and my kid brother

myself, especially after Nan died. But things didn't truly escalate with the bullshit revolving around her choice in men until I hit my mid-teens. She just wanted him to love her, so she did whatever she could to hold onto him. No matter that he took and never gave. No matter that he cheated, called her worthless, and slapped her around. And she was beautiful. Didn't know how pretty she was. Didn't know her life could've been different if she would've tried. She got hooked on booze. Addicted to the numbness, I'd say. And hooked on his approval, I guess. Did whatever he wanted her to do. He had Willie so scared shitless the kid pissed the bed at ten, eleven years old, had nightmares until he started sleeping in my room. After she was murdered, after I pulled that trigger, I started havin' the nightmares. But Willie didn't have them anymore. He started flourishing."

"That's why you keep hurting Ray. So you won't regret letting him off easy."

"He can go to Porto Campo. Then I can move on, stop taking my anger out on him but I can sleep at night knowing he's still suffering."

I flinch.

"That's how we end this, Violet. I pay for him to go to a work camp a world away from here, and we never see him again; he never darkens our door. You don't like that idea?" he asks, gazing into my eyes, "It means he doesn't die at my hands, but we can both rest easy. It's the only answer I think will work for both of us."

I empty my lungs. I don't know how to respond.

Campo. Camp? Like it's a fun place.

"Look at it this way. It's not much different than jail. It's just not a cushy jail. And he's out of our hair. Yeah, it'll be hard work, something he's not used to, but it'll be his choice to stay alive or not. Up to him if he turns it into a death sentence."

"But it's a life sentence." Ray wouldn't get a life sentence for scamming Mrs. Shear.

“Yes.”

“Where is it?”

“That’s classified,” he says. “I don’t even know. Don’t want to, either. I’ll have to pay a steep price, but it’s worth it to me if it means you can start to let this go.”

The less I know the better about this? I don’t know; *they* say ignorance is bliss and I’m suddenly wishing I was still ignorant about the Ray situation. But not really.

I want a marriage built on honesty, trust, mutual respect.

Killian takes another sip of beer. “The background of the camp? A good friend of the man who appointed himself a mentor of mine, one of his mentors was a religious man and also a powerful one. It was a conundrum because he had issues with murder but also needed a way to eliminate problems. He loved God but he loved power and money just about as much. The camp is a place where people of a certain association can send their problems, eliminate those problems in their lives without breaking a commandment. It’s a prison work-camp co-op run by some of the darkest and most powerful criminals. If the inmates do what they’re told, they get three squares and a place to lay their heads at night. If they don’t, they either get punished until they change their ways, or they don’t survive. We send him there, his future fate is in his own hands, but he won’t ever get out and won’t ever have a line of communication to the outside world.”

“And Ray’s mom? She’s already there and forever?”

“She’s in an arm of it, doesn’t have the same life of hard physical labor, but she doesn’t have an easy life there either. I’m not gonna sugar coat it.”

“Did she know where she was being sent?”

“She wasn’t sent directly there. She was given a couple options and she picked the one I wanted her to pick. Doesn’t even know I had a hand in it. She was put in a position of trust and when she broke that trust, which was what I suspected she’d do, she was given her choice of punishments and she

chose that one. She chose it not knowing I was behind it, but I'm the one that paid for her to go. Really, she'd see it that she sent herself there. If she took any accountability, which like her son, she probably doesn't."

"But you knew she'd wind up failing just like you knew Ray would wind up failing. Entrapment."

"Essentially."

"What about me? What traps have you set for me, Killian?"

He looks deep into my eyes, moving closer and closer, until I'm leaning back.

"I set out to make you fall madly in love with me, have my babies and spend your life being treated like a queen."

"And I'm failing."

He gives a sharp shake of his head. "You're not. Believe me, you're not. And even if you do, you won't. I didn't set out to do anything but extract Iadanza from your life. Not at first. Yeah, I played dirty with him. But not with you. Never played dirty with you baby. I fell in love with you. And I've been punished deeply for it. But I'll play dirty now if that's what it takes to get to keep you."

I frown.

He continues talking. "Because every minute of every day, all I want is to be with you. All I want is to see you smile. Feel your touch. Be inside you. My favorite fucking place. It's both a blessing and a curse to feel this much for somebody. I'm afraid I've become a little obsessed."

"That sounds ominous," I mumble.

He searches my eyes like he's trying to guess what I'm thinking.

I can't help it, I crack a smile.

"My kingdom for these dimples," he whispers and then our lips are touching for a beat before I turn my head away.

“I’m tired,” I say.

“Okay.”

He rises, lifting me with his hands on my hips. He gently sets me on my feet, then takes his plate and beer bottle to the kitchen counter on his way behind me, heading for the bedroom.

We’re brushing our teeth side-by-side. I’m trying to avoid his eyes. I think he’s trying to read mine.

We wind up in bed at the same time and he’s wrapping me up in an embrace.

“You keep acting like things are just okay. Touching me, holding me. It’s fucking with me.”

“Good,” he whispers and kisses me.

“Good?”

“Every time I touch you, take you into my arms, you’re recoiling less and less. So guess what? I’m gonna keep touching you, keep putting my hands on you. I’m gonna convince my beautiful wife that I really do love her, really do want her, and I do.”

I gulp.

“Baby, I do,” he insists. “I want nothing more than for all the pain you’ve been feeling the past week and a half to be gone. Fading into memory because you’re looking forward. Forward to a time when we’ll have our little family. When we get to meet this tiny person that’s growing inside you. Then make another one and another until our little family is big.”

He squeezes me.

“But what if I can’t trust you? Trust is important in a marriage. It’s the most important thing. You had it and you threw it away.”

“It might take time for you to forgive me for my deception, but we have time. We have all the time. So, just enjoy the spoiling, the pampering, and the lovefest it’ll be.”

I shake my head. “Don’t make light of this.”

“Believe me, that’s the last thing I’m doing. I’m letting you know I’m in this. All the way. I’m not giving up on us. I’ll spend every fuckin’ day showing you how much I love you, proving you can trust me again. And Violet...in Italy, when I asked you to give me that burden, I really fucking meant it. Don’t you see it? I don’t want it to weigh on you at all. Agree to me sending him to Campo. Do your best to put it out of your head, think of him simply as being incarcerated just as he should be. Trust me, please. Know that all I want is to hear you haven’t given up on us. However much time it takes to regain your trust, I’ll keep puttin’ in the work.”

“What if I do? Give up on us, I mean.”

“You won’t. Not only will I not let you, you won’t want to. You’re too stubborn.”

I rear back, but I can’t get far as his hold on me tightens.

“The more I get to know you, the more I realize that with you and him, you dug in. That’s one of the reasons it went on so long.”

“Meaning?” I ask.

“You beat yourself up because you think you were bein’ weak. It was the opposite for a long time, wasn’t it? You were being strong enough for the both of you by believing in your man. You were sure you were right about him. Sure you should believe in him. That’s why you defended him to everyone. You weren’t right. But you were so sure you were, that if you just gave it more time, gave him more support, that he’d have that room to prove himself.”

My sinuses are burning a little. Killian keeps going, rubbing my back as he talks.

“That things would change. And no, you weren’t weak at first. You were the opposite of that. But over time of course he did break you down, he did fuck with your heart, and your confidence took a hit. But that took time and happened because you were stubborn about it. You believed in your gut

for a long time the best was there in him. You tried to show him, too, by not givin' up. Didn't you? You're stubborn, baby. And he could've grown from that. He didn't. You're gonna be stubborn this time, too. But the outcome will be very different. Because I'm already growing from it."

He touches his lips to mine briefly before continuing. "You need a bit of time to work through all you know about me, but so far, here's what you know. You know I haven't let you down. Yes, I lied, but it came from a place of tryin' to protect you, not because I was trying to deceive you. You know I haven't done things to hurt you or left you to deal with shit just because you would deal with it. Not like him. You're getting there – coming to terms with the man I am, a man who would throw another man into a hole in the ground for weeks for hurting the woman I love. That's one of the many differences between me and him. He let you eat shit for him. Lay his burdens and his sins on you. I would not. Will not. I'll be the one to do the dirty work, the heavy lifting, the wet work so that you don't have to do it, baby. If I have to bust my balls to keep you from stress and worry, I'll do it. I'm the opposite of that schlep. I won't wind up in a hole, either, I'm too smart and too strong. He had you living in what felt like the hole in the ground for a long time and I couldn't allow that to go unpunished. Deep down you know that and maybe it freaks you out, because you can't condone violence, but you're eventually gonna come to realize that because you've got me, you're never gonna be left dangling in the wind again. Nobody else is ever, *fucking ever* gonna break you or stuff you in a prison, feeding you shit. Pissing on you. Hurting you. You've got the opportunity to grow strong again because you've got me at your back instead of me letting you eat shit like he would do."

I blink in the darkness and say nothing. But I'm feeling a lot right now. A whole lot.

"When we wake up in the morning, I want to go to Tillamook," he says.

I startle.

“To pick up the Christmas tree. Can we do that? Come back here and decorate it?”

I blink in the darkness in shock at how out of left field that statement seems.

“A Christmas tree?” I ask.

“I haven’t wanted a Christmas tree since I was a kid,” he says. “Never got much of anything, especially after Nan died, so never looked forward to any of it. Found it depressing to be honest, then got older and just didn’t give a fuck. This year, I give a fuck. I want to put up a Christmas tree with you. Watch all your favorite movies like we did at Halloween. Can we do that tomorrow?”

“I don’t... know.”

“We’ll just go, get the tree you had your eye on, and bring it back. I’ll run in and grab the boxes of decorations from your old apartment and take five minutes to do what I’ve gotta do; you don’t have to set foot inside.”

“Killian.”

“I’ll tear that place down if you never want to set foot in it again. Build us something else. Or sell it and buy us a beach house somewhere else. Think about it. But can we get a tree from there like you wanted when I first showed it to you?”

I moisten my lips and sigh.

He kisses me. “Let’s do the Christmas tree thing tomorrow. Have a nice weekend together. Or try. We’ll figure the other shit out Monday. The camp thing. Your employment lawyer thing. All the rest?”

“I’ll figure out the lawyer thing, Killian. By myself.”

His body shakes with silent laughter as he buries his nose in my throat. “You’re fucking hilarious,” he says.

I don’t laugh. Because I don’t quite know how to feel. I only know that being in my husband’s arms in the middle of the night while he laughs at my efforts to throw attitude and

pleads with me to make Christmas memories together while his lips and hands roam me ... it matters.

As I lie in the dark, processing the things he's said about me and Ray, about my life with him, about my stubbornness and loyalty to Ray, I don't know for sure... but I think maybe it's the start of looking at what's happened a little differently. The information about what he endured as a kid, as a teenager facing his mother's killer? Is my opinion changing?

I don't know.

Maybe.

"Baby?" he says after a little while.

"Yeah?"

"I married you on the anniversary of her death."

I go stiff.

"I wanted that day to stop being so ugly. So... you know. Woke up that day deciding it was time to turn the page and felt like I had the ability to maybe finally do that, because I was finding myself in love for the first time in my life. So I took you to Vegas and talked you into becoming my wife. Now I've got *that* instead of the pain I've felt on that day for the past decade."

I reach up and cup his cheek with my hand, feeling emotion clog my throat.

He kisses my palm and then pulls me closer.

And I somehow avoid the overwhelming urge to bawl my eyes out at what he's endured. All he's overcome. And the fact that I know he's still in pain, still suffering. Instead, I fall asleep in his arms.

31

Killian

She stares at the beach house as if it's about to bite her. Like it's an insect about to start crawling in her direction with bared fangs. I'm frankly surprised it didn't take any coercion this morning to get her here.

When I woke up today I was alone in bed and I felt a stab of panic until I found her. She was already dressed and staring out the window by the balcony, in the same place she sat last night.

When I approached, sliding my hands under her arms and holding her belly while kissing the top of her head, she didn't stiffen. She didn't sink into me, but it was still progress in my mind.

"Snow didn't stay," I say.

"I'm ready when you are," she said, sipping tea.

"For?"

"To go get that tree," she answered.

"I'll be ready in fifteen," I replied and kissed her neck.

"Thanks, baby."

It had been a quiet ride, almost no conversation. It began with her turning on a Christmas music station as we pulled out of the garage. Twenty minutes in, she requested a stop at a coffee shop for a bathroom and food break. She asked me if I wanted food or coffee. No puking yet today and she ate a muffin and drank an orange juice after that stop. She seemed reflective and in her head, but didn't pull away when I put my hand on her knee after we ate.

I'm taking her willingness to do this today as a positive sign.

A light dusting of snow lies on the ground and Violet's eyes light up as she heads directly toward a cluster of trees beyond the house.

I watch her approach as I unlock the garage so I can grab the axe. She's got her red ski jacket on with baby blue mittens on her hands and a cute matching hat with a big white pom-pom bouncing on her head.

After fetching an axe, rope, and bungee cords, I catch up to her.

"This one?" I gesture to the Nordmann fir that's about seven feet tall and perfectly shaped.

"Wait. Um... do you have to cut it down?" She eyes my axe with alarm.

"Isn't that the point?"

"Couldn't we, well ... pot it, bring it, and then bring it back when we're done?"

I scratch my head. "Not without a whole lot of planning and tools that I don't have at my disposal."

"Oh," she whispers.

"What's wrong?"

"Just..." She shrugs. "Look how pretty it is with all that snow on it and it smells so..." she inhales the air. "So Christmassy and I don't wanna k-kill it. God, why am I getting emotional about this?" Her eyes are moist.

She looks at me with what I think is embarrassment.

I tilt my head and regard her for a minute. She pulls her glossed pink lips tight.

"So, we'll go buy a fake one," I say with a shrug of my own.

Her mouth drops open.

"Okay?" I check.

She shakes her head. "Can we buy a real one that's already been cut? Then we haven't done the cutting. We're just giving

it a good home. And our home will smell like Christmas.”

“Whatever you want, baby.” I smile at her.

“Sorry to make you drive all the way here.” She dabs her eyes with the tips of her mittens.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s ridiculous,” she corrects. “I’m glad you find my ridiculousness so amusing. This has to be pregnancy hormones getting me all up in my feelings.”

I chuckle and pull her to me. “We need the boxes of ornaments. And it was a nice drive.”

“It was,” she says softly, wrapping her arms around my waist. And I soak it in, because it feels amazing that she’s tucked close to me like this, not pulling away.

We stare at the tree for a minute.

“It’s a nice tree,” I say.

She nods. “Thanks for not being mad.”

“Huh?”

“If that was him and I did this, he’d have lost it on me.”

“I’m not him.”

“I know,” she says softly.

I tag her hand and hold it walking back toward the garage. After putting the axe inside and locking up, I start up my SUV.

She’s eying the house like it’s gonna bite her.

Maybe I should sell it.

“Wait inside the car. Get warm and I’ll go get those boxes.” I open the passenger door.

“I have to pee again,” she says, still eyeballing the house.

I shut the car door while I disarm the alarm on the app on my phone and tag her hand, heading for the door.

“New alarm system,” she mutters, eyes on my screen.

“Yeah,” I say. “Cameras at each exit, set up on my phone. Couple inside, too. Remember that kid that delivered the groceries the first time you came?”

“Yeah.”

“He and his friends were partying here while we were in Italy. Broke in.”

Her eyes go wide. “You never said.”

“I know. Tony caught ‘em. Scared the shit out of them. The new system was a necessity.”

“What about the cameras at home? They’re on your phone, too, right?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

“Still?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?” she asks, warily.

“Kitchen. As you know. One pointing at the living space. Our room. Guest room.”

She flinches.

I continue, talking fast. “Left in for safety. Purely for safety. I’ll put the apps on your phone, too. You can access whatever I do.”

“Do they record stuff?”

“Here? Motion detected here, yeah. Motion triggers a recording event. At home, no. That’s an option but I’ve turned it off. At home I have to look in to see what’s happening, but nothing gets recorded unless I hit a button.”

“You have audio and visual at home,” she says instead of asks.

“Yeah,” I confirm. “Baby, I’ve recorded and shared nothing visually from home here except that heavily edited kitchen counter-”

“I have to pee.”

“Okay,” I say. She wants to drop the subject.

I unlock the door and open it for her.

She storms ahead of me and I head for the hall leading off the back side of the kitchen where we stowed all Violet’s extra boxes from her old place.

I’m making my second trip when she merges with me heading to where the boxes are.

I glance at her and can see she’s on fire about this still.

“When was the last time you eavesdropped on me in the apartment?” she demands.

I heft a box into my arms and head for the door. She follows.

“You’re not gonna like it.”

Her nostrils flare and she huffs, scorching me with a glare.

“You and Susanna the other night,” I say. “I caught the tail end of a conversation. That’s it. It was just a safety check, and I was listening for maybe thirty seconds.”

“Takes probably three seconds to do a safety check,” she says.

“I know. But you were talking about me.”

She swallows.

“You were smart. Gathered you were filling her in without really filling her in and it was believable. My woman’s got it all. Beauty. Brains.” I smile.

She huffs and storms outside.

I get the box into the back of the SUV and when I close it, she’s at the shoreline, looking out at the water, arms folded.

“Aren’t you gonna check in on him?” she asks.

“Yeah. Checking on you first.”

“He’s on your phone, too? His... room?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me see.”

I sigh, then pull my phone from my coat and unlock it, slide my thumb across to the app and bring Raymond's cell up.

He's sitting on his bed, watching the news that's being projected on the wall, back against the wall, one knee bent, looking relaxed, holding a water bottle, tapping it against his calf as he stares at the screen.

She turns her head away.

I close the app.

"Things have been uneventful with him," I say, watching her chewing her cheek. "Tony comes every day," I continue, "long enough to give him food, water, change the bucket out. Hose him down if necessary. Give him a pain pill. No current injuries. Just some residual rib pain. His ribs are wrapped."

"What about his knee?"

"He'll have a limp the rest of his life. Maybe pain. Dunno."

Don't know; don't fucking care.

"Maybe I should-"

"No," I cut her off.

"No? No, what?" she asks, eyes narrowing.

"No. I don't want you down there," I say.

Her eyes blaze with annoyance and her hands go to her hips.

"Oh, because it's all your decision, right? How do you know I was even gonna say I wanted to go down there?"

"Where your safety is concerned, yes, I'll make that decision. And that's not just your physical safety. That's your emotional wellbeing as well."

"You don't even know what I was gonna say."

"What were you gonna say?"

"Maybe I shouldn't ask about him is what I was gonna say. What do you think I could possibly have to talk to him about?"

“Ask him if he wants to go to the camp or die? Warn him about what’s happening so you can somehow convince him to be on his best behavior, so he doesn’t wind up with his head on a spike as a warning to everyone else? It’s not his choice and he’s not right in the head, you do remember your last conversation down there with the lasagna, right? He’s been sentenced. I’m the judge and jury. He’s almost out of our hair and out of our lives. This is a result of his actions; he doesn’t even need to exist for you. From here on out. And baby, I know it’s a big ask, but I’d really fuckin’ love it if we could look at finding ways to put it behind us and maybe even let him get moved this week so it could conceivably be the last fuckin’ time we even talk about him.”

She scowls, looking even more pissed.

I finish with, “Though obviously if you need to talk about it or him I won’t stop you. But I’d love it if we could fuckin’ move on.”

I search her face. “Do you feel like you need to see him one more time for closure?”

“No. I don’t. Though I don’t like you throwing the word *no* at me like your word is law when I haven’t even gotten a full sentence out. I wanted it over a long time ago and you’re telling me you want it to be over too, so... get it done. Do whatever you feel you need to do. Just not murder. Not you doing it, not you ordering it. Okay?” She puts her hands together and swipes one over the other. “Finished. Done. But do not dismiss me like that and not let me get a sentence out of my mouth before you start laying down the law. Okay?”

“Okay. My apologies. Where he’s concerned, things clearly get emotional.”

“Clearly,” she snaps.

I empty my lungs, waiting to see if she’s got anything else to add. “I’ll be back in five,” I finally say and head into the house.

And I'm suddenly cautiously optimistic. Because it feels and sounds like she's ready to put this behind us.

I get downstairs and unlock the door.

He straightens when he sees me, looking shocked. Looking far more well than he should. Not getting beaten agrees with him. It doesn't agree with me, but whatever.

"Hey," I greet.

I set down his ration of water, a new toilet paper roll, and a heated Lean Cuisine on his bed. Chicken Teriyaki stir fry. For fun. He gets this often. And I'm not changing his shit bucket today. Fuck that.

"Killian." He's visibly shaking.

I snicker. And I can't help but feel a little satisfied.

"Our time together is coming to a close," I say.

His eyes widen. "Don't do it. Brah, *please*. I'll never fuck you over again. I'll - I'll do anything. Anything. Name it."

"Not killing you. Chapter's closing. I'm sending you somewhere outta my hair."

He frowns. "Where's Violet?"

"She's not your concern. Though she never was, was she? You never treated her right."

He looks down.

"Though if it weren't for her," I continue, "the next chapter for you wouldn't be happening. You'd either be dead or you'd be the mouse for the cat to play with at least a while longer."

He frowns. "Be good to her, Kill. She deserves a good life."

I laugh. "That's rich coming from you. But man, I tell ya, that's exactly what she's gonna have. Got some good news in fact."

He straightens and waits, looking braced.

“She’s havin’ my baby,” I say and flash him a Cheshire cat grin.

His face goes sour as he swallows and looks away. He looks wounded. Aww; poor Raymond. Fuckface.

“Yeah. Life is gonna be sweet for us. Can’t say the same for you, where you’re goin’.”

“Where am I goin’?”

“You’ll see. I’d say arrivederci, but I don’t think that’s the right phrase as it translates to, ‘until we meet again’. We won’t see one another again, Shit-stain. So... bye. Enjoy your time in hell.” I chuckle. “Actually, where I’m sending you might make you wish you were in hell. Unless you decide you wanna ... you know... end it before then.” I reach into my pocket and toss over a pill bottle that lands on his bed, contents rattling. “Your call.”

“Wait,” he says, urgently.

I walk out and lock up without looking back.

Instead of giving him the one pain pill he gets for the day, he can decide if he wants to take them all and end his pain permanently.

She folds her arms and stares out the window as we drive away.

And do I have a pang of remorse for tossing Iadanza those pills? No. Because I don’t think he’s man enough to take them. I really don’t. But I’m sure he’ll have a long and agonizing day with the insight he just got.

Violet didn’t want murder. And that’s not murder. It’s just providing the ass-wipe with an opportunity. An opportunity he won’t take, but that he’ll toil over.

Maybe he’d have ended it with a handful of painkillers a few weeks ago when I was still torturing him every time I went. But he’s had a week and a half of regular food, entertainment,

and pain medication. He's got the will to live again. Though, now he's also got fear of the unknown. And that's satisfying as fuck.

I'll make some calls Monday and get the ball rolling on sending the fucker off to Campo.

Violet

By the time we get to the garden center near home, I'm feeling green with a combination of car sickness and morning sickness and my boobs feel like they weigh four hundred pounds. Each.

I'm crabby and tired until I smell all the Christmas trees inside the big greenhouse that's decked out to the max for Christmas. This perks me up; I love this store.

I'm further perked by the teenaged girl and boy in the front entrance who are dressed like Santa's elves and offering us large gingerbread men cookies and hot chocolate.

I take a bite of mine and chew as we wander through the beautiful space.

"It's like Christmas puked in here," Killian mutters, biting the head off his cookie.

I smile. "Isn't it great?"

He leans in and kisses me, holding onto the pom-pom on top of my hat. "It is. And you know what?"

"What?" I ask, taking another bite of my cookie. It's delicious. And for now, I'm not feeling that clawing nausea in the middle of my throat.

"Love seeing you smile. I think Christmas could not have had better timing."

I shrug, feeling myself deflate. Clearly, I was just ignoring our problems for a minute, because I love Christmas and for some strange reason, this store is making me happy.

"No. Don't stop smiling. Let's make this a good day, baby. Let's buy new ornaments. If there's anything you want from

the old boxes, fine, but I'd just as well have our first tree be all us. You know?"

"Okay," I say softly.

I've always loved this store. It's pricy, though. I've walked through here many times as a kid with my mom and my grandmother, most often right after Christmas when things are marked down on clearance.

As far as a tree decorated with nothing from my boxes, I'm feeling relief. Because there are some Ray and Violet memories in those boxes. Most of the decorations are from before Ray, but there are a few that would make me think of him.

"To new beginnings?" Killian asks, holding out his Styrofoam hot chocolate cup.

He jerks his chin toward my cup.

An agreement? A fresh start?

I don't know.

"Baby," he whispers. And his eyes... the emotion in them, the longing?

We're standing in the middle of a beautiful Christmas store while Mariah Carey's *All I Want for Christmas is You* is playing, and he's looking into my eyes with that smoldering gaze and that unspoken *please*. I'm melting.

"To new beginnings," I say, my voice coming out emotional as I tap my Styrofoam cup against his.

He kisses my temple. "Love you," he says gruffly, then grabs a shopping cart.

Forty-five minutes later, his SUV has a massive Christmas tree tied to the top and the trunk has five bags of Christmas decorations in it. It cost a small fortune. And in the bag is a heart-shaped porcelain ornament with the year on it and it says, "Our first Christmas Together." On the opposite side, it says "Mr. and Mrs."

He chose it with an adorable smile on his face. “This one?”

I smiled as he set it carefully into the shopping cart.

He lifted a ‘Baby’s first Christmas’ ornament, but as his lips parted to ask me if I wanted it, I shook my head.

“No. Superstition wins out on this one.”

“Okay. We’ll buy one next year,” he relented, then kissed me.

I’m pretty exhausted when we get in, so he sends me for a nap with plans to go down and get the tree to bring upstairs, then set it up in the new tree stand in the corner. He suggests we decorate it on Sunday after it’s had the chance to settle.

When I wake up after a two-hour nap, feeling nauseous again, but at least not puking, he’s on the couch with his laptop.

He smiles when he sees me and snaps the lid shut before setting it down on the coffee table. He pats his knee and I’m awestruck by the gorgeous, happy smile that he has on his face. The Christmas tree sits by the window, undecorated but making the place smell amazing.

I try to sit on the couch beside him, but he catches me and pulls me onto his lap. Holding the back of my neck, our lips are fused together for a moment before he breaks the kiss, asking, “Good nap?”

“Terrible,” I say. “I feel nauseous again. The only time I felt not-yucky today is when I had a gingerbread cookie at the Christmas store and it wore off after about half an hour.”

“I’ll go buy you some more,” he says.

“That’s okay.”

“I insist. Anything else?”

I shake my head.

“Back soon.” He lifts me up so he can get up, then sets me down, draping the blanket over me. “Pick a movie for tonight?”

“Okay,” I whisper.

He moves to the kitchen and pulls out a bottle of red Gatorade, and brings it to me along with the remote.

“Where’s your phone? In the bedroom? I’ll grab it so you don’t have to move a muscle.”

“Oh. Oh, shit. I left it in your SUV.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. It’s in the cupholder.”

“Right. Okay, I’ll leave mine and you call me on yours if you need anything.” He gestures to the coffee table.

“Okay.”

He leans over and kisses me. “7488.”

“I know,” I say.

His phone code. I’ve seen him unlock it dozens of times in front of me. He doesn’t try to hide it. And that’s always said something to me.

Strangely.

If I’d snooped on him the way he snooped on me, I might have gotten clues about his secrets a lot sooner. But he trusted me.

My hand lands on his jaw and he gives me a burning stare, like he likes it. I kiss him back and then snuggle up with the remote as he grabs his keys and heads out.

Around an hour later, I’ve narrowed it down to between *Christmas with the Kranks* and *Fred Claus* as tonight’s movie choices, figuring I’ll ask Killian which one he prefers when he gets home, when his phone screen lights up from the coffee table, catching my eye. I lean forward and see a bunch of alarm system notifications.

Driveway motion event. T.

Motion detected front door T

Alarm disabled T

Motion kitchen T

T.

Tillamook.

I tap the screen on the most recent notification and a new window opens, showing me a large guy in a leather jacket opening the fridge in that kitchen.

I enlarge the window to full-size. It's his security guy, Tony, who I met at Genesis and again at Numbers. He was there when Ray showed up with the gun. He also came to the hospital when Killian was jumped.

Tony opens the freezer, pulls a frozen entrée out and pops it into the microwave.

He then pulls something from the fridge and then seems like he's looking around on top of the fridge. He looks around on the floor and then disappears out of camera view.

Killian's phone starts ringing with *Tony calling* across the top of the screen. The security window is still open.

I startle and hold the phone without answering.

It stops ringing.

I scroll down through various icons on the app and when I see the option *Basement*, I open it. This gives me a view into the room Ray's locked in.

My belly drops with dread as my eyes land on him sitting there, but then I see him flop down quickly and turn his back. The door opens and Tony goes inside.

Ray's pretending to be asleep.

The apartment door opens and Killian is coming in with two shopping bags as well as a pizza box. He disarms the alarm.

"Hey, you tryin' to call?" he asks, seeing me with his phone.

I'm about to pass him his phone when motion catches my attention.

"Oh shit!" I shriek.

Killian

“What?” I rush to Violet as horror registers on her face.

“Your, your... Ray and Tony, and, and... oh shit!”

When what’s happening on screen registers, I could swear I’m not seeing what I think I’m seeing.

Raymond has Tony on the bed, slumped over his legs. The chain on his arm is wrapped around Tony’s neck.

“What the fuck!” I holler and grab the phone to get a closer look in time to see Raymond lifting Tony’s gun out of his back holster. He unwraps the chain and Tony slumps to the floor, looking unconscious or dead. I don’t know. *Fuck!*

Raymond points the gun at Tony for a minute, hands shaking, looking freaked while he stares at him.

Violet speaks quickly, panicked, “I saw the alerts on the screen, so I opened them and he phoned you, but I didn’t answer. Then I looked into the basement room and Ray starts off sitting up watching TV, but then quickly pretended to be sleeping. He tripped him and then when he fell and the bucket fell over, Ray wrapped the chain around his neck and started pulling! Oh my God, Killian! He’s feeding him something, look! What is that?”

“Fuck!” I move into the bedroom, eyes on the phone as I watch Iadanza pouring his water bottle into Tony’s mouth.

And then he drops the bottle and searches Tony’s pockets. Violet watches as I reach into the bottom drawer of my two-drawer nightstand. Strapped to the bottom of the top drawer is a gun. I feel for it while my eyes are still on my screen but catch the flash of panic in her eyes as she sees what I yank out. She follows and sees me reach under my desk where I have another gun strapped. I set it on the desk, then move the

framed mirror off the wall, press in the digits to unlock my wall safe and grab an ammo-loaded belly band holster. I strap it on, load the weapon, then reach into the inside pocket of my jacket.

“No. No. You’re not going there; he has Tony’s gun.” She’s wild-eyed, shaking her head vigorously.

“Baby, here.” I pass Violet her own phone from my pocket and drop a kiss on her mouth. “You’re here. The alarm is on. Here.” I try to hand her a gun. She backs away, hands high, her head shaking, horror in her eyes. I press my hand to the small of her back and walk her back to the bed, setting the weapon on the bench at the end of the bed.

“I’ll have Willie come stay with you,” I say. “I don’t think he’ll head this way but if for some reason he does and gets here before Will, use this. Safety’s off and it’s loaded. All you gotta do is point and-”

“No! Do not go there! Stay here with me.”

“And shoot. You get it?”

“No Killian. No!” She throws her arms around me. She’s trembling.

“Baby, Tony’s on the fuckin’ floor. What do you want me to do? Call the cops?”

“God!” she shrieks. “That’s who should’ve been handling Ray all this time. All this time!” She points at me with accusation and then pushes me with both hands. “I can’t believe this shit.”

“I have to go.”

“Ray’s gonna hurt you!” she cries out, hands trembling as she grabs me again. “Don’t go.”

“Calm down. It’s gonna be fine.”

“I can’t,” she cries, burying her face in my chest. “I can’t. I can’t lose you.”

I lift her chin again, so she has no choice but to look in my eyes.

“Do you think that little fuck is stronger than me?”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“Do you think he’s smarter than me?”

She shakes her head again. Her eyes are wild with fear, and I hate it. I kiss her forehead.

“You will not lose me. I promise. I’ll call you soon. As soon as I can. I’ve gotta go handle this.”

“Please don’t go,” she calls out.

“I have to, my beautiful Violet. Settle down, set the alarm. I’ll call as soon as I can. Love you. ”

Violet

I've let him go without returning his, *I love you*. And I'm terrified. Terrified I won't get a chance to say it back. Terrified he'll get hurt.

Fear pulses in my blood.

Nothing like danger screaming in your face to get you to realize just how much you're willing to let go of the past, I guess.

I've been negotiating with myself these last few minutes of pacing. I know he's *it* for me, despite everything.

Ray is my past; Killian is my future. Even if Kill lied to me. Even if he does dangerous things. I love my husband. And Ray is on the loose. Dangerous, maybe. No. No *maybe* about it. He's armed. And he's lost his mind.

I try to get my heart to stop racing so fast. I try some slow breathing to try to calm myself down. To make sure I'm not putting my baby under stress.

I run and haul my pants and underwear down, then dab a tissue between my legs to make sure there's no bleeding, because that's the last thing I need.

There's no bleeding. Relief.

More pacing ensues.

God... watching that happen as if it was a television show but knowing it was really happening, that Ray really tripped that big guy and choked him out while disarming him? I'll never forget the level of panic. I've never been so afraid in my life. Not since Killian got jumped by all those guys after the wedding. But this feels worse, because I'm here waiting. Waiting and praying.

And Killian is gone. He took a gun. And left one for me! God, I wish I had his phone still, so I could see what's happening.

I go to the fridge and pour a glass of apple juice and down it.

There are two bags on the counter beside a pizza box. After pacing for a good twenty minutes, I peer inside.

One has a box of soft gingerbread cookies from the bakery section of the supermarket, plus there's a box of ginger snaps, and there are also five packages of gingerbread cookie dough formed to little men that are oven-ready, with icing packets for decorating. The other bag has a pair of slippers in it.

I pull them out. They're pale lavender, super soft closed-toe slides and on the top of one is a dandelion, the other is a dandelion gone to seed.

My heart squeezes.

He saw those while buying me gingerbread and bought them because of the dandelion picture.

I should have told him I love him, too.

I should have.

Shit; I'm scared.

Terrified that Ray could hurt him with that gun. Or that Ray will get away and tell someone about the basement and then Killian will be in big trouble. Huge trouble. Like, jailed until our child is an adult *type* of trouble.

I can't burst into tears. I can't lose it. But do I ever want to. Instead, I slide my feet into my slippers and then I make a wish. A wish while staring at the dandelion seeds on my right foot, wishing this will somehow get resolved without anyone dying, without anyone getting hurt.

I open the pizza box and look inside, knowing I can't possibly eat at a time like this, and burst into tears anyway because half the pizza is covered in pineapple chunks. Lots of them. Like he ordered double pineapple for me.

I stare at my slippers. I know my wish coming true isn't likely, not unless Ray manages to disappear forever. If not, someone is going to get hurt.

As I feel cushiony memory foam hugging my feet, all I can think is that if someone has to get hurt, I'd damn-well prefer it be Ray over Killian.

Killian

Why the fuck was Tony there?

I messaged him from the beach house today saying I was there and he didn't need to go today. I told him not to go back until he heard from me because I was planning to close this chapter within days. He replied immediately and said *OK*.

Why the fuck was he there and why was his eye off the ball like that? The way Violet described what she saw, Tony walked in, and Iadanza was waiting for him, pretending to sleep so he could trip him and then choke him out with his chained arm.

How did Tony let that happen? He's not an idiot. If he were, he wouldn't be working for me. He's never let me down before.

I've already called Tino and asked him to meet me there, said I need his tracking assistance. And I called Will and asked him to go sit with Violet, said I have a security emergency with Violet's ex, that I can't give him a lot of detail, and he's to look after her until I get back. I tell him there's a gun on the bench at the end of my bed. He's on his way and I'm very fucking grateful for that.

He knows a little about the Raymond situation from before I took Violet as a marker and has remarked more than once that he gets a serious kick out of the fact that I've taken her from Raymond and made her mine. Willie saw, firsthand, what sort of person Iadanza was – growing up with him in our complex we all could see he'd wind up a con artist loser just like his old man. Of course Willie has no clue Raymond has been my hostage for weeks.

I call her.

“Killian?”

“Baby,” I say.

“What’s happening?”

“Don’t know yet, driving – but Willie’s coming, and I’ve got help meeting me at the house.”

“What kind of help?”

“The kind that will track him down. Do not worry about this. I will deal with it. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you, but I’m scared. And what are you doing if you catch him?”

“*When* I catch him,” I correct. “And trust me, I will.”

She laughs. But it doesn’t sound comical, it sounds painful. And it hurts me, too, because I know that a few weeks ago, I could’ve said “trust me” and she would’ve relaxed. But because of my mistakes, I’ve lost that.

And as for mistakes, I’ve made more of them today. I should not have said a word to Iadanza about his fate. I tipped my hand because I wanted to get in his head, but instead, I should have simply had him moved when the time came. If I had, he might not have made this desperate move tonight. He knew the clock was ticking and as much as Tony’s got responsibility for what happened tonight, so do I. Because I made Raymond afraid enough that he was willing to be bold when he heard those slide locks and that doorknob, feeling like he had nothing to lose.

“Will’s gonna be there in fifteen. He has a key, so he’ll come straight up and let himself in. He has the alarm codes. I told him where the gun is.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll call you in a bit.”

“Killian?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you,” she breathes, sounding winded.

Fuck. I needed this.

“I love you, baby. Very fucking much. Okay?”

“Be careful. Please, please be careful.”

“I will. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Please come home soon,” she chokes.

“I will, Violet. Don’t stress. Promise, baby, I’ll be good. I promise you. Gotta go. I’ll call as soon as I have good news. Please try to trust me.”

“I trust you, Killian,” she whispers.

Fuck.

“Thank you, Violet,” I hope my inadequate words have enough feeling in them that she knows how much I appreciate the gift of her trust. “Love you so much. Call you soon.”

I’m relieved my brother is with my wife even though I doubt Iadanza is headed straight there. He’s probably planning to hunker down at least at first.

I get to Tillamook in record time, miraculously hitting no traffic or red lights and surprisingly not getting stopped for speeding in my Macan, as it’s a cop-magnet. Rarely do I drive it without finding them following me, just waiting for me to open it up.

After finding Tony still on the floor of Iadanza’s cell, without his gun or his keys, but thankfully breathing, groggy, stumbling, but breathing, I back the security footage up to when I left earlier today and play it back at maximum accelerated speed. After the door shut, Raymond fidgeted, looking tweaked. I was in his head, just like I wanted. Pacing the two paces his chain allowed to get him to and from his shit bucket, with the pill bottle in his hands. Looking at it. Pondering it. And then taking just one of the probably two dozen pills left in the bottle. Finally, he put whatever was left, likely a dozen of them, in the water bottle. He shook that

bottle for a good hour in between examining it to see if the pills dissolved.

And like Violet described, as Tony came in, pretending he was asleep and then throwing his good leg out to trip him when Tony bent to grab the handle for the five-gallon pail with a couple days' worth of piss and shit, Raymond used the few feet of chain he had to choke Tony out before letting him slide to the floor into the puddle of waste.

Whether he dissolved those pills with a plan to take them later or simply hoped someone would come that he could overtake, I don't know, but he clearly took advantage of the opportunity when it came up and I still can't fucking believe Tony was so oblivious.

He then unwound the chain and tried to force the dissolved pain meds down Tony's throat, but at least some of it wound up on the floor with the shit and piss that got knocked over. And that was when he searched Tony and found the gun, fished through pockets until he had Tony's wallet and keys and let himself out of his cuff before cuffing Tony, waving at the camera with a shit-eating grin meant for me, throwing the camera the finger, and fucking off.

I switched views and saw him limp out of the house on the camera and get to Tony's car. But when he opened the door and the car interior light blinked on, I saw another person in the passenger seat. It was too far for me to get a good enough look to see who it was and I'm waiting for the doc to finish his preliminary exam on a now rousing Tony to find out who the fuck that was.

Tony's got a purple neck bruise from the chain, but he isn't dead, so that's something. Though he isn't dead, I'm about ready to kill him.

The dumb fuck is on the floor in the main part of the basement near the space heater, nude and covered with the blanket that's supposed to be on the back of the couch because I had to strip the clothes off him that were covered in Iadanza's sewage, trying not to puke my guts up at the stench.

I've been ready in case Iadanza tried to come back here thinkin' he'd catch me. But if he's smart, he'll dump Tony's car and find a way to fuck off. Thankfully, Iadanza isn't very smart.

Though right now it seems he's way fuckin' smarter than Tony.

We're upstairs now in the living room and Doc is done looking Tony over. I send him out of the room for a minute so I can get answers. And those answers do not make me happy.

The kicker? The second person in the car.

Jessa's now missing.

This news has me about to blow a gasket. Tony's barely conscious efforts at explaining only makes me angrier. My head is about to fucking explode.

The other night when Alana called me because Jessa was sloppy-drunk and asking for me at the club and Tony was supposed to get rid of her? Looks like she charmed her way onto Tony's dick and has been at his place ever since.

Tony swears, groggy as fuck – evidently consuming at least some of the pain meds, that he didn't get my text today.

He showed up like he figured he was supposed to do and other than not knowing why he couldn't find the pain pills in the cupboard over the fridge, said he was here to do his usual thing. I show him the text I sent and his reply to me and he can't explain it. He's been with Jessa for a couple days so clearly this text mystery shit is no real mystery. He's just groggy as fuck.

"You left her alone with your phone?" I have to point out because he can't seem to compute.

Not only has he failed at not letting the prisoner escape, but also that he brought her is beyond the pale. Amid his groggy panic about her safety, he swears he told her nothing, made out like he had a quick errand, and left her in the car. Says she

wanted to spend the evening with him and doesn't know this is my place.

Because he's groggy as fuck, he nods off while I'm trying to question him. I lose patience and jerk an open bottle of water in his direction to keep the idiot awake.

Since the car's gone and so is Raymond, I can only assume Jessa is still with the shit-stain fuckhead. Fitting. Really fucking fitting.

I'm beyond livid because until today, I'd have sworn Tony has solid judgement skills. Known this guy for years and he's been unfailingly loyal. I can't wrap my brain around the fact that he brought her here, let alone went down there distracted.

I'm now questioning my own judgement skills in giving him this job. In fucking my marriage almost irreparably. In hurting my wife. Now having her scared out of her mind. And in *not* shooting Iadanza between the eyes the minute the Rossis brought him here.

Tony keeps insisting he didn't tell Jess a thing about the place, didn't even say it was mine. Clearly, she knew. She knew because she got my text on his phone, then deleted it after responding to it, but he's still having trouble wrapping his mind around that because of the drugs and the bump to his noggin.

Well that doesn't fucking matter much, because now I have to phone Jagger and get him involved. And yeah, he might be able to get Iadanza found faster, which would be good, but he's gonna be pissed and it means more people knowing about that hostage situation.

Tino Rossi arrives while I'm still reading Tony the riot act and I brief him. Doc takes Tony up to take a shower, saying he'll be there to make sure Tony doesn't pass out and drown himself. I set out a t-shirt and track pants which won't fit the giant motherfucker very well, but his shit-stained clothes need to be burnt. Tino is already mobilizing his network to hunt the fucker down. Lots of ways this could go. Raymond could go

north on 101 toward Washington or south to California. He could also drive back toward Portland.

After Tony settles on the couch for the night and Doc gives me guidelines to keep an eye on him with that lump on his head from hitting the concrete floor, not to mention not knowing how much of those pain meds he actually drank. Then, Doc heads out and Tony swears to me he'll work his ass off tomorrow on Tino's team to bring Raymond in.

"After you muck the shit out of his cell, you mean? Because that's your fuckin' mess in there. Yo, Tino? What about we call Zack Jacobs? He's got ways of tracking people, too, doesn't he?"

Tino gives me a head shake and gestures for me to follow him out of earshot.

"Turns out he's a Fed."

"He's what?"

"Long story, not mine to tell. Talk to Dare or Tommy about it but I'd say Zack is not the guy you wanna call to get your captive back."

Fuck.

I walk Tino to his car and he promises to stay in contact.

After he pulls away, I dial Jagger, not looking forward to the conversation we're about to have. But Jag's sister is missing. And there's the fact he's a security specialist who will be able to help. He's only been on his own with his new company a while, but it sounds like he's quickly built up resources.

I call Violet at two thirty in the morning after seeing on the apartment's surveillance that she's awake. She answers on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Sorry about the hour, but no good news yet. I won't be home tonight, baby. He's gone, got Tony's car, and he's being

hunted. I'm staying put for the time being."

"How's Tony?" she asks.

"He's a fucking moron."

"Is he hurt?"

"He'll live," I growl.

For now. If anything goes wrong because of this shitshow?
Fuck.

"Try to sleep," I say. "Can I talk to Will? Get some sleep and call me when you wake up."

"I don't think I can sleep," she whispers. "What if he-"

"Try to sleep. Okay? Don't worry about the *what ifs*. I've got this."

"Yeah. Okay," she says, but she doesn't sound convinced.

"You didn't say anything to my brother?"

"Of course not."

"Pass him the phone, please."

"One sec," she says, sounding upset.

I growl. I fuckin' hate this shit. Hate that she's worried. Hate that this fucker is out there, that he's even breathing.

One thing about shooting Max Amos the minute the gun was put in my hand, he was never able to fuck with me afterwards.

My lip curls. I'm pissed at Iadanza. Fuming at Tony. But most of all, I'm livid that this was preventable and that it's ultimately down to me that he's out there.

"Bro," Will greets, "What's up?"

"Bullshit. Can't get too far into it, but can you stay there? Stay awake. Violet's ex is a thorn in my side and I don't think he'll show there, but just in case."

"No problem. I've got today and tomorrow off; I wouldn't have slept tonight. I have to be back in Monday night, so I'd

have kept on this schedule.”

“Thanks, bro. I appreciate it. I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

“Anything for you, Kill. You sure you’re all right? You don’t sound good. If you need help, I can help.”

“Just keep that gun nearby. Just in case.”

“Will do. Love to have a reason to pop a cap in Ray Iadanza’s ass.”

“He shows up there, don’t shoot him in the ass. You shoot that piece of shit in the head.”

“Shit,” Will says softly.

“No. I don’t mean that. I wanna be the one to shoot him, so you do what you need to do to secure him for me. But I’m thinkin’ he won’t show there. Keep you posted.”

“Kill,” he says, sounding shook.

“Sorry, man. Forget I said that. Just keep my wife safe.”

“Don’t need to forget it. Not sure if you noticed, bro, but I’m not a kid anymore. Anything you need, Kill, just let me know. Even if it involves difficult shit.”

“Thanks, Will. I know you’re not a kid. I’m proud of the man you’ve become.”

He holds the phone and there’s silence, but it’s filled with emotion.

“If there’s anything to be proud of, it’s down to you,” he finally says. “I’ve seen shit lately, working for Tommy and Dario. No longer the green youth, Kill.”

I grind my teeth.

“I can help if you need help,” he offers.

“Gotta go. I’ll stay in touch. Thanks for being there. You’ve got the most important job right now. I can focus on fixing some bullshit because I know Violet’s safe.”

“Anything, man. My honor.”

“Thanks.”

I end the call and sit down at the kitchen table, dropping my head. Fuck sakes.

Ten minutes later, I use my app to peek into the master bedroom at home and Violet’s crawling into bed. I look in on the living room and Will’s got the remote, but sits looking alert rather than sprawled out.

I go back to the master bedroom view. The lights are off, but the night vision mode shows me her rolling to my side of the bed, hugging my pillow. I hear her sob.

An ache spreads through my chest. I close out of the app and dial her number.

She answers on the first ring, her voice scratchy.

“Killian?”

“I love you,” I say.

She sniffles. “I love you, too.”

“I’m so fucking sorry, baby.”

She sniffles again. “Are you watching me?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s creepy,” she says.

“I know. But that’s the man you married.”

“I think I’m figuring that out,” she says softly.

“Can you deal?” I ask.

“I can deal,” she whispers. “As long as I have you and as long as you’re honest, I’ll deal.”

My eyes drift shut as her words wash over me.

“I’m gonna try to sleep now,” she says.

Raking my free hand through my hair, I empty my lungs. “Call me when you wake up.”

“Okay. Unless you watch me until I wake up and then you’ll know I’m up. Creepy creeper.”

I chuckle. “Good night, beautiful.”

“Good night, Stalky stalker.”

I chuckle at her being a goofball at a time like this. Nobody but Violet could give me a reason to smile in the middle of this bullshit.

I end the call and stare into the fire for a few minutes before checking in on the app on her again. It’s dark and she’s breathing evenly.

My phone rings at eleven thirty Sunday morning.

I’m expecting it to be Violet, who I spoke to briefly at eight thirty just for a minute after she told me she was awake but feeling morning sickness, so she’d be trying to go back to sleep. I looked in on her half an hour ago and she was asleep, the box of ginger snaps I bought last night on the pillow beside her. The phone call is Jag, who is not my biggest fan at the moment. Understandably. I’m sure I’m not his conniving twin sister’s biggest fan either.

“Jessa called, Kill. And she had a fuckin’ lot to say, man.”

“Where is she? She still with him?”

“She’s at a diner in Arcata. He dropped her off near there.”

“You got someone who can pick her up? Bring her to me?”

“I’m having a rental car dropped off to her. She’s heading to me.”

“No, Jag. Straight to me. It’s urgent. I need her here as soon as possible. You got a number for her? You got someone in the sky heading there to look for him?”

“She’s pickin’ up a throwaway phone. He tossed hers. She’s comin’ here, Kill. Listen, man... we go way back, but I’m not

sending my sister to you until I get her settled. She's been through a trauma."

"He hurt her?"

"Bout time you fuckin' asked that, Coulter."

I grind my teeth. He's right, of course; Jessa is the least of my concerns, but I get it.

"I apologize, Jag. Fuck, man. There's a lot at stake here. Is she all right?"

"She's Jessa. Made of Kevlar; you know her. But she's pissed. And so am I."

"You're pissed?" I ask. "At her I'm assuming, because it was her scheming to wrap Tony around her little finger that got her where she is, not me. She's been trying to get to me – showing up at my house, my clubs, and she found a way to scheme and *that* is what got her where she is."

He sighs.

"What did she say?" I ask.

"She had a lot to say, but man, that's probably her callin' again. I'll call you back. And yes, I've got a chopper on the way to the Arcata area lookin' for him."

"Perfect. Thanks. Call Tino?"

"Already did."

"Tell her she better not say a word to anyone until talking to me. It's life or death."

"Yeah," he clips. "Pretty sure she gets that. Call you back."

I don't have time to manage Jagger's feelings while I've got this shit show on my hands. Tony is on thin ice with me right now, too. I had to wake him every two hours to make sure he was gonna wake up in between waiting on updates from Tino who'd had zero leads so far. But now that we know where Jess is, it's only a matter of time before we find Iadanza.

Tony's been up since ten o'clock and I've slept maybe ten minutes, sitting up, nodding off.

He approaches with a mug of coffee that he sets down for me.

"Boss, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I know," I say. "Too bad sorry doesn't undo the damage."

I'm a fucking hypocrite, of course, because of the apologies I've tried to lay on Violet.

"I fucked up, and I'm sorry for that. It won't happen again and as soon as the meds finish wearin' off, I'll be on the case to find the fuckhead for ya."

"Damn right you fucked up. And you almost wound up dead for it."

"Kill. She's... I mean, you know..." He shrugs.

I roll my eyes. "Jessa was tryin' to get her hooks into me. You spent a couple days with her because she's using you to try to get to me. How did you not see through it?"

"She said you were blowin' her visit out of proportion. She's thinkin' of moving back to Portland, and as soon as you told her you're married, she backed off."

"Then suddenly, you're not getting my texts but I'm getting responses you've never sent and you're showing up here, doing a job I pay you well to do, but you're doin' it with your mind on the bitch in the car outside instead of making sure the prisoner doesn't trip you into a shit bucket, choke you out, pour dissolved pain meds down your throat, and then rob you and steal your car and your new girl?"

"I can't figure out how he got the pain pills. I gave him one last time, then left them in the cabinet above the fridge like always."

"I was fuckin' here yesterday, numbskull!" I growl. "I gave him the pill bottle, hoping he'd take 'em all and then I wouldn't have to worry about paying through the nose to send

him out of my hair to a place that would let me sleep at night and let my wife get on with her life.”

“Your wife?”

“Forget about my wife,” I growl. “Jessa is a girl I used to fuck. You know this. You’ve known Jag even longer than you’ve worked for me so you’ve gotta know what his sister is about. You also know she was a pain in my ass which meant I ended it. You saw her handiwork firsthand when you escorted her out of my apartment that last time when she trashed it. What the fuck, man? She comes to town to hassle me, finds out I’m married and therefore not interested and even with the track record you’ve got some clue she has, you decide to not only fall for her games, but also to leave her unattended with your fuckin’ cell phone and then bring her here.”

“I know.”

“Here where I’ve got someone imprisoned in the basement.”

He hangs his head and sits down. “You said a few days back that you were hoping you’d be transporting the prisoner out of here soon, so the location, I told myself it wasn’t such a big deal since in a coupla days, he’d be shipped out and I wouldn’t likely hafta come back. And I didn’t bring her in so she’d have no clue what the errand was about.”

“You look in the mirror your throat, man? You see that? He took your gun and half-strangled you. He could’ve shot you. This was a guy with a bum knee and broken ribs cuffed with a three-foot chain and he got the better of you, a guy twice his size with a gun. He almost fuckin’ killed you because your head was hung up on someone who was usin’ you.”

“I gotta find her,” he says.

“Have you heard a goddamn word I’ve said? Get your fuckin’ mind off your cock and listen to me.”

He looks at me with a grimace. “She’s Jag’s sister. I wanna find her for him, too.”

“She’s on her way to Jag. She’s in a rental car. She’s fine.”

He breathes out relief.

“You aren’t in love with her, Tony. You’ve spent a few days with a fuckin’ siren. You’re just drunk on her cunt. That’s how she wanted it. Think about it. She read my text and answered it, then deleted it. Let me guess, she was pushy about comin’ with you last night. Probably used her pussy as payment. Right?”

He sighs.

I continue, “I’m right. And if you’d made it back to your car, she’d have pushed to find a way inside to scope the place out. Or come back after ditching you to investigate it herself. She knew I was sending you on a task and she was being nosy about it because that was her goal, to get more information about me thinking she can get her hooks into me again.”

He says nothing for a minute and then nods. “Yeah. You’re right. I know, Kill. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

My phone rings. Tino. I grab it.

36

Violet

I'm stuffing a warm, delicious, soft gingerbread cookie in my mouth, marveling at the miraculous ability it has to soothe my nausea temporarily when the lobby phone rings. I frown and wash down the cookie, my second one so far today, with some milk and answer.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Coulter?"

"Yes?"

"Company for you. Gates. Party of four."

Huh?

"Mrs. Coulter?"

"Uh...Oh. Um..." Shit. My family? What are they doing here?

"Can you describe them, please?"

Is it really my family or is this a trick?

"Yes, ma'am. Dark haired woman. Mom-type. Man in his fifties, I think. Salt and pepper mustache and beard. Tall teenage boy. Older gentleman with grey hair."

"Okay, send them up. No wait. They seem okay? They're acting normal? No one else is there with them, right?"

"No ma'am. Everything... uh... *seems* okay." He sounds perplexed.

I breathe out relief. It's not out of the question to imagine Ray using them to get here, to get to me. I wouldn't have thought it before, but the things I've learned about him recently – that he brought a gun to Killian's club, that he scammed Mrs. Shear out of her life savings, then watching what he did with the guard last night – I would no longer put anything past him.

I hurry to the master bedroom. Killian's brother is using Killian's laptop at the desk, phone to his ear.

"Will. My family's here," I say.

"Call you back," he says into the phone and hangs up. He frowns. "You sure they're alone?" He closes the laptop.

"I think so. He described them."

"I'll answer the door," he insists and then heads out of the bedroom, me following.

The gun is stuffed into the back of his waistband. I shudder.

How is this my life?

A minute later, there's a knock on the door and as Will answers, my heart hammers because he's got one hand on the doorknob and the other hand behind his back poised to grab that gun.

Thankfully, it *is* just Mom, Dad, Cody, and Grampa. Once Will lets them in I say hello and introduce them to him while I get hugs. I notice he's untucked his shirt so that it now covers the gun.

"I know Killian said he'd be ordering food, to just bring ourselves, but I brought a chocolate cake for dessert. I hope that's okay. Ice cream, too." Mom heads to the kitchen with the bag in her hand. "I can't believe that young man at the desk called me a Mom-type. I need a makeover." She smooths her hair back.

"You're a hot mama, don't you listen to him," Dad says, setting a box on the floor, then kissing her. He then gives me an eye roll. "She's gonna stew on that for at least a month."

Cody is carrying a big cardboard box marked, *Christmas*. He puts it on the coffee table and looks around.

"Um, this is a surprise," I remark. "I didn't know you guys were coming."

"Nice tree," Cody says, gesturing. "And this place is sah-weet."

“Killian told you to come?” I ask.

Mom looks over at me and chats happily while unpacking the cake and ice cream. “He called me last night and invited us to come over and help you two trim your tree. I’m so happy you two are working things out. I guess we’ve played phone tag, or you would’ve told me.”

I give my head a shake. “Killian invited you over today to help us decorate the tree? Last night?”

“Oh. Maybe it was a surprise. Darn, I’ve ruined it. These counters are gorgeous, Violet! This entire space. Oh my.”

“Killian isn’t here. He had a... uh... thing. I’m not sure we’re going to be doing the tree today. I don’t know what time he’ll be back.”

“Oh.” Mom sounds disappointed. “What a lovely tree. And this place, honey. Wow. I love it. At least we got to see it finally.”

“Let me find out how much longer he’ll be. Gimme a sec,” I say. “Here, sit. I’ll put on coffee.”

“I can do the coffee,” Mom says.

“Ooh, cookies!” Grampa ambles over to the counter.

“One sec,” I head down the hallway calling back, “Stay put. I’ll be back to give you a tour in a minute.”

I head into the bedroom and immediately call Killian.

“Baby,” he answers. “Sorry. Everything okay? Can’t talk if it is. Can I call you back?”

I talk fast, my voice laced with panic, “You invited my parents over? They’re here with Cody and Grampa and talking about decorating the tree and staying for dinner.”

There’s a pause and then he grumbles, “Fuck.”

“Yep.”

“Shit. I forgot,” he says.

“You told me you forget nothing,” I complain.

“I called when I went to the store last night before things went sideways. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, yeah. Surprise!” I whisper-shriek, then rub my face with exasperation.

“I’ll call you back in a few minutes. I’m in the middle of... shit, there’s my other line. It’s Nino. Gotta go.”

“Okay, but...”

He’s already hung up.

Nino? Nino that I met at Dario’s wedding? Nino who said he’s in ‘waste management’ as a joke? My blood has gone icy.

I drum my fingers for a minute, trying to fortify myself, think up an excuse without showing them that things are crazy when Killian phones me again.

“Hello?” I answer on the first ring.

“Tell them to stay. I’ll be back in a couple hours.”

“You what?”

“I’ll be back soon. Tell them to stay.”

“I don’t think I can do this,” I say. “I’m a wreck and they’ll notice, and-”

“No baby. It’s okay. Let them stay. Chill. Raymond turned himself in to the cops.”

“What? What?”

“He was about to be picked up by one of the guys and knew he was cornered. Jagger had a chopper overhead who tracked him, and Nino was a minute away from pullin’ in. Limped straight up to a cop car in a gas station and turned himself in. I’ll be home soon. I’ve got shit to sort, but will get the ball rolling on some of that on the phone on my way back and then I can spend a couple hours with your folks.”

“Oh my God. What? What?” My brain is going at a million RPM.

“I know, baby. I know. Do not stress. I’ll figure it out. Nothing I can do for the time being while he’s being booked. Tell your parents to stay, that I’ll be back soon. We’ll do dinner with them and the tree and go from there.”

“No. No, no. This is nuts. We can’t pretend nothing’s going on. I mean, I can’t. Clearly I don’t have that same skill you’ve got.” You can’t mistake the animosity in my voice.

There’s a beat of silence.

“I don’t want you fretting about this,” he says firmly. “I’ll figure it out. I’m about to call a specialized cleaning crew to come make sure there’s no trace of anything downstairs. Nothing I can do for the next couple hours, so I’m comin’ home while that’s bein’ done. Let’s do our tree today like we planned, and we’ll tackle the shit with Iadanza from there.”

“But Killian... what if he says something and they come and arrest you right in front of my family?”

“Then I’ll know at least that you’ve got your folks there. That you won’t be by yourself if that happens.”

There’s a lump lodged in the center of my throat. I hold onto my phone, closing my eyes.

“This is my fault,” he says, voice low. “And I’m gonna fix it. I’ve already got a plan in motion so please believe that. Stress is not good for you or the baby. Let me worry about this. You just worry about staying calm and growing our child.”

“A plan? What plan?”

“What did I just say?” he asks.

I growl. “If you think you can sweep stuff under the rug and I’ll just wave my arms and say, whatever, you don’t know me at all, Killian Coulter.”

“Listen to me, Violet Coulter,” he says, and it sounds like there’s humor in his voice. “I’ve always got a contingency plan ready to go. It’s how my brain works. Let me wrap up here and I’ll be home soon. Order food. Thai? Chinese? Whatever. And stop worrying.”

“I don’t think this is your best idea.”

“I’ve had a few less than stellar ideas lately. I know this. But the distraction will be good and we need to get that tree decorated, right? Tell ‘em about the baby. Make it a happy day and get your mind off the shit. Plus then they’ll leave early knowing you’re pregnant and need your rest.”

“I mean...”

“Because I’m gonna be home soon but I haven’t slept so I’ll probably fade soon after I get home. Okay? C’mon.”

“Okay,” I sigh. “But I can’t help but freak out.”

“Try to trust me. I know it’s hard. But can you try?”

“Ugh.”

“Good girl. See you soon. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” I whisper.

My hands shake as I hang up.

A minute later, there’s a knock on my bedroom door.

Will is there when I open it.

“Oh hey. Sorry to desert you out there,” I say. “Killian is on his way.”

“Not a problem,” he smiles wide. “And yeah, I’m headin’ out. Kill just messaged and told me it’s cool to leave, so, I’m gonna hit the gym.”

“Do you want to come back after your workout? We’re gonna order food in and decorate the tree. Things are kooky with this thing Killian has going on, so I could use some extra distractions, too.” My family will interrogate me less if there’s someone here they don’t know.

“Yeah. Sure.” He smiles big.

“Great. Come back whenever.”

“I’ll skip my workout. Stay here and help you with your folks.”

I breathe out relief. “Thank you, but you can work out downstairs if you need. Then you still get your workout in, and we’ll have dinner when you get back. I’ll get you the key if you want?”

“Works for me.”

“Thanks again for hanging out with me.”

“Not a problem; that’s what family is for.” He gives me a quick hug.

After I see him to the door, I see my family are all out on the balcony, checking out the view.

Having everyone over feels like a bad idea. A really bad idea. But the alternative, being stuck in my head for the next hour or two until Killian gets here? Probably even worse.

Twenty minutes later, I’ve given the tour of the apartment and we’re having coffee (They are. I’m drinking water) and the baked gingerbread cookies are disappearing fast, which has me thinking I need to bake some more.

My grandfather opens the first box marked *Christmas* to show me some decorations that have been in our family all my life.

“Your grandmother would’ve wanted you to have these.”

Her ceramic light-up Christmas tree that was always on the mantle, the quilted tree skirt she always had under her tree wrapped around it. The second box has the three pretty snow globes that I always got excited about as a little girl.

“This box even smells like her Nivea cream.” I burst into tears after leaning in to take a whiff of the tissue paper the first snow globe is wrapped in.

“Aw, shit. I didn’t bring this stuff to get you bawlin’,” Grampa teases.

Me crying makes my mom cry. This makes Cody make a joke (but his eyes are a little bright too), and though Dad rolls his eyes at us, he’s got a big smile on his face.

“You two gonna be okay?” Mom asks. “You and your new husband?”

I nod. “Trying.”

Mom moves to the kitchen and gestures with her chin for me to follow.

I meet her by the fridge. She dabs at my eyes with a paper towel.

“Marriage isn’t always easy,” she advises, cupping my cheek. “But if you find the right man, it’ll be worth the effort. I really like him. Want to tell me what’s been happening this past few weeks?”

I shake my head.

Her face falls. And it feels like it did back when I was with Ray and shutting her out. I’m sure that’s what she’s feeling right now. And I really don’t want her to give up on me again, because I know deep down that she did that once already.

I make a snap-judgement and lean in. “I’m pregnant,” I whisper.

Mom jolts in surprise. “You are?”

I nod and give her a shaky smile.

Her face splits into a wide smile. “Ah. That makes sense. It was a surprise and caused you to question things? I thought you were on the pill.”

“Um... a lot of crazy things happened all at once. And we really don’t know one another as well as we should. I panicked. And... needed a minute to think.”

“You did get married fast, but sweetie, Grandma and Grampa got married after knowing each other five weeks. And we all know they lasted fifty-one years before she died.”

“What’s this?” my father asks.

Might as well let the cat the rest of the way out of the bag.

“I’m... I’m pregnant,” I announce, making sure I’m loud enough for Grampa and Cody to also hear. “We were going to do a Christmas Day reveal, even that might’ve been a bit early to be telling anyone, but you guys caught me feeling not my best and... I evidently can’t keep a secret.”

Mom wraps her arms around me. “I’m so happy for you. Do you want us to go?” she asks. “Do you need to rest?”

“I...” A pang of guilt hits me. “Let’s see how I feel. I seem to feel better when I eat gingerbread cookies, so maybe you could make me a hot chocolate and throw another batch in the oven?”

“Ginger is good for nausea. Actually, those pregnancy lollipops help, too. Do you have those? The girl at work, you know the one with the brother that used to go to school with Colleen? She swore by them.”

“No. What are they called? I’ll buy some.”

“You need fresh ginger, some mint tea, and those ginger pills. Have you bought crackers? Plain crackers. And Jell-O. And Gatorade. I should run out and get you some supplies.”

“I’ve been eating a lot of crackers. And promptly evacuating them almost immediately afterwards. Cookies work better.”

“You sit there and have a cookie. I’ll nip out to the store for some of those lollies.” She kisses my cheek. “A grandbaby!” she squeals. “When? How far along?”

“Just about six weeks, I think. So, August. I had a bit of a scare, though. A bit of spotting a few days ago. On the meatloaf night. That’s why... uh... why I’m here. Killian got super-protective and insisted he take care of me.”

“Good man,” my father says. “He taking *good* care of you?”

I nod, a lump in my throat. It’s kind of a lie if you take into account the stress I’ve been under since last night, and lately, but Killian is trying. “He’s trying,” I say.

Mom clasps her necklace and sighs. And then she sobers.

“Don’t worry. I bled with your brother in the first trimester.

Terrifying. But he was fine. Just happens to some. Just take it easy, sweetheart. Let your husband pamper you. Sleep as much as you can. And take some vitamins. I'll buy you some prenatal vitamins."

"I already started those, Mom."

"Congrats, munchkin," Dad says, leaning over and kissing my head. Grampa smiles and squeezes my hand, then kisses it.

"I'll miss havin' you at the house with me. But this is where you belong. Glad he's steppin' up."

"Thanks Grampa. He wasn't ever trying to not step up. I just needed space."

"Well, whatever the case, I'm glad you're workin' on it."

Cody smiles and leans over, talking low. "That's crazy. My sister havin' a baby." He then lowers his voice even further.

"Real glad it's with this guy and not the last one."

"You and me both," I whisper and give my brother a hug.

He reaches for another cookie and I growl in a voice a couple octaves lower than my usual voice. "Those are for the baby. Stop it."

"Finally, I'm no longer at the bottom of the totem pole." He pops one into his mouth.

I ruffle his hair and pull another package out of the fridge so I can bake them.

Killian was right. This distraction is helpful. And it's making things feel a little more real.

Morning sickness? Real. Worry about spotting? Also real. But talking to your parents and other family members about having a baby? That's taking things to a new level.

"I'll come with ya," Grampa says as Mom heads for the door.

"I need somethin'. What are we havin' for supper, Violet?"

"Chinese food, I think. Is that okay?" I ask this knowing it will be more than okay with Grampa. I decide I should put out the

pizza Killian brought home last night, too. I don't want to take a chance eating any and getting sick. I can't chance ruining my love for pizza.

Grampa smiles and wrings his hands. "Sure is. Make sure you get me lots of those egg rolls. And deep-fried chicken wings. Deep fried. Not air-fried."

"Just one, Dad. They're not good for you. You're not just coming with me to buy a chocolate bar, are you?"

"Three," Grampa corrects. "And I need my lottery tickets."

My brother chuckles.

"And a chocolate bar and some pork rinds," Grampa adds under his breath.

"We already have chocolate cake," Mom says as she opens the front door.

The alarm starts blaring and scares us all. I rush over and disarm it.

"Sorry. Should've said. Killian likes me to keep that on when he's not home and I put it on when Will was leaving."

"I like this guy more 'n more," Grampa remarks. "And can never have too much chocolate, Daph."

"Back in a jiffy," Mom says, looping her handbag over her shoulder.

I nab my phone and tap out a text to Killian.

I told my family about the baby. It's a helpful distraction.

I lift the lobby phone and tell the desk guard that my mom and grandfather are going out and to let them back in when they get back.

As I'm saying goodbye to the guard, my cell phone rings so I rush to the kitchen counter to grab it. It's a blocked number.

I answer it.

"Hello?"

“Collect call from... *Ray*. Do you accept the charges?” It’s an automated greeting with Ray’s voice saying his name.

My stomach flip-flops. A text alert comes in. I pull the phone away from my ear to glance at the screen.

Killian: Great news.

“Yes,” I say into the phone and quickly leave the room. “Back in a minute guys,” I call over my shoulder to Dad and Cody.

There’s a brief moment of silence, and then, “Violet?” Ray’s voice.

“Why are you calling me?” I demand, my heart galloping hard.

“I got out of that place,” he says. “But then I turned myself in. Got one call.”

“Well, it shouldn’t have been to me. We broke up. Remember? I’m married, and-”

“Listen – I called you ‘cuz I need you to pass on a message. I’m not sayin’ a word. Not a single word. I just need to be left alone. Tell him to leave me be. I’ll be in here, doin’ whatever time I get and then that’s it. When I get out, I’ll leave town, go as far away as I can go. I say nothin’ about nothin’ and he just lets me be. Get me? I also have a thing in place so if anything happens to me, he’ll get found out. I sent something somewhere before I turned myself in.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say.

“But pass that message on,” he says. “Okay?”

I hold the phone. “Is that it?” I finally snap.

“Vi?” he calls out.

“What?”

“If you can, leave. Get away. Evil, babe. Pure fuckin’ evil. Not just a criminal, he’s a psycho who likes to play with his prey before he finishes things. I think you know that. I know what I saw in your eyes the day you found out what was bein’ skirted

and I can only hope you're not stuck in a place you don't wanna be."

"That's rich coming from you," I mutter.

"I know I fucked up with you 'n me. I know it was all on me. From my heart, Vi, I know it was my fault and I regret a lot. For what that's worth. You deserved better. Wish I had it in me to give to you. And... I know my opinion means nothin' to you no more. But that guy?" His voice drops an octave. "Get as far away from him as you can as soon as you can. Please. You deserve better than that, too. Abort that baby and fucking run."

I shakily hit *end* without saying goodbye.

It takes a second for my lungs to work. When they do, I blow out a breath, a long one.

And my mind is assaulted with images of Ray. Images of Ray before things went to shit. That enigmatic smile. Moments together that were romantic. Our trip to Vegas. Our first Christmas. Him giving me a piggyback through the zoo on our third date because I had a raging and bleeding blister on my foot and didn't want to leave before I got to see the polar bears. Him skipping with me on his back, making me giggle.

And then it shatters in my mind and I get a faster-paced montage of things smashing, my little doll in the purple dress, of him shouting at me, of me cowering and feeling despair. Loneliness. Palpable sadness. An empty wallet. Emptiness inside me as I lost myself and pushed everyone else away.

Just one evening spent with us and Killian saw what was there and made it a mission to lift me up out of that pot of boiling water I was living in. He saved me from that. I really do believe it would've been bad if he hadn't stepped in when he did. Even if what he did was calculated and manipulative. He did save me. And he has shown me he loves me. Repeatedly.

And I'm getting stronger with him. I feel like it, anyway.

Ray kept me away from my loved ones. Killian sent them over to cheer me up. Ray let me deal with every single problem we

had, the bulk of them coming from him screwing up. Killian tries to keep my life sweet, to put a protective bubble around me.

Even if he's dark. Even if he's got demons. He's shown me time and time again he's here for me.

But now I also know I need to find a way to stand on my own in case what's happening now keeps happening. More drama. More danger. I don't want to be a victim, a timid and broken person just waiting for the next catastrophe to make me feel paralyzed. I don't want to be in a bubble of bliss if it's a lie.

I hear noise from the other room. My father's and brother's laughter snaps me out of my daze. And then I call Killian.

"Hey baby," he answers.

Sounds like I'm on speaker. He must be in the car.

The sound of his voice echoes in my heart. Do I want to stay with Killian? Yes. But not ever in a position where I'll be blindsided like this again.

I want my husband. But I need to make sure I have the ability to withstand anything. Because if this drama with Ray is going to be over, really over, I need to know I can survive anything that life throws at me. And being married to Killian, a man who has darkness in him, a man who has demons, this might not be the last time things get scary.

I have to be strong. For me. And for this baby I'm carrying.

"You there?"

"I'm here. Are you alone?"

"Yeah I'm driving."

"He phoned me," I say.

"What?"

"Used his phone call to tell me that he won't say anything if you leave him alone. Says just let him be and made it clear

that he took efforts so that if anything happens to him, the authorities will find out about what you did.”

“What did you say?”

“I denied knowing what he was talking about.”

“I’ll be home in an hour. Your family’s there?”

“Mom and Grampa ran to the store to buy morning sickness supplies. Dad and Cody are here. Will’s coming back for dinner.”

“I’ll see you soon,” he says.

“Okay. Bye.”

And I’m shaking a little when I end the call. Adrenalin, I guess. But I’m also sort of relieved.

I don’t know if Ray really will keep his mouth shut. But I do know that for at least today, Killian isn’t hurt. He also hasn’t hurt anyone. Ray is in police custody, promising to keep his mouth shut. Do I believe him? I don’t know. He might have been tortured and terrorized enough to truly fear Killian in a way that could keep him quiet. I don’t know if I can trust that, but at least my husband is on his way home.

I make a decision. Today, I’m going to focus on my family, on getting that tree decorated, and on being able to breathe a bit easier, even if it’s just for a little while.

Killian

I get a text message from someone named Hugo who works for a company called JC Cleanup Services. Nino recommended this company that offers specialized cleaning services that take care of all sorts of problems (particularly when you want no trace of a crime, a person, or that you'd been somewhere) that the beach house will be clean in two more hours. This means there's nothing tracing Raymond Iadanza to the property. That's fast. And a relief.

When I step off the elevator, Violet's at the door, paying a delivery guy for food.

I kiss my wife quickly, locking eyes for a brief moment that's loaded with emotion before taking the food to the counter.

Sitting on a couch are her father, brother, and grandfather. Violet's mother is setting my table with cutlery and napkins for everyone. She waves, face bright with happiness.

"Be with you all in just a minute," I call out and head toward the hall so I can change my clothes.

Will is coming down the hall from the guest room, hair wet.

"Used the shower in the guest room. Had a workout."

"Cool, man."

"Violet invited me to decorate the tree with you guys," Will says.

"That's great," I say. "Glad you're here." And then I add under my breath, "Thanks for last night."

"No problem, bro. You need help?"

"Don't know," I say. "Keep ya posted."

"Trouble brewing in your eyes, man. I read you."

“Later, okay?”

“Yeah, Kill. But you should know, I can handle it. The shit I’ve seen lately?” His eyes widen.

I bristle. Another mention of *shit* with the Ferranos that has me grinding my teeth. Knowing Dario was trying to live cleaner is why I sent Will his way. My protective instincts are clearly still rampant when it comes to my brother.

“Anything you need, Kill. I mean that. Put your piece in your desk drawer.”

Could be my mind playing tricks but I’m pretty sure my brother’s eyes don’t look as innocent as they did the last time I saw him.

“Thanks, bro. You good?” I ask, making a mental note to move it and the gun I’ve got on me back where it belongs.

He swallows thickly, but then nods. “Yeah.”

He’s not good. But looks like he’s tryin’ to be. I resist the urge to ask more questions. He’s a man now. He’ll let me know if he needs me.

“Be back in five. Just gonna change.”

“Yeah, man,” Will says.

When I come out, Will is still by the mouth of the hallway, doing something on his cell.

Violet approaches us. “Tell him the news. I told my family before he got here but figured you’d want to tell your brother yourself, so I’ve asked everyone to not say anything and I think my mom is about to burst.”

“I am!” Daphne Gates calls out, eyes alight with excitement.

Will’s eyebrows jut up. “What’s up?”

“Violet’s pregnant,” I say, deciding I need to take my brother out for a drink, spend some time talking to him. Make sure

he's all right. I had a few instances of working on shit with the Ferranos that shook me.

Willie throws his massive arms around me and hugs me. And then he pulls Violet in for a group hug. She gives him a big smile with dimples and fuck, looking at her, I fucking love this girl.

“Congrats, guys. That’s awesome. And totally explains all the cookies.”

Violet laughs.

Will releases us and I put my arm around her and kiss her temple. “What’s for dinner? Chinese takeout? I haven’t had anything since yesterday.”

“Oh. Yeah. Enough to feed about twenty people. I’m not sure if I can hold any of it down, but I’m certainly going to try. And judging by the amount of stuff I ordered when I saw the menu, you might want to brace. Once I get through this first trimester, I have plans to gain about a hundred pounds. I’m going to eat for pleasure. A lot of pleasure.”

I smile at her. “Sounds like a plan. Maybe I’ll gain a hundred with you.”

She startles. “Don’t you dare.”

“What? Not lookin’ forward to the dad bod?” Cody steps up and reaches out to shake my hand. “Congrats, man. Happy for you guys.”

“No dad-bod,” Violet warns, talking to the room instead of me. “Not until we’ve been married at least ten years.”

“Deal,” I say, heart lifting.

Ten years. Fuck, yeah. Forever, baby.

I give the kid a back slap and then I’m getting a handshake from Violet’s grandfather and then her father, who goes from shaking my hand to giving me a hug.

“I like my dad bod,” Kev says. “Tacos versus abs? Tacos win every time.” Kev playfully socks me in the gut. “You got a lot

of work cut out for ya gettin' rid of those. Start tonight."

"Sounds like a plan," I say.

"Work out hard enough, you can have both tacos and abs," Will interjects.

"Teach my husband your ways, please," Daphne jokes as she approaches and grasps my face in both hands, excitement in her eyes. "I'm going to spoil this baby rotten. Fair warning."

"So am I," I say with a shrug. "And this baby's mother, too."

"Grampa bought champagne when we went to the store, kids," Violet's mom continues looking pleased with what I've just said, "Sparkling alcohol-free apple cider for the mommy-to-be. Come help me pour the champagne, Kev. We'll have a toast, then let's eat so we can decorate this beautiful tree."

"Look," Violet says. "My grampa brought me some of my grandmother's decorations."

"That's awesome, baby. Thank you for that, Mr. Gabriel. We'll take good care of them."

Violet's grandfather gives me a thumbs up without looking in my direction. He's poking through the takeout bags on the counter. His eyes light up as he lifts a cardboard box and pulls out an egg roll, then gives the room a big smile before he bites into it.

In the middle of dinner, Violet's mother pipes up with, "Are you going to be a stay-home mommy or are you planning to put the baby in daycare and go back to work?"

Violet's mouth is full of fried noodles, so she raises her index finger as she sips from her glass to wash it down.

"We haven't thought that far," I answer for her. "But whatever Violet wants to do is fine with me."

"I could retire early and watch the baby while you work," Violet's mom's eyes light with excitement.

Kev gives her a double take.

Violet answers, “I don’t know yet. Actually, I got fired on Friday, so I have plenty of time on my hands to weigh out my list of options.” She shrugs and reaches for a spring roll.

“Fired?” Kev sits up straighter. “Why?”

Violet waves her hand nonchalantly, which surprises me.

“I’m suing them. Unlawful dismissal. Discrimination. My boss is a witch and I have reason to believe she made stuff up to make me look bad. I’m not worried about it, but I’m not letting her get away with it either. I think I might take over managing procurement for Killian’s clubs.”

My eyes swing to her and now it’s my face that lights up.

“Family business?” I say. “Sounds good to me.”

“You say that now, but we haven’t started negotiating my salary yet,” Violet warns, biting her spring roll.

“Name your price,” I invite.

They’ve all just gone home; we’ve walked them to the door. As I lock it and set the alarm, Violet’s eyes have changed.

“What’s happening?” she asks.

“No updates,” I say, taking her into my arms and holding her close.

She melts into me in a way that makes me weak in the knees for a second. The relief I feel at her reaction to me is hitting me in the feels. And then I feel a surge of strength. It’s clear for the first time to me that love can knock you down, and it can also make you stronger.

“I was so scared last night,” she says, looking up at me.

“Soon, you’ll never have to be afraid of that fuckhead again,” I drop a kiss on her throat. “Because I’m gonna take care of it.”

“So, you’re not gonna... you’re not just gonna let him do his time in prison, and... and leave it?”

“I’ve been weighing options,” I say, dropping another kiss on her mouth.

She frowns and as her mouth opens for another question, I put my index finger to it.

“Let’s not worry about it tonight.”

I move my finger and lean in for another kiss, this time touching my tongue to hers.

She pulls back. “Not worry about it? It’s been a nightmarish twenty-four hours, and this is the first time we can talk about it. I wanna talk about it, Killian.”

I sigh and take her hand and kiss it before I walk her to the couch and sit down, pulling her to my side.

“The tree looks amazing,” I say.

The apartment just has this tree in the corner by the window, white lights twinkling, ornaments and other decorations shimmering. The fireplace mantle has a 1970s-style ceramic lit Christmas tree on it and I fuckin’ love the tacky-looking thing. Violet’s grandmother apparently made it in a craft class.

My nan had one too almost the same, except hers was green and this one is white. My kid brother knocked Nan’s over, and it smashed into a million pieces the year before the last Christmas we had with her. We talked that over tonight when Will and I put all the little lights in this one and set it up. It was something we did together every year before Nan died, back when Christmas meant something. We always built gingerbread houses the same day. It was good to share that moment with him. We didn’t build one today, but we did eat some of Violet’s gingerbread while we decorated, and it brought me back to some nice Christmas memories.

The whole night was nice, really. A little bickering between Violet’s parents, but the kind that doesn’t make you feel uncomfortable because it’s not a real fight, just a married couple bantering. They finished each other’s sentences and gently teased one another throughout the evening. And Violet’s mom griping about Mr. Gabriel overindulging and

him sticking his tongue out at her when her back was turned was comical.

Cody made smartass remarks all night long and cracked us all up with his dry humor. He and Will hit it off despite that Will's six years older than him. They seem to have plenty in common and they exchanged numbers with a plan to meet up and work out together next week. Will offered to take him to his gym and show him how to use the equipment since Cody commented he was tired of being a beanpole and wanted to gain muscle.

Violet's mother blurted at least three dozen baby names throughout the evening and Violet seemed to enjoy it.

Violet seemed happy and comfortable, though her eyes hit me a few times with lots of emotion in them. She ate a big plate of dinner and then, halfway through decorating the tree, she wasn't feeling well. She didn't throw up, though, which felt like progress. She had a morning sickness sucker and we all wrapped things up quickly after that so she could rest.

I see how tired she looks. How worn out. How worried.

I snuggle her close.

"Don't change the subject," she admonishes.

I sigh. "What? It looks good." I gesture to the tree. "But yeah, I can't just leave him be. It makes us sitting ducks."

She pulls away from me, looking distraught.

"He'd eventually rat, baby. It's a fact."

"You can't kill him." She shakes her head and glares at me.

"I don't want you to worry about this. Let me handle it." I kiss her again.

"Stop kissing me!"

"What?" I laugh.

"You're trying to distract me and it's not gonna work. Not if you're murdering him. No. And what about that stuff he said?"

About if anything happens to him, the cops will know everything you did.”

“Baby,” I say, bone-tired suddenly. “Chill out. He’s probably bluffing about that. And even if he isn’t, I’m not worried about it. I’m not stupid. Despite the fact that Tony was stupid last night and that I was careless enough that you figured out what was going on, I’m usually pretty savvy. I’m not worried about this. I’m on it and I’m telling you, it’s not going to be a problem.”

“Not cool! You’re still acting like you don’t have to fill me in. That you can keep me in the dark. And that you’re okay to deceive me.” She pulls away.

“Settle down and let me handle this. All I fuckin’ want is you to be relaxed, stress-free, and for you to let me take care of you. Let me do that. It’s what I want. It’s my fucking honor to protect you, to give you the life you deserve. Please let me do that.”

She rises and points at me with accusation. “I can’t let you kill him. I won’t get over it, Killian. I won’t be able to forgive you. I know you did what you did when you were a teenager out of what that did to you. But it’s been eating you alive ever since. I mean, obviously. By how you’ve handled this Ray situation, it’s very obvious that doing that has haunted you. And if you do it again...”

“Violet, baby,” I rise and wrap her up in an embrace, “I will not lose a minute of sleep if the ass-wipe gets shivved in jail on my orders. Not a wink. It won’t damage me.”

“Well, I *will* lose sleep and it’ll damage me.” She pushes away from me, bending to lift two coffee cups off the table. She takes them to the kitchen and I follow.

“So, what do you suggest? I leave him be and wait for the axe to fall? It happens a year down the line, a few years, maybe, if we’re real lucky. And then what? Then I go down for it and you’re left raisin’ our kids alone, without me?”

She growls.

I pick her up by the hips and set her on the counter. This gets me a frown and Violet folding her arms.

I kiss her. “Let’s sleep on all this. Okay? I really fuckin’ need some sleep. But I’m telling you right now, I will do whatever the fuck I need to do to keep you safe. Trust that I’ll do that, please.”

“Yeah,” she mutters. “Whatever.”

She’s pissed.

She hops off the counter and stomps down the hall to the bedroom and slams the door. I pour myself a drink and down it. And then I pour and drink back another one before I turn the lights off for the Christmas tree and head to the bedroom.

She’s in the dark, under the covers. I shed my clothes and climb in, pulling her close to me.

She tries to shove me.

I hold on tight.

She grunts. “Let go of me.”

“No.”

“You’re making me very angry right now.”

“Baby, please. Let me hold you. I need to hold you. I haven’t slept, I’ve had a fuckin’ wild twenty-four hours. And all I want right now is to hold my wife.”

She snuffles and then her body relaxes into me.

“Thank you,” I whisper into her hair and then touch my lips to hers.

“I slept terrible last night, too,” she says, sadness in her voice.

“I’m so sorry. I really fucking am.”

“I know. But we’re gonna talk about this some more tomorrow. You’re not gonna just shut me out and make these decisions on your own. If we’re a couple, we’re a couple and that means that we’re in this thing together. All of it. Okay?”

I grind my teeth.

“Killian?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

She snuggles in. After a minute of holding her, my eyes drift closed.

I wake up, it's still dark, but Violet's asleep on top of me. She's on her stomach, directly on top of my body, her face tucked into my neck. My fingers slide up her spine to tangle in her hair. This has the magical effect of her wiggling into me. Her pussy is in the perfect spot for that.

My hand slides down over her ass and she does it again, making a sweet little sigh in her sleep.

My cock wakes up completely, so I take both of her ass cheeks into my hands and tighten my grip while flexing my pelvis. She squirms against it, then lifts her head out of my neck.

“Hey,” she protests, about to roll away.

I tighten my grip and grind into her again before moving my hands down enough to pry her legs further apart while grinding once again.

This gets me a sweet little whimper, followed by a rotation of her hips.

“I'm sleeping,” she complains.

“Mm, baby,” I say and then both hands are on her hips and I'm running them up her torso, feeling the sides of her tits before my hands land at her jaw on either side. I kiss her. “Sleeping on top of me. You've gotta pay the toll charge now.”

“How much?” she asks, voice husky.

“How much you got?” I ask.

“Fuck me, baby,” she whispers.

And the command lights my insides on fire. It takes self-control to stop myself from flipping her to her back so I can

bury myself inside her. It's been way too long since I've been inside my favorite place on the planet.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Huh? Angry sex?"

I laugh. "No. I'm not angry, though let's bookmark that for another time when you're not pregnant. I meant I don't know if it's safe to fuck you after the bleeding."

"Oh."

I feel her deflate.

"Let's wait until we have your first doctor's appointment and ask. Okay?"

"The hospital would've said if we weren't supposed to, wouldn't they?" She sounds bummed out.

"Don't wanna risk it, but let's play," I suggest. "I wanna come on your tits again. That was so nice the other night."

She says nothing.

"You mad?"

"Yeah, but we'll talk about that after you go down on me."

My body jerks in surprise.

"Get to it," she orders.

"Something tells me I'm gonna regret this."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, after we make one another come, I'm gonna pass right out again after not sleeping last night. If you wanna fight with me, wife, you're gonna win because I'm gonna be zonked."

"Then I guess I'll win," she says and then she's climbing on top of me.

"Can't eat your sweet pussy with you grinding against my cock, Mrs. Coulter."

“Let’s do this some more instead. Good old fashioned making out.”

She grinds her pussy against my cock.

“Mm,” is my response.

She wiggles her pussy against my shaft some more and not only do I feel the heat, but I also hear evidence of her being wet through her thin cotton pajama shorts.

“You gonna use me to get off?” I ask, tugging gently on her hair to get her mouth to mine.

My answer comes when she slides up and then back down, letting out a breathy sigh into my mouth. I nip at her bottom lip, eliciting a whimper from her.

Fuck, I like feeling how wet she is even with my underwear and hers between us. I throw my arms over my head and enjoy the sensations of my wife working at getting off by grinding against me. My fingers tingle with the need to take over, but I hold it at bay and let her keep control other than the occasional flex of my pelvis.

Now I’m also making noises, listening to the sound of her breaths speeding up, feeling the increasing heat and wetness through her panties as she takes herself closer and closer to an orgasm.

“Wanna feel you,” I say, then slide her shorts down over her ass and yank my own underwear down so we’re skin to skin.

Fuck, yeah.

She slides back up, coating me with wetness.

“Mm, baby,” I say. “Yeah.”

And then it’s moments of grinding, panting, circling hips, and roaming hands as she grinds her clit against the ridge of my cock before I know she’s coming. Trembling and moaning into my mouth while she frantically rubs against me. She lets out a breathy moan into my mouth as I take her lips in a rough kiss. I come between her legs and all over myself while growling

out my release verbally, between her parted lips, hands full of Violet's ass cheeks.

She goes lax on top of me for a second and her heart hammers against my chest briefly before I lose that sensation as she rolls over.

"Apple juice?" I ask, kissing her earlobe.

"Yeah. The sparkling one Mom bought." She sighs. "Because that... that was a sparkling orgasm."

I chuckle, rolling closer so we're face to face on our sides. "Is a sparkling orgasm as good as a stunning one?"

She shakes her head, burying her face into my neck. "No. For it to be stunning, your beautiful cock has to feel the squeeze inside me."

I laugh. "Beautiful?"

"Mm hm. Stop fishing for compliments when I just did all the work. Apple juice. Hurry." She reaches around to slap my ass.

I snicker. "You got it." I kiss her and get out of bed, letting my boxer briefs fall the rest of the way down my legs, step out of them, then head to the bathroom to clean up. I come back with a towel and wipe between her legs before kissing her again.

She's already asleep when I'm back with her juice.

Violet

Killian is still asleep when my work alarm goes off. He doesn't move an inch when I roll away from him and out of bed.

My first thought is the same one I think of first each morning the last few days. Wondering about bleeding, hoping that there's been no more of it.

My second thought after I use the bathroom and see that it's another blood-free morning is Ray.

Ray shooting his mouth off about what's happened. I try to shake that off because it's terrifying. And I can't shake it off because it occurs to me that he could even lie, something he's been known to do, and say I did stuff to him, too. That I knew about it from the start. Not only could Killian go to jail, so could I. And where would that leave our baby?

In my mind I hear Killian asking me to trust him.

As I take a fast shower, the next thing I consider is how strange I feel. I got up with an alarm, it's Monday morning, but I have no job, nothing to do. This isn't how my life is.

And then I decide I have plenty to do. Starting with calling a lawyer.

I get to nine o'clock without throwing up, having had some weak tea and a yogurt for breakfast, watching some news while sucking on a nausea lollipop and checking my social media accounts before I begin to look online for local law firms.

The firm Killian took me to when we got back from Italy to go over his stuff and to add me to his will comes up first, so I

decide to start there and ask them for a recommendation for someone in employment law.

They tell me that they've got someone in their firm that can help me, so I make an appointment, planning to tell whoever I meet with that I'll want to call all the shots, that they'll be working with me, not Killian on the case.

I get a text from Tennille at KIT Peripherals just before nine thirty, asking me when I left for and returned from my honeymoon. After I reply, she says she wants to do lunch, telling me she's got proof that I didn't place the wrong purchase order. She wants to talk about it in person. I arrange to meet tomorrow for lunch. It works well because my appointment with the lawyer is shortly after lunch, so I'll have some information that'll help my case, maybe. Tennille also tells me I should have a conversation with Tara at my office, that they've already spoken, and I will definitely want to get her take on what happened.

I send Tara a text.

Me: Can we talk? Maybe after work? Call me. Or can we get together for a coffee?

Tara responds almost immediately.

Tara: I'm gathering info for you. I'll call when I know more. You're gonna be ok! You're not wrong and we'll get proof.

It's kind of bizarre to feel so calm about all this stuff. But I know I'm not in the wrong and I also know that I won't starve to death without a paycheck, thanks to Killian. And that's a strange feeling, a foreign one. It's beyond strange to have support like this instead of being the one always having to worry about money.

Besides, I've had a lot more serious things to worry about lately, so this doesn't feel like the catastrophe it might've felt like not too long ago.

Speaking of support, my friends are helping me. I have a support system. A great one. And I guess I know now that I've

always had one despite the fact that I didn't reach out to anybody for help back in the *Ray* days.

Patricia comes in, looking surprised to see me.

"Hi!" she greets with an extra-bright smile.

"Good morning, Patricia. How are you?"

"I'm fine. But more importantly, what about you? Is everything okay?"

She's obviously noticed I wasn't here last week.

I say, "Working on it."

"I've been worried about you both. I'm glad to see you here."

She hangs her coat up and is about to enter the butler's pantry when I blurt, "I'm pregnant. Early, but yeah. Pregnant."

Her eyes light up. "Oh! Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

"Is that why you've been gone? Is he not happy? I probably shouldn't ask that, but Killian has become like a brother. Alana and I both kind of adopted him. If we need to sort him out, we'll do that. Believe me."

I wave a hand. "He threw out my birth control pills on our way to get married. He wanted this."

Her brows just up in surprise. "Do you have cold feet?"

"Oh, I am happy about the baby. Let's say things have been an adjustment lately. Lots of things have been, um... happening."

"Ah," she says, nodding, like it's a perfectly reasonable explanation.

My pregnancy is serving as a good cover for why Killian and I have been on the outs. It kind of makes me feel guilty that I'm letting people think this, by being generally vague, other than Suse who also doesn't have the full picture but thinks it's my husband's stalkery ways.

Things have been a whirlwind and I feel like doing my chameleon act and rolling with the punches is my only option. And while it's not entirely unlike how I handled some things in my last relationship, it feels different.

I covered for Ray because I didn't want to admit he was doing unacceptable things and failing me.

I'm covering for Killian because he was doing unacceptable things to protect me.

Well, and avenge me and himself, but yeah... it feels different. And now that Ray's not in Killian's basement any longer, maybe it'll help me move forward. Though, the fear of both Ray blabbing and of Killian making sure he can't blab are both real.

Killian emerges from the bedroom showered and dressed to impress in a suit. He looks sleepy though, and heads straight for me.

And the look in his eyes, it's like his day is complete at the sight of me. I get a burst of affection for him.

Patricia moves aside as he takes me into his arms.

"Good morning, baby," he says gruffly, kissing me while squeezing.

"Hi," I greet, tucking my head into his neck.

"Killian."

"Patricia."

"Congratulations on the baby. Very exciting."

"Thank you," he says and then his hold loosens on me, though he doesn't let go entirely, just enough to tip up my chin so he can lock my gaze with his. "Sorry, but feel the need for coffee. If you don't wanna smell it, baby, I'm sorry but I need it. Want me to drink it out on the balcony?"

"I'll vacate," I offer.

“Alana couldn’t stomach coffee either when she was pregnant,” Patricia says. “But after having kids, her coffee consumption doubled.”

“I miss it,” I pout.

“How are you feeling so far today?” Killian asks.

“Not terrible so far,” I reply.

The lobby phone rings, sending all our gazes swinging that way.

“Are we expecting someone?” I ask.

Killian shakes his head while heading that way to answer.

“Hello?”

His eyes go concerned.

“Their names?” he asks.

What now. My heart is beating too fast.

“Send them up,” Killian says and hangs up, then looks to me.

“The police are here.”

My stomach drops while my heart begins racing. Bile also climbs up the back of my throat and to top it all off, I wobble unsteadily.

He shakes his head and quickly speaks, coming to me and hooking an arm around my waist to steady me. “Friendly visit. The cops I’m working with on the Felix Hoffman case are here. You feel faint? You okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Amber’s boyfriend. That situation.”

“Right.” My heart takes a minute to recover.

“They’ve been tryin’ to catch him.”

“I’ll get to work,” Patricia says and heads for the laundry room.

“You all right?” he asks.

“You know what I just thought,” I say.

“I know. Don’t worry. In fact, make yourself scarce because you’ve got guilty written all over your face and cops pick up on that shit.”

I jolt back.

“Not tryin’ to be an asshole, baby. It’s just a fact.”

“Ugh,” I grumble and bury my face into his shirt.

Patricia breezes by us, heading to the bedrooms.

He caresses the back of my neck and showers me with kisses.

Patricia is then back yet again. “There’s no laundry to be done in your bedroom?”

I laugh nervously. “I did it on the weekend.”

She points at me. “That’s my job.”

“Sorry.” I shrug.

She smiles. “I’m very angry with you.” And then she laughs.

I look to Killian. “I’m gonna take a shower,” I say. “Come see me when they’re gone.”

As I take a gingerbread cookie, there’s a knock on the door.

He kisses me quick and swats my butt before heading to the door. I make my way down the hall to our bedroom and swallow down some nausea with the cookie.

Killian

After a short meeting with the two cops, I go to the bedroom to see Violet.

The police got word from a confidential informant about a ploy to rob Numbers. Evidently, I've got a new employee who is fucking Craig, the manager. Her name is Stephanie Whitley and she's Hoffman's stepsister. They don't think Craig knew her before she was hired but they're digging into Craig to see if they think he's in on it. So far, it looks like he isn't.

Listening to all this, I'm not happy that they're obviously watching Numbers because is it only about Hoffman and that ploy or are they watching me, too?

The cops say their C.I says there's a plot to rob Numbers on New Year's Eve, says they originally had plans to rob Numbers opening night, but something went wrong, C.I doesn't know what.

New Year's Eve is a target that makes sense, though. People will be dressed to the nines, wearing expensive jewelry. And we have several in-house cash fundraisers happening with some of our arcade games for local charities, so the place will have extra cash on hand that night.

The cops want to put some plainclothes officers there. According to their informant, Hoffman plans to be at the edge of the parking lot calling shots to his stepsister and a couple ticketholders who are in on it.

This is a headache I don't need on top of everything else I've got goin' on, but of course I agree to help them catch Hoffman. I say I'll put extra security on site that night, valet services that'll be undercover cops instead of regular parking guys, and we'll be having a briefing with my security and the

cops before the planned heist unless they can catch Hoffman before that.

Little do they know the Hoffman problem is already dealt with. Two shitheads dealt with – with just one stone. Well, one dealt with and the other about to take the fall.

But I'm playing along, hoping the cops don't get suspicious. Though, the way they keep turning up at my home unannounced has me thinking they already are.

I find Violet in my office, sitting on top of my desk while talking on the phone, staring out the window. She senses my presence and looks over her shoulder, her eyes hitting mine with unspoken questions as she wraps up her call.

"I'll be there. Thank you so much." She ends the call and turns fully to me. She's dressed in yoga pants and a tank top. Her tits look extra scrumptious this morning.

"What's all that?" I ask.

"What happened with the police? You can't just glaze over that with me."

I wave my hand dismissively. "They're after Amber's junkie dealer boyfriend. They've already got warrants. They have a confidential informant that told them he's hatching a plan to rob Numbers on New Year's Eve. They're determined to catch him and then take him down for the other shit along with that."

"You seem awfully calm about a ploy to rob your club."

"It's all gonna work out. No time to get into it right now, I've gotta catch a flight to Seattle for a meeting with Jag. I'll be back tonight."

"What about?"

"About what happened on the weekend and also now about this potential heist."

"What about the weekend?" she asks.

“Jag used to run security for me. Has his own security company now. Tony’s been my head of security since Jag left just by default, but things were mostly quiet. I believe in risk management and the writing is on the wall about us being potential targets with Numbers, so I want to assess my security plan and see what he can do to take things up a notch with not only on-site security but screening employees, shit like that. Gotta make plans for him to provide security for New Year’s Eve as well as talk about an ongoing strategy. And I’ve got to talk to him and his sister about our other problem.”

“His sister?” she asks, but then there’s a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Violet calls out.

Patricia pokes her head in. “I was about to head out for your groceries. There was no list, so...”

“I’ll do the shopping tomorrow. I’m not working,” Violet says. “I already need to shop for my grandfather so if you could just take our dry-cleaning in, that’d be wonderful. Do you have time to do that? If not, I can do it.”

“Oh,” Patricia looks surprised. “I’ll do it, no problem. And I’ll be back soon and I’ll do the floors. Unless that’s not convenient. You both going to be here all day?”

“I’m heading out in five,” I say.

“I’m going Christmas shopping,” Violet says.

“With someone?” I ask.

“No. Everyone I know is at work.”

“I’d rather you go with someone,” I say.

“Christmas is in a few days so I’m running out of time.”

“Take the driving service. I’ll call Stan and ask him to be on call for you.”

“I can drive.”

“I’d rather you take my driver.”

“Okay. Patricia, would you like to go to the mall with me? You can skip the floors. I’ll do them.”

“Sure!” Patricia exclaims. “I have a few things I still need. Alana is off today, too. Maybe she’d like to meet us there.”

“Great,” Violet claps her hands.

“You can come back tomorrow and do the floors, Patricia,” I say.

Violet waves her hand dismissively. “They’re not even dirty. If they get intolerably dirty before you come again Thursday, I’ll do them.”

“I’ll be back in an hour,” Patricia leaves, looking excited.

My wife is hanging out with my housekeeper and doing her job for her. Not only is she the housekeeper, she’s about a decade Violet’s senior, but they seem like good friends already. She’s constantly surprising me.

“So, continue,” Violet invites.

I lift a finger. “Wait. She’s still getting the dry cleaning from the walk-in.”

When we hear the door shut, I continue.

“Baby, I don’t want you burdened with this. You don’t need all the details of this shit. But take Stan wherever you go the next few days at least, while I figure some stuff out.”

Stan can handle himself and proved to be excellent in a crisis when I got jumped after Dario’s wedding. If not for Stan with his gun, who knows how that would’ve ended.

“Is this marriage a partnership or what?” she demands, hands propped on her hips.

She’s not just facing me; she’s facing off with me.

“Of course it is. But there’s no need for you to feel burdened with shit I have to take care of.”

“Well, in the case of this scenario, I need to know what’s happening. Keep me posted. I mean it.”

I raise my hands defensively. This goes against everything I want. But my wife is like a lit firecracker the last few days.

She's full of fire. And demands. And as much as I want to shield and protect her, I'm a little in awe of how strong she seems.

"Come here," I order.

She walks the two paces toward me. I grab her by the ass with both hands and move in for a kiss.

She gasps in surprise and then her hands are in my hair.

"I want to know if it's safe to fuck you," I say, "because you bein' sassy with me like this, I'm findin' I'd like to help you work this aggression and sass out while you're naked."

She shivers in my arms and it makes me smile wide.

"There she is. My sassy and sweet salted caramel girl."

"I have a doctor's appointment Wednesday," she says, shyly, smiling wider.

"What time? I'm coming with."

"Ten."

"Good. Need to ask that doctor if it's all right to not only fuck my pregnant wife, but also spank her ass when she's sassy."

She shivers, dimples on display, eyes shining.

And now my cock is hard. "Right. Now, I'm heading to Seattle; with a hard-on, thanks to you. I'll be back tonight. Keep alert while you're at the mall. So much happening, I'm still feeling tweaked. I'd feel better if you keep your eyes open. Yeah?"

"Okay. But I want that hard-on gone before you're anywhere near Jagger's sister."

I can't help but grin, and she looks ready to face-off again over it.

"Don't even worry about that. I'm not remotely interested in anyone but you. Swear it."

“You’d better mean that,” she warns.

“This is for you. All for you,” I squeeze her ass and press her into me.

“Good,” she says. “Better be.”

“Where are you going today?” I ask.

“Washington Square.”

“Let me see if Stan’s available. One sec.” I dial his number.

“Keep in touch.” I kiss her again. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I’m about to head out, but stop and look at her. “We gonna talk about you joining the team when I get back tonight?” I ask.

“And the lawsuit?”

“I’m gonna take this week for me. We’ll talk about that after my doctor’s appointment. I might table that for now.”

“Okay...”

“And I have an appointment with a lawyer tomorrow. I’m going to be launching a little investigation of my own. Prove Shara firing me was targeted and illegal.”

“Yeah? Gonna talk to me about that?”

Her eyes narrow.

“You don’t want secrets, remember?” I try.

She sighs. “Okay, but I’m handling this. I can deal with this on my own.”

I raise my hands defensively. “I’m sure you can. But if you need help, say the word.”

“I’ve got this.”

“Okay,” I say.

“I have a lunch meeting with a vendor friend that says she has proof Shara lied about a big order that was a mistake, part of

her argument about me not having my head in the game when they fired me. They called it a restructuring, but I happen to know they were planning to keep and promote me. Until you picked a fight with Shara. Maybe a little before that but that probably fanned the flames.”

I say nothing. She narrows her eyes and then continues.

“Anyway, I’m gonna talk to another coworker that might give me more info for the lawsuit. They say they’re not firing me because I’m pregnant, but that being pregnant means I get a more generous severance package and then tried to throw facts at me that make it seem like I’m shit at my job anyway. Shara played a game with that, and I think she’s been working to build a pile of evidence to try to fire me. When I broke up with Ray she said, in writing, that I was making everyone else look bad because I never take time off. Ha! And she’s always saying we should all get to work remotely more often, yet Friday made it sound like I’m taking advantage by working from home. Come to think of it, I still have that text. More evidence against her. But you’ve got to catch your flight, so get going. I’ve got this.”

“Clearly you do. I’m impressed. You need any help, you let me know.”

“I’ve got this,” she says. “She turned on me as soon as I started to get strong. It’s like she liked me best when I was meek. As soon as me and you got started, she started to get really... kind of aggressive with me.”

“She’s jealous. What if they can her and offer you the job back?” I ask.

She twists her lips in contemplation. “We’ll see. I think I need a break. The way I got fired left a bad taste in my mouth. Though if I go squirrely, I’ll work for you. I’ve never had a break. Like... ever. And now seems like a good time to take one. But we’ll see if I can handle it.” She bites her lip, looking at me as if for approval. She’s got it.

I smile. “I agree. And I’ve got this Raymond shit. I don’t want you worrying.”

“Thankfully, I’m going to be busy the next few days getting Christmas shopping done, doing some stuff for Grampa, figuring out this lawyer stuff. I won’t have much time to worry.”

I kiss her. “I know. But I don’t want you to worry. I want you to focus on being happy, being my queen. Growing our baby. You ‘n me. Forever. Okay? Like we promised.”

She looks into my eyes and hers get brighter. “You’re gonna miss your flight,” she says softly.

“I’m still fine. Don’t worry.”

“I love you, Killian.”

I’m about to say it back, but she keeps going. “I love you more than I’ve loved any man in my life. So much, even the idea of life without you devastates me. I meant my vows to you.”

“I know how it feels; I feel the same.”

“But if you blindside me like you did again, if you hurt me like that again, you probably *will* lose me.”

I blow out a breath.

She keeps going. “I don’t like ultimatums and it’s not my style to say things like this so please know I don’t say this lightly. I’m very serious. You really, really hurt me. And I’m having a bit of trouble with trust right now. Trust is the most important thing in a marriage and I’m trying, but...”

I cup her jaw. “I know. All I ask is that you try. Gimme the chance. It’s my goal to never hurt you again. Ever. But if you think I’ll let anything cause me to lose you including you being stubborn, you’re wrong.”

Her eyes spark with anger. “Is that a threat?”

“Yes. I’m warning you, you’re gonna have a happily ever after with me. Whether you want it or not.” I smile wide and kiss her.

“Of course I want it,” she says against my mouth.

“Then let’s get on with that,” I say and bury my nose in her throat, feeling her shiver. I breathe her in, taking her scent into my lungs, willing it to work straight through me. This girl. My girl. I really do fucking love her. “You’re getting strong,” I say. “Is it my kid inside you making you so fierce or do you just feel safe to be strong because you’ve got a loving and supportive husband who will give you anything?”

She shrugs. “Who knows. Maybe after all I’ve gone through, I’m done being a victim. Tired of just being this... people-pleaser. And I love that you see us together forever, Killian, I do. I hope you’re right. But I’m done getting broken, feeling beaten down. I mean that. If I get broken again, I don’t know if I’ll bounce back. I’ll either lose my marbles or turn bitter and hate your guts.”

“You’re heard, baby. And something tells me you’re unbreakable now. And you’re only gonna grow even more fierce when you become a mama bear.”

“I want to know what you’re planning with Ray.”

“I know. We’ll talk later; I’ll fill you in. Have fun today. And be careful.”

“You be careful, too.”

I already know what I’m doing about that shit-stain. Tracks I laid a while back will work in my favor. Now, to just get to Seattle and talk to Jag’s sister. Make sure she’s not some wildcard that might bite me in the ass. And then I’ll execute the rest of my two assholes/one stone plan and something like Felix Hoffman, Raymond Iadanza will cease to be a threat to us. Though he won’t be dead, too. He’ll just wish he was.

Killian

Something nags, almost gnaws at me through the flight to see Jag, and it's making me wish I'd set up personal security for Violet before leaving the state. Stan carries a gun, but he's not a trained bodyguard.

Seattle is close, less than an hour flight, but the ride feels like it takes forever because I've got a feeling. It reminds me of what I imagine was what my nan used to get. We'd be out someplace and she'd start, muttering that she thought she left something on at home. She'd say things like, "Did I turn my stove off?" Or "Oh no; I think I left that coffee pot on." This is like that, but worse. I've got a sense of doom crawling through my veins. As if I've overlooked something important.

I send a text message to Stan to reiterate he's to keep alert, that I've had security threats lately. He replies that he's waiting outside my building for Violet to come down and that he'll ensure he's vigilant. I quickly log in and see she's on the bench at the end of the bed, pulling her shoes on, so I reply to tell him to message me before he leaves the curb to tell me she's safely there.

It's extreme, but I'm feeling the need.

I find myself checking her location twice more between the time he lets me know she's in the car and the time I get off the plane. When I'm in the cab on the way to Jag's, I phone her. She doesn't answer, so I immediately call back with my teeth clenched. She answers cheerfully, saying she's in a restaurant at the mall with Patricia and Alana. She says she's good, and I ask if Stan's around and she says he's two tables away.

I'm still feeling tweaked. I briefly ponder poaching Will from his gig with the Ferrano family providing personal security. I don't want to rock the boat with them, but I'm weighing

options knowing I'll feel better if I have someone watching Violet when I can't.

My brother wants to go back to school. He hasn't ever wanted to work for me before despite offers – wants to make his own way. Security is just a temporary gig that he has no trouble with because he's built like a tank and the Ferrano family pays well. He wants to get his degree in personal training and nutrition, eventually open his own health club, which he wants to grow into a chain. Like me. His own man, but it's obvious he's watched and learned from me. He has an enterprising spirit, too. And I don't like that it seems that family isn't living as clean yet as I believed. I don't want my brother in danger.

I stop my train of thought because Will is an adult who can make his own decisions.

In the cab on the way to Jag's, I can't stand the feeling I've still got, and decide to do something about it. I reach out to Wes Traynor and ask him if he's up for resuming security detail over Violet. Immediately if he can. He replies within a couple minutes and agrees to start the next day.

I send him Stan's contact information as well as Violet's, so they can liaise.

Jacobs might be a Fed, but if this gives me an extra layer of protection for her, I'll do it for now at least. It's probably because so much shit has happened in such a short timeframe that I'm feeling this tweaked. As I gather more information, I'll decide whether I need an alternate security source or not.

I send her a text as well, telling her she'll be getting a call from Wes and he'll be tailing her from now on unless she's out with me, that she needs to keep him informed of her schedule and keep using Stan until further notice.

She responds to my text with a simple 'ok.'

After I message Stan to say he'll hear from Wes, I lean back in the seat feeling like I've aged these last few weeks. Once I've dealt with Iadanza, I should be able to relax. I hate that the little puke is getting so much of my headspace.

Right now I like the idea we had a while back of taking off after Christmas. A vacation sounds perfect. When I get home, I'll get something booked and surprise Violet on Christmas morning.

Jagger is *all* business with me when I arrive. One look at him and I know he's still pissed. I walk into his new apartment that's almost as large as mine, though ten stories higher, and immediately spot Jessa, sitting on his sofa, arms folded, eyes on me with an icy expression. For a change, she's not head-to-toe glamorous. She's wearing sweats and eyeglasses, is makeup free, and has her blonde hair in a bun.

"Sweet pad, Jag," I say.

"Thanks," he mutters from behind me.

"Kill," she greets, frost dripping from my name.

"Ah. Finally losin' the Pooky?" I ask.

She scowls.

"We alone?" I ask Jag.

"My woman's at work, so yeah."

"Let's get this out of the way now, Jess. Then I need a private conversation with Jag."

"Oh, then I'm *allowed* to leave? You've got a lot of nerve, Killian Coulter."

"I've got nerve?" I point at myself. "You come sniffin' around, seduce my employee as part of whatever scheme you're cookin' and because that gets your ass kidnapped, I've got nerve?"

"Yeah, kidnapped by *your* hostage. At gunpoint!"

"Let's talk about that." I undo my blazer and sit down in a chair opposite to the couch she's on. "Walk me through it."

She reaches for her package of cigarettes on the table and lights one.

Jag mutters, “Jem’s gonna have my balls you keep smokin’ in here. Take it to the balcony. Coffee, Kill?”

“I’m good, thanks, Jag.”

Jessa gets outraged. “My nerves, Jag. My nerves are shot and you’re offering Killian coffee. And P.S... *fuck* Jem. Sanctimonious bitch.”

“Smoke it out there.” He opens the sliding door and glares at her. “Then come talk to Kill. And shut yer trap about my fiancée or I’ll be really pissed.”

She huffs and heads out the door, all but stomping her feet, then turning to me.

“Are you coming?” she asks.

“I’ll wait until you get your fix.” I lean back and relax.

She aims a glare at me before taking a long drag and leaning her back against the railing.

“My woman is ready to kill me *and* Jess,” Jag mutters, sliding the door shut. “All that drama ruined plans she had and now she’s dealing with my sister and those two are like bleach and vinegar together. And I’m about to take it out on you.” He points at me before thrusting his hand through his hair.

“Me?” I gesture to myself, “Your sister shouldn’t have been there. She seduces Tony and casts her spell on him so the guy turns up to his job with her when we both know he should never have let her talk him into that, and what the fuck?”

“Can’t find good help,” Jag mutters. “Wouldn’t have happened if I was still your right hand.”

“Yeah. You hired and trained the guy. Where’d you go wrong?”

He snickers and relaxes a little.

“Though I’d have tried to talk you out of keeping a hostage. What gives?”

I ignore the question. “We know where things went wrong. That siren you share DNA with,” I say. “That’s part of why I’ve gotta talk to you. I need you to take over security for my clubs. Things are amped and that’s comin’ from all around. I’ll explain the rest later. She gonna keep her mouth shut about this? Because Jagger...” I give him a poignant stare.

He sighs. “It’s a mess. I know. But man, I’m busy.”

She’s coming back in, eyes blazing at me.

“We’ll talk after,” I say to Jag and turn my attention to his sister. “Talk to me. Leave nothing out. Start at the part where you decided to seduce Tony.”

She flops onto the couch.

“No. Leave that part out,” Jag growls.

“My mistake,” I raise a hand and toss a smirk at him.

I wait while she examines her fingernails.

“Any time now, Jessa,” Jag pushes.

“I don’t take well to rejection. As you can probably guess.” She’s still looking at her fingers.

I scoff and fold my arms.

“And you’re the only one who has rejected me, and you’ve done it more than once. It stings every time, too. When you said you were off the market permanently, I got pissed off and that changed to feeling sorry for myself, so I got drunk and made a scene, hoping you’d show up and I could try one more time to get you to come back to my hotel or something. Tony has always had a crush on me and when it was him taking me back instead of you, it started out just as an ego stroke, getting him to stay, but then I was having fun. He’s actually a really sweet guy. And it feels good that he’s so into me. But then he was being all secretive about what he’s doing for you, and you know how I hate when people try to keep secrets from me.”

“So you snooped in his phone and decided to snoop some more by talking him into taking you to the gig he had to take

care of for me.”

“Yeah, and then you canceled so that meant I wouldn’t get to find out what it was. So I deleted the text from you and talked him into taking me. It was actually easier than I thought it’d be. He’s a teddy bear.”

“Probably because he knew that chapter was coming to a close with that guy. If you hadn’t done that, he wouldn’t have gone and the guy wouldn’t have escaped. Your stunt nearly got Tony killed, Jess.”

She looks remorseful. I don’t know if it’s legit or not.

“What happened when the guy came out of the house without Tony?”

“To back up, when we got there, Tony wouldn’t let me go in to use the bathroom, so I was in a snit. Then your hostage comes limping out, gets in the car, not even seeing me until his door was shut. And then he freaked out and fumbled until he got that gun pointed at me. I nearly had a heart attack but managed to think quick and talk fast, and next thing I know, he’s driving off, freaked that you might come back. Swears he’s not gonna hurt me and apologizes that he’s got me as a hostage but says he needs leverage in case you start chasing him. Starts spouting off that you stole his girl, married her, and locked him in there so you could torture him.”

“What else?”

“The guy was a lunatic. And he reeked. He said you’re getting ready to kill him or send him somewhere to get killed, so he was doing what he could to get out of there. I tried some reverse psychology, talking shit about you and acting on his side. It worked and he was figuring we were friends and I was gonna help him out.”

She pulls the hair band out of her hair and then reties it while continuing. “He told me he was gonna try to go to Canada. He’s got a great uncle in Lethbridge. Said he’d hide out until he knew he could find a way to take you out and save the girl. Said he’s got some friends who would help him, friends that

hate you too and will likely help. Is she your hostage, too?"

Jessa smirks.

"The guy has a screw loose. My marriage is completely on the up 'n up."

"Yeah, he's got a screw loose because you tortured him and kept him locked up for however long. What was he like before that?"

"He was a piece of shit, lazy lowlife, and an abuser who put her through a lot of shit and she couldn't scrape him off. And I helped her scrape him off. She wasn't down with the way I did that, though. This is on me, not Violet. What he say about having friends who'll help him?"

Jessa shrugs. "He didn't elaborate. But that's a lot of trouble to go to... having Tony go there daily to babysit the guy."

"There's more to why I had him there, and I'd usually leave those details out, but I want you to know we're dealing with a fuckface here that not only hurt Violet, but he also cheated me. He owed me a lot of money and brought a gun to Numbers on opening night. And pulled some other shit, too. I also found out he kept her and I from getting started three years ago by cheating in a bet so that demanded payback."

Jag winces audibly.

Jessa's eyebrows pop up high. "He cheated in a bet? With you? Since when do you gamble? And what does that have to do with you getting with that girl?"

"The details don't matter. Bottom line, the guy is a loser. And cracked in the brain. He said nothing else about friends hating me?"

"That's all he said about that. So you love your wife?" she asks.

"I do."

Jag's phone rings. He slips out of the room to answer.

“Why didn’t you ever fall in love with me? I turned the charm on so hard.” She’s looking at me and for once I think she’s being genuine.

I sigh. “You ever meet someone and just know?”

“Yeah. You.”

I shake my head. This conversation is pointless. I say nothing, because I don’t want to hurt her feelings, maybe she does actually have some. I’m not about to blow smoke, either.

“So, you stole her from him because he stole her first?”

“Believe me, the guy is a tool and he deserves worse than what he’s gotten from me. I didn’t steal her. She was done with him.”

“And then you locked him up? Sounds like something I’d daydream about doing. Sounds like something I’ve *been* daydreaming about doin’.”

“Whoa. What the fuck? Are you threatening my wife or me?”

“Stop it, Pooky. Just because I daydreamed about locking you up so I can have my way with you whenever I want doesn’t mean I’d actually do it. That’s just... psycho.” She smiles big.

“Well, if I’m a psycho, so be it. But you don’t have all the facts and the guy deserved even worse than he got. I feel no need to justify myself to you. What I need to know is how to get you to forget this information. Permanently.”

“So, you’re still after him?”

“He turned himself in to the cops.”

“He what?”

“Figured he’s safer in jail than out where I can catch him.” I shrug. “He make any deals or plans with you to take me down? What did you say about who you are?”

“I just played it like I was Tony’s girl and outraged that Tony took part in that. Said I knew only a little about you, just that

you were my boyfriend's boss and that it sounds like you're a real asshole." She smiles wide.

I roll my eyes.

She continues. "He told me his name and said that if his death makes it into the papers that I should tell the authorities what you did. How you kidnapped him and kept him in your basement and tortured him for months. He told me to leave Tony's name out of it, said he didn't kill Tony, just locked him in there even though Tony was abusive to him, too. I agreed."

"He choked Tony out, gave him a concussion, and tried to force-feed him a dozen painkillers after trippin' him to fall into a bucket of human waste. That wasn't a good guy, Jessa. He was locked up for good reason."

"You don't have to worry about me judging this." She waves her hand. "Some people deserve to be locked up or put out of their misery. Wish I had the guts to take out revenge against my enemies."

"You've got enemies? Shocker."

"Never mind that. Anyway, since you're happily married and off the market, I've decided I'm done trying to get with you."

"About time," I say.

She rolls her eyes. But where the fuck is she going with this?

I wait for whatever she's about to say, because there's definitely something.

"I think I wanna keep seeing Tony. He's sweet." She smiles big. "And he's kinda ruggedly handsome. Besides, he's got a big dick. And I mean really big. He thinks I'm so above his paygrade, he'll do anything I want. But yeah. I like him. I think I'll go for it."

I give her an assessing stare as I consider all the variables here.

"So, can I go? Are you done with me?"

"I think it goes without sayin', but I'm gonna say it anyway. I can't have you repeating anything about what happened to

anyone. No one.”

“Of course not, Pooky. You can rely on me. Have I ever been known to have a big mouth?”

Jag is back.

“Not that I know of,” I say.

“She won’t say a word, Kill,” Jag says, looking me dead in the eyes.

“I won’t. I know when to keep my mouth shut, believe me. But have you punished Tony? Or are you planning to? Because if you do anything to hurt that big teddy bear, I might have to get nasty.”

I’m unable to hide my surprise.

“Tony’s lost some street cred with me for lettin’ the likes of you wind him around your finger, but no. He’s not about to get punished.”

“I am pretty tough to resist,” she says, smiling. “For most people.”

“This is true. I had trouble resisting you before Violet and me got together.”

She smiles, looking satisfied. “You ‘n me are good, Killian. If he’s good, you ‘n me are good. Now, I think I’m gonna go see him.”

Do I believe her? This seems too easy.

My eyes bounce to Jag. He gives me a nod. He’s reading my mind and wants me at ease.

“I’ll hop a ride back with you and meet up with him. Okay?” she adds.

“I’m flying. Already have a flight booked.”

“Oh. Oh well. Before you go, call him and tell him he’s allowed to see me. He’s being shy with me right now on account of you being angry.”

“Before I do that, you still thinking about starting that interior design business?” I ask.

“If I had the capital,” she says. “It’s what I’ve wanted to do since I graduated college. Jag doesn’t believe I’m serious enough so he won’t front the money.”

Jag smiles. “Who says I have that much cash lyin’ around?”

“You’re living well, baby brother. You’re holdin’ out on me.”

“She thinks being born six minutes ahead means she can call me baby brother,” Jag muses.

I pipe up. “We’ll talk, but just throwin’ this out there. What if I put the money up and hold 51%? Silent partner. You’ve got control and keep it as long as it’s profitable by the end of eighteen months. We’ll sign a secondary agreement then up until five years. If it’s all still good with us, I’ll sell you two per cent back and maybe we’ll even finesse details for a complete buy-out. You willing to put in the work?”

Her brows fly up. “You serious?”

“Do I look like I’m joking? Sweat equity, Jess. I put up the money, you put in the work. All of it.”

She purses her lips and then her eyes light up.

“If you’re ready to dig in and work hard, I’ll have a contract drawn up,” I offer.

“Yes,” she says without hesitation. “But what sort of a contract?”

“You can have a lawyer look it over. I’m not twisting your arm. This is an opportunity.”

“An opportunity to keep me on my best behavior, you mean.”

“A side effect, but yeah. You know Jag’s my boy, I’m not about to fuck his sister over, not unless she fucks me over first. Right Jag?”

Jag jerks his chin up. “I trust you. You should trust him, too, Jessa.”

“Okay,” she says. “Soon? And how much capital? I don’t wanna start up some Mickey Mouse operation. Go big or stay home, baby.”

“Late January if you want. Show me a business plan in a couple weeks and we’ll finesse everything.”

She claps her hands.

“One sec,” I say, pulling my phone out.

I dial Tony and he picks up on the first ring.

“Boss?”

“I’m here with Jessa. You avoiding her waiting for my go-ahead or you done with her?”

“Yes, boss. I’m done unless I have your blessing.”

Fucker sounds like a dog whose been kicked.

“What if I give you my blessing? You want it?”

“Can we talk? I think we should talk. In person.”

“Where are you?”

“Genesis.”

“I’ll send you a text when I get to the airport. I’ll be leavin’ Jag’s in a couple hours. Meet me at Law afterwards and we’ll have dinner and talk.”

“I’ll be there.”

Jessa leaves a while later and finally Jag and I are alone.

“Fuck,” I rake my hands through my hair. “What a weekend.”

“Yeah. I imagine,” he says calmly, pulling out a box of cigars and opening them. “My woman will love you forever if my sister moves back to Portland. Though, we might be comin’ back, too. I get more business there than here and things aren’t going so well with her new job.” He holds the box out.

I take one and put it to my nose.

“It’d be good to have you back,” I say. “Miss kickin’ yer ass in racquetball. What’s wrong with Jem’s job?”

“Too much to get into, but bottom line, Portland might make more sense.”

“You think your sister will keep her mouth shut about Iadanza?”

“She’s not stupid. You don’t have to worry, man. You know what you’re doing about him?” he asks. “In case he spills to the cops?”

“I had all evidence of him being at the house removed. If the company that was recommended to me is as good as I hear, even if the cops do come, there’ll be no trace.”

He smiles. Light in his eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothin’.”

“And he’s got no credibility. Plus I had a contingency plan, so I’m workin’ that now.”

“That’s all you’re gonna give me?” he asks.

I shrug. “For now.”

“So, what business you wanna talk to me about?” Jag asks, passing me a book of matches.

“Smoke this on the balcony?”

“Naw, here’s good.”

“Your woman won’t have a shit fit?”

“She only has a shit fit when it involves my sister. My life’d be a fuck-ton simpler if those two would get along.” He rolls his eyes.

I snicker. And then I fill him in on the conversation with the cops about New Year’s Eve at Numbers and tell him I want him to take over security for all my clubs. Hire people. Implement the latest technology. All of that. I don’t want to worry about security and surveillance. He can hire my existing

security employees or fire them if they're not good enough. I tell him I want a quote.

"I'm kinda busy," he says.

"Name your price, Jag. I don't want to worry about this shit and I want someone handling it who has my trust. You comin' back to Portland would make even more sense for you to take me on as a client."

"As I say, I'm busy. But for you, for the right price, I could make some time."

"Glad you're busy. Nice place. Swanky. You seem to be doing well. Not surprised at all. You've got skills."

"I figured I'd do well here with my business, but Portland seems to be where the bulk of my clients are and if I add you back to the list... can I share something? This can go nowhere. Almost nobody knows this, not even my sister. But I trust you. And I'm also sharin' not just because you're one of my closest friends but also because you're feeling mistrust with Jessa and so I'm giving you this to let you know where you stand with me."

"I'm listening," I say.

"The company you hired to clean the basement? The one Nino Rossi recommended?"

"Yeah?"

"It's my company."

I blink. "JC?"

He smiles. "Sometimes I'm Hugo. Sometimes Hugo's JC. Sometimes one of my other guys poses as Hugo or JC. Not too creative, but business boomed faster than I expected and the type of business it is, I want my identity on the downlow. Besides the Rossi brothers, you're the only person who doesn't work for me that knows it's actually me."

I laugh loud. And then I slap his arm and tell him I'm proud of him.

He and I are a lot alike, why we got along so well when we met. I knew he had something when he started working for me, and I'm not at all surprised he's hitting this level of success. Even if he can't crow about it. Leave it to Jagger to have an elite secret company.

We shoot the shit for a while longer until it's time to catch my flight. He runs me to the airport and we make plans to meet up the day after Christmas.

Since he leveled with me on his side business hustle, I level with him that Hoffman is no longer a threat, but that I need things believable with the cops. I also ask him to liaise with Nino on the Hoffman situation. Just like Jag can make sure a crime scene comes up squeaky clean, he can also use his knowledge to do the opposite and stage a scene perfectly.

As much as I appreciate him leveling with me about his secondary business beyond security, and it does make me feel confident about the state of my basement, I've never been the type to show all my cards to anyone. So while I've leveled with him about my plan for Iadanza and what's happened with Hoffman, it still leaves me with unease.

And despite his efforts to alleviate my concerns about his sister, she's not only a weakness for him, she's also seeming like a wildcard. I don't like wildcards because there's not one cut and dried purpose for them. Wildcards can be valuable, they can also fuck up a game, depending on how the card is played.

We'll see how my conversation with Tony goes. Getting into business with Jessa would not have been my first choice before this, but the more ways I've got to pull her strings and affect her life, the more chances of her being a mild headache I tolerate instead of a full-blown migraine I need to deal with.

When I get back to Portland, I check in with Violet and she's home from Christmas shopping, laying down, tired. I'm

relieved she's home, feel like my stress levels have come down a notch.

I tell her I'm going to Law from the airport for a meeting and that I'll be back in a bit, to look over the online menu and text me with what she wants me to bring home for her for dinner.

I'm sitting down with Tony, both of us having a meal in my office so we can have a private conversation, when I get a text from Violet that says she doesn't see anything she wants on our menu and would I mind stopping by the Chinese food place we ordered from yesterday for some ginger beef and broccoli?

I write back that I will and then settle into my steak and lobster tail.

"All right," I say. "Plead your case."

Tony stares blankly for a minute and then takes a breath so big it's clear he's full of nerves.

"Boss, I want your blessing to pursue Jessa full ahead, I mean full-speed-ahead. But, if I don't get it, I won't do it. Date her, I mean. I know how big my fuck-up was. And it... it'll keep me awake at night."

This is interesting. He keeps talking. And it feels slightly reminiscent to the speech Luca Brasi gives The Godfather on the day Connie gets married. Like he's practiced it a bunch, but keeps stumbling.

"I know she... she pulled a fast one on me, but she regrets that. I... know, I mean, she's sorry because we talked on the phone when she got to her brother's. I called her and I told her my loyalty is to you and that I gotta make up for my mistakes. That I figure she was affectin' my ability to think clear and that I felt like she's insincere and her games put us all at risk. She admitted to fucking with my phone and told me she's regretting that because after all she's been through since yesterday, she's realizing she doesn't really love you. Sorry, Boss. It's just her competitiveness, you see. She likes to be the

one to end it. I think she was real with me. She's interested in explorin' things with me. She got shook up on Saturday and likes that I can protect her. She feels bad that what happened was because of her game. I know she's shook up so that might be part of it, but I think I could build something real with her from that. I really regret my fuck up. If that means I don't get to pursue her, it'll hurt, but that's how much... how much our friendship means to me. If you think my relationship with her makes me a liability, I trust you. I don't know that I can think clearly with that gorgeous woman in my ear because Killian, her voice does things to me." He shakes his head.

"You think you can keep her in check?" I ask. "You think you can find a way she's not gonna go babbling about that shit if things between you two go sour? Because that's the priority for me."

He gives a firm shake of his head. "If she tries, I take responsibility and that'd mean me taking care of whatever problems arise. I mean that. Serious, Kill. She only knows your secret because I fucked up. In fact," he leans forward and gets an expression most people would find not just intimidating, but also chilling, "if she hurts either of us, she's been playin' me and I'll choke her lights out myself."

Well. Interesting. I lean back and regard him thoughtfully.

I believe every word out of his mouth.

"You'd have to answer to Jag for that, though."

"I know," he says. "I'm prepared for that and I'll talk to Jagger today if I get your permission to go ahead with this."

I regard him a minute, then finally let the poor bastard out of his misery.

"Well, Tony, I'm thinkin' of investing in her dream business. Something she's wanted to do since she was a teenager. That ought to indebt her to me and buy some loyalty."

Plus she'll hear I'm organizing a big contract with Jag. Jag and me go way back so she's not gonna want to fuck her brother over, either, especially not knowing about his lucrative side-

business. If there's one thing about Jessa that's real above and beyond her love of all things champagne wishes and caviar dreams, it's her bond with Jag.

Some might think she'd devour Tony. But I happen to know the man well and before this fiasco, there's a reason I trusted him. He's unfailingly loyal but when it comes to women, he's extremely possessive and old-fashioned. Tony has the type of old-school loyalty that could make him a *made* man if he joined the right organization. Lucky for me, he joined mine.

Risk management where Jessa is concerned could've been sticky, even with me investing in her business. But with the addition of Tony keeping Jessa in check?

"So, let's get this straight. You're proposing that Jessa's yours and anything Jessa does to piss me off is on you? Is that what you're proposing? Because Jagger is also a force to be reckoned with and he won't be happy if he thinks his sister is in any danger."

"That's right, Kill." He straightens up. Light in his eyes. "And I'll make sure she knows it, too. As for Jag, he and I are tight. I'll make sure he's cool with me. He loves his sister, but I suspect he'll be happy to find out she might actually settle down and not be his problem for once."

He's excited about this. I lean over and shake his hand.

"Done."

"Can I ask what's being done about Iadanza? Or am I out of that because of my mistake? Whatever I can do to help, you let me know, Boss. I'd love to get my hands on that sticky little fuck." He rubs his head, which still has a goose egg on it from where he hit the floor.

"I'm meeting with Tino tomorrow. There's a plan in the works that'll make sure Raymond is no longer my problem, no longer anyone's."

A wide smile spreads across Tony's face.

"But whatever business we have, no pillow talk, Tony. I don't know that I can ever fully trust Jess. And she's wily. She likes

to be in the know and she gets devious if she thinks she's out of the loop. As you can tell.”

He nods slowly. He gets it.

I continue. “And when this shit is over, it's back to boring day-to-day shit. Your job will still be the same, but you'll work closely with Jag to make sure everything works like clockwork for security. No disrespect to you but with the growth of my business and the amount of security threats, I need Jag, so need you to report to him as well as me. This is outside what happened at the house on the weekend. It's something I've been thinking on for a while.”

His smile slips. “No pillow talk about business. Ever. And Kill, I'm relieved. I'm lookin' forward to less excitement. Believe me. I want my days to go back to being like they were, but with the difference bein' that I've got Jessa in my bed when I get home at night. Jag trained me. I got no problem reporting to him as well as you.”

“Jessa Carson isn't a girl that waits around for her man to get home at night. If you're not wining and dining her, it might be an issue. We might need to switch you to dayshift.”

He waves his hand. “I work nights. That won't change. Don't worry. I'll knock her up. Problem solved.” He sweeps one palm across the other

I laugh loud and give him a high five. He smiles and then picks up his cutlery. He saws off another bite of steak and shoves it into his mouth.

A minute later, he swallows his food, then looks me in the eyes. “Thanks for the second chance, Kill. Your respect means a lot to me. You're the brother I never had. I hate that I let you down and I would never forgive myself if you didn't forgive me. I still might have some trouble.”

I lean forward and slap him on the shoulder. “It's in the past, Tone. We're good. Now, let's eat this food so I can head out and pick up ginger beef and broccoli for my pregnant wife.”

His eyes light up. “Violet's pregnant?”

“Yeah.” I shoot him a grin before sipping my drink.

“Congratulations, man!” He holds his hand out.

I take it and shake. “Thank you. It’s still early, so only telling people we’re close to so far.”

He smiles wide. “I’m honored.”

“You’re a good friend,” I say.

“Be nice if we have kids that grow up together, eh, Kill?”

“It would. Don’t expect your woman to be on board with bein’ friends with mine though, Tony. Jessa isn’t exactly the type.”

“She will be,” he says, smiling with a devious grin.

“Am I about to get a front row seat to *The Taming of the Shrew*?”

He winks.

A lot of people might take one look at Tony, at the size of him, and what he does, deciding he must be a meathead. But the guy has a university degree and graduated Cum Laude. He was in a bad car accident not long after he graduated and it fucked with him, took time for him to come back from it. He’s been through a lot in his life and came to work for me at a time when he was feeling low. His loyalty has been proven more than once, but the way he’s been about this? It’s given me more confidence in him than ever.

He fucked up. His feelings for a beautiful woman got in the way of some common sense. I know how that is. And I’m also feeling like he’s learned from it.

Violet

Killian walks in as I'm setting a wrapped gift under the Christmas tree.

"Hey, baby." He approaches, taking his jacket off and setting a stapled paper bag on the counter on his way to me. "How you feeling?"

"Hi," I greet and get up from the floor. "Hungry. Get my ginger beef?"

He kisses me and then wraps his arms tight around me. "Got it. Fuckin' missed you today."

I look into his eyes. "You missed me?"

He nods and puts his lips to mine again. "Spent the day feeling like I was comin' outta my skin being in another state."

I caress his jaw and put my lips to it.

"How was your day?" he asks, rubbing his nose along the side of mine.

"Christmas shopping is mostly done. I have one thing left to wrap, but it's getting delivered."

"Nice. I guess I have something to get, too."

"What?"

"A gift for you." He pokes me on the nose.

"You already bought me the ridiculously expensive, ridiculously awesome SUV."

"That wasn't a Christmas gift, it was just transportation. You have fun shopping?"

"You have no idea. So much fun. I wrapped all your gifts in the laundry room so you couldn't spy on me. Did you try?"

“No, actually. Looked in once this morning when you were getting your shoes on.”

“No snooping,” I say. “Or you’ll be on the naughty list. Oh, I ran into Heidi at the mall today, too.”

“Heidi? Heidi who?”

“One of your employees, silly. She served me at Genesis that night and screwed up the orders? You took my advice and gave her an office job.”

“Oh yeah, her. Right.” He smiles.

“She has the biggest crush on you still. I’m glad she’s worked out after all.”

“Your idea to put her in the back office was a good one. Alana says she’s workin’ out well. Good with computers, with numbers.”

“Would it be weird if I became friends with her? Would you rather I didn’t do that with your employees?”

He laughs. “You went shopping today with Alana and Patricia. Both of them work for me, baby.”

“Right. I know. But I thought I’d ask. I like Heidi. Oh yeah, and then when I was leaving, I could’ve sworn I saw her get into Guy’s car. If it wasn’t him, the guy looked like he could pass for his brother. So maybe I can be chummy with her because if she’s got a guy, ha, get it, a guy named Guy? If she’s got him, I don’t have to worry she’ll try to steal you from me.”

“As if she could.” He rolls his eyes. “But I doubt she’s seein’ Guy. Not his type. What make was the car?”

I shrug. “Red El Camino. Souped up.”

“Guy drives a silver Jetta.”

“Oh. Maybe it wasn’t him. Who knows. Anyway, forget all that. Talk to me about what’s going on.”

He goes to the wine wall and into his liquor cabinet.

“That bad?” I ask.

“No. Not at all actually. I’ll fill you in after you eat.”

“Talk to me while I eat,” I counter.

He shakes his head. “You don’t eat when we’re talking serious shit. You push your food around and lose your appetite.”

“Well aren’t you getting observant,” I mutter.

“You eat while I go make a couple work calls and then we’ll talk.”

“Fine,” I grumble and unpack the bag and crack open a bottle of water before I reach for my light-up chopsticks.

We’re in bed, fireplace on, and I’m sifting through Christmas movie choices.

“Wes get ahold of you?” Killian asks.

“Yeah, I filled him in on my schedule the rest of the week. It’s gonna be a busy week.”

“Run it down for me.”

“Tomorrow, I’ve got lunch with Tennille and an appointment with a lawyer.”

“Which lawyer? I want that paid out of our joint account. Not yours.” He points at me.

“My account is also our joint account.” I point back.

“Then, let’s say I want it paid out of the joint account that has more than eighteen hundred bucks in it.”

I stick my tongue out at him. “It now has far less than that since I went Christmas shopping.”

He chuckles and finishes his drink before wrapping an arm around me and pulling me close, rubbing his nose against mine.

“Why? You buy me something?”

“Maaaybe...”

“Pay for the lawyer out of the other joint account. The one at Susanna’s bank.”

“Fine,” I relent. “It so happens, I’m seeing someone in the practice you use that’s specializes in employment law. Jennifer... uh... Cross, I think. And I’ve just decided I’m fine to let you pay for my lawyer since it’s partly your fault I’m unemployed.”

“It’s not my fault Shara is a cunt, but I’ll let you think that if you let me pay for it.”

I laugh. “Yeah, Shara had it out for me, but you totally threw gasoline on the fire when you threatened her.”

“Don’t know Jennifer, but it’s a good firm and they’ll just bill me since you’re my wife. Glad that’s organized. What’s after that?”

“Then, the next day, doctor’s appointment at ten o’clock. I told Wes you’d be coming with me so he probably didn’t need to. Then Christmas Eve. We don’t need him Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, right?”

“Right. What are we doing Christmas Eve and Christmas Day?” he asks.

“Christmas Eve, I was thinking we could invite everyone over here. What do you think about that? Food, drinks, Christmas music.”

“Works for me.”

“Christmas Day at Mom and Dad’s for dinner. The whole family is coming. I’m making the sweet potatoes and you’re responsible for the dinner rolls.”

“I am?” he asks, looking surprised.

“I’ll buy them. Everyone gets a chore. I sent Will a text that he should bring something desserty. But told him no protein powder allowed in those desserts.”

“You’re figuring my brother out already. But I can make the dinner rolls. Master dough maker over here.”

“If you’re sure. And oh... hey, stay out of the account transactions until after Christmas so it doesn’t ruin the surprise..”

He looks at me with interest.

“I mean it.” I poke his chest.

But most of the presents I bought him were bought on my own credit card, so at least I know he can’t snoop on that one. At least I don’t think he can. He’s proven pretty resourceful so far.

“Fine,” he fake-grumbles.

“So, talk to me and fill me in on everything that’s happening before we watch a movie. Jingle All the Way or Deck the Halls?”

“Whatever you wanna watch. And you sure you wanna hear all this?”

I poke his chest. “You’re cruisin’ for a bruisin’ if you think you’re gonna keep me in the dark.”

“Cruisin’ for a bruisin’?” he smirks. “Where are you gonna bruise me?”

“Your bum,” I deadpan.

“Are you hankering for a ... spank-” he chuckles, “ering?”

“Maybe.” I roll onto him.

He taps my bottom playfully.

I sober. “No, really. Talk to me. What’s happening with Ray? What about this New Year’s Eve thing? What was the trip to Seattle about?”

“Violet, I really don’t-”

“Start talking,” I order, poking his chest.

He spansks my bum again, this time with a little more oomph.

I squirm and he smirks, then rolls me to my back and his lips meet mine hungrily.

“Are you distracting me with spankings and kisses?” I ask.

“Mm. Yes.” He thrusts his finger into my hair “And this.” He nips at my throat.

I squirm under him and this gives room to slide his fingers into the waistband of my pajama pants. I arch as his finger dips inside me before he rubs my clit.

“Killian, c’mon.”

“You come on.” He circles my clit again.

I grab his wrist. “Stop.”

He lifts his face out of the curve of my neck and his expression is playful. “I’ll fill you in while I play with you. How about that? Then you won’t feel any stress because you’ll be feeling what I’m doing.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

His mouth moves down to my chest and he nips at my boob.

I grab his face with both hands. “Talk or you’re cut off until you do.”

He rolls to his back. “Angle shooting, Mrs. Coulter? I might be a little impressed.”

I roll, too, so I’m snuggled into his side, my head on his arm and then look into his eyes and bat my eyelashes. “I don’t know what that means, but is it working? Because I don’t like the idea of withholding sexy time, but I will...”

“Raymond kidnapped Jessa when he left the beach house in Tony’s car. She was in it and he pointed the gun at her, then drove off.”

I sit up and my mouth drops.

He pulls me back to where I was. “She’s fine. He didn’t lay a hand on her. She was here the other day, the day Susanna

came, trying to bait me and wound up playing with Tony instead. She got messages from his phone Saturday about not needing to go to Tillamook because I went and finagled her way there with him, bein' nosy. He never got my text sayin' I'd been there that day because she replied to me and then erased that string. So Tony's fault for letting his guard down with Raymond and with Jessa. Also partly my fault because I also got into Raymond's head when you were waiting in the car and my words about what might be coming next got him tweaked enough to make him make that bold move."

I wince.

"Yeah. So it was my fault he made the play to escape. Tony's fault for letting Jessa come. Jessa's fault for fucking with Tony's phone. An all-around cluster-fuck."

I blow out a long breath.

"Not to mention I equipped him by leaving his pain pills with him. All of them."

I double-blink.

"It was up to him what he'd do with them. Figured I'd get in his head one more time for fun."

I roll my eyes.

"And he dissolved them in his water bottle."

I gasp. "He tried to force-feed them to Tony!"

"Yeah. I shouldn't have tried to mindfuck him one more time. That's on me. He had nothin' to lose and obviously it went sideways. So," he continues on, "Ass-wipe let Jessa go on the side of the road not knowin' who she was. She got to a diner and called her brother collect and he sent a car for her and then knew where to have the chopper do surveillance to find him. So now not only do I have the Raymond in custody issue to deal with but also there's the fact that Jessa Carson knows I was holding him captive."

"Oh God."

“Yeah. Stop scratching your neck. See. I didn’t wanna do this.”

“I’m fine. I’ll sit on my hands.”

“I’ve made some moves to keep Jessa’s mouth shut.”

“You what?”

“No. Nothin’ like that. Jagger and I have been friends since we were teenagers. And believe me, if anyone laid a hand on his sister, there’d be hell to pay. Turns out he’s pretty dangerous himself. Way more dangerous than I am, evidently because Jag’s level of dangerous is untraceable.”

I frown.

“Anyway, that was my day. Making treaties with Jessa. Talkin’ over the New Year’s Eve strategy with Jag. And dinner with Tony where I gave him my blessing to pursue Jessa. Tony will make her his responsibility and I’ve laid out a business partnership with her that should keep her mouth shut. Pain in my ass, but whatever.”

I blow out a breath. That’s a lot to digest. “What about Ray?”

“He’s goin’ to Campo.”

I frown. “How?”

“I have a plan.”

“But, he won’t get bail again after missing his last court date.”

“No, he won’t,” Killian agrees.

I’m confused. “So, how will you make that happen?”

“Remember the gun he brought to Numbers opening night?”

“Of course I do. That was terrifying.”

“That weapon was discharged the same day Raymond turned himself in.”

“Discharged?”

“Used to commit a murder.”

I gasp. “What? I thought you kept the gun.”

He grabs my hands, probably worrying I’m about to start clawing at my neck again, I guess.

“I did keep the gun. And it was used on Felix Hoffman.”

I frown.

He elaborates. “Amber Buckley’s junkie boyfriend. The one planning to rob Numbers.”

I gape at him.

“The gun will be found. Registered to Raymond with his prints on it. Murder took place the same day Raymond was caught.”

“You shot Felix Hoffman?”

He shakes his head. “Not me, no. Timing would’ve been off for what they’ll estimate as time of death by about five hours, but should still work out fine. I’m working that part out.

Iadanza has already been moved back here from California where he was held last night. But he’ll either get moved to another jail, maximum security for the new charge, or he’ll be moved to a courthouse for that additional charge and whichever comes first, that transport will be intercepted.”

“What? How? Huh? Okay, hang on. Let me process this for a second. You’re having him kidnapped from jail guards? And you framed him for murder?”

“Hoffman lived in your old hood. Four blocks from Ass-wipe’s favorite watering hole. Was known to frequent it. Maybe they had a beef nobody knew about.”

“What if Ray implicates you before he’s caught?”

“He might try. But his new public defender is already in the pocket.”

I do a double-take.

“That’s who he’d give the information to. And it wouldn’t go anywhere.”

“You kept that gun with his prints on it as a contingency?”

“Yep.”

“What if the public defender tells someone?”

“He won’t. Wherever I can, I have contingency plans, baby.”

“But... you ordered a hit on Felix Hoffman?”

“I thought you might have trouble with that one. Listen, Felix Hoffman was a lowlife drug dealer and drug manufacturer with a lab and zero quality control. He knocked Amber around, got her hooked on drugs, and has direct responsibility for her overdose as well as other bad drug deaths in the city earlier this month. Add to that, he caused harm to several of my employees not to mention was planning to rob my club and target me New Year’s Eve despite that he got paid a visit and given a beating with a warning after the last time he fucked with me. He got his stepsister to get herself hired and seduce one of my managers so they can plan their heist and steal money from children’s charities as well as me and likely my customers. Like I told you before, violence isn’t something I jump into lightly, but I won’t hesitate when people or things I care about are in jeopardy.”

Suddenly, I don’t feel so good.

I lay back down and empty my lungs while staring at the ceiling.

He’s quiet.

“I don’t like doin’ this to you. Stressing you out. Can you just start trusting me to let you know what I think you need to know?”

“No,” I say. “I’m not gonna be some timid bunny rabbit who walks around oblivious. If there’s danger, tell me. If there’s a plot, I need to know so I can watch my surroundings. I don’t want to live in the dark. I don’t want to be blindsided. I’m not weak or broken anymore, Killian. I’ll learn to handle this shit.”

He flexes his jaw muscles.

“I’m serious. I’ll deal. If this is what life looks like for us, I’ll deal. I’ll adapt. And besides, you need someone to talk to, to

bounce ideas off. That can be me.”

“But baby...”

I lean over and put my lips to his, holding his jaw and then touching his bottom lip with my tongue.

He groans out a sexy noise. “Violet, listen...”

“No. Shh.”

I lift my top up over my head and toss it.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Distracting you with my bra.”

“Baby, I don’t wanna cause-”

“Shh.” I kiss him. “This seems like a great way to shut you up. Is it working?”

He sighs.

I smile.

He pokes my cheek, sticking his index finger against a dimple.

“Pullin’ out the dimples? Unfair, Mrs. Coulter.”

“So, it’s working?” I ask.

“It is. But not enough. A better option might be to bend over and let me slip my tongue inside you. Lose the sexy reindeer pajamas, Dimples.”

My head being all full of all that stuff, I’m thinking no way will I climax. But I do. And so does he, all over my lower back, uttering dirty words about how he can’t wait to fuck me properly, how if we get the green light from my doctor, he’ll have to make up for the past two weeks.

I fall asleep with trouble brewing in my brain. I dream of a giant Jenga game where all the things that could go wrong are piled on me one by one with big tree sized Jenga blocks that are labeled with all the problems. On top of the blocks sits a

baby whose face I can't see. The baby has a judge's gavel in one hand like a baby rattle, a toy gun in the other.

I wake up thinking about the day I've got ahead and then thoughts stray to the fact that Ray's mom is already at that prison where Ray's about to be sent. I wonder if he'll find out about that. And then I think about Killian's ex getting kidnapped by Ray and how Killian is going into business with her to make sure she keeps his secrets.

My chest feels tight. My throat feels clogged. I have to summon my strength. Focus on the things I can focus on. Today, dealing with getting fired. Tomorrow, a doctor's appointment. And then... Christmas. And hopefully nothing crazy after that.

I hope.

For a split second, I'm almost considering the benefits of blissful ignorance. But then I think about the fact that I have a baby to protect and knowledge is power, and can be used to gain strength. I do believe Killian's goal is to protect me, but I'm feeling protective, too. Over the baby. Over him as well. I can only hope his carefully constructed house of cards doesn't tumble down around him. Around both of us.

I roll over and he's lying there awake, stress on his face, too.

"Good morning," I say.

Reaching for me, the stress on his face clears.

Killian

I didn't sleep. My mind ran over the plans, all the plans in place. Contingencies and then I tried to forge contingencies for the contingencies. I thought on Violet's reaction to knowing what's happening. She slept, but she was restless all night and I was in tune with that, worrying it's too much for her. I'm proud of her for trying to take it all in, but I also feel guilty that she feels she has to do it.

Waking up to those pretty eyes on me with concern, it was soothing. She's not looking at me with betrayal now and I want this shit done and over with so that she has nothing at all to worry about. I want her to see I've got control of all of it, that I'm capable of protecting her, keeping our family safe.

She wakes hungry so I cook pancakes for us. And despite how she goes on about them being the best pancakes ever, I can't stomach any. Instead, I think on the fact that every time my mother was trying to settle us down, make us feel happy even though everything around us was bullshit, she made pancakes. Shitty ones, but it was an effort and here I am making pancakes from scratch for Violet after making her worry because yeah, we're surrounded by bullshit.

She eats half of hers but feels nauseous, so she decides to take a shower and get ready while I clean up, planning to head to Genesis.

I've got a meeting with the cops there and then I'm planning to sift through as much surveillance of Numbers as possible to get intel on this stepsister of Felix Hoffman and hopefully whoever else is part of the crew that has been planning to rip me off before Susanna brings Violet over for her surprise bridal shower.

Violet's phone rings and she answers it. Her lawyer's appointment is canceled. Jennifer Cross can't meet until the first week of the new year due to a personal emergency. Violet is pissed about it for a minute, but then shrugs that this gives her more time to investigate Shara and build her case.

I find it amusing, and I'm also proud of her.

She's standing up for herself. Fighting back. Somehow I don't think she'd do that this well if this were a few months ago.

Yes, I'll take partial credit for it.

"So all you've got today then is your meeting with your friend?"

"Tennille from KIT Peripherals, yeah."

"Stan taking you?"

"He can't drive me today. We talked about it after the mall. He has his daughter's Christmas pageant. I told him not to worry. Wesley is going to follow me. Since you think that's necessary. But is it really?"

I clasp her chin and look into her eyes. "A hundred per cent. I'll take no chances with your safety."

She moistens her lips and then nods.

"Thanks, baby," I say. "It'll make me feel better to know you're not vulnerable. Lots of shit piled on my plate right now and over the next bit I'll be workin' hard to get it cleaned up so we've got a clean slate for the new year."

"Okay. If you need any help, let me know."

I smile at her.

"What? I can help."

"Let me worry about all that."

"Fine. Will you be back for dinner later? Should I cook like the dutiful little woman?" she asks, snark in her tone.

"I think I'm spending the evening at Numbers," I say.

"Probably won't be home until closing, but you're way more

than the dutiful little woman, woman. And I have a pile of shit on my plate, so it'll help me focus on that if I know you're safe. Is that okay?"

She sighs. "Okay, well, I've just decided I'm not cooking. I'm having gingerbread again for dinner."

I chuckle. "You're gonna turn into gingerbread."

"And give birth to one," she shrugs.

My phone rings. *TR*. Tino Rossi.

"Hey," I greet.

He says, "Throw the kettle on."

"Will do."

"Later."

He's referring to the news, so I head to the television and turn it on. Not five minutes later the ticker on the bottom of the screen has a line indicating a yet-to-be identified body was just found at the landfill.

Hoffman.

They haven't said his name, but obviously. I asked Tino to work with JC to get advice on where and how to stage the scene.

Hoffman's stepsister Stephanie happens to be on the schedule today from three to eleven at Numbers, so that ought to be interesting to see, too.

Half an hour after Violet leaves to go to her lunch, I'm almost ready to head out when Ed Scottsdale, one of the cops that came to see me the other day calls.

He tells me Felix Hoffman was found dead, at the landfill. Gunshot wound to the head.

I remark that I guess we don't need to worry about a New Year's Eve heist, and he tells me their ears will be open and we'll proceed as planned in case the rest of Hoffman's crew continues on with their plan.

43

Violet

I phone Killian after my lunch with Tennille. I'm so excited to fill him in that I'm trembling.

"Hey, baby."

"Is this a good time?" I ask, about ready to burst. "I have news."

"Sure, I'm at Numbers going through surveillance, waiting for the manager to show. He should've been here an hour ago, so I might have to let you go suddenly. But if I do, I'll call back after a quick chat with him. Go. Give me your update. You sound excited."

"Oh, I am. So, I went to lunch with Tennille, and she's given me quite a bit of ammo."

"Tell me."

"So, there was an order from me the Thursday before we went away that came in via the usual EDI transmission, which is archaic but still how we do business with this supplier. Remember the time you picked me up and had to wait half an hour?"

"Yeah."

"It's a pain in the ass. But anyway, because of how it works, if you have order changes, you have to fax or email a revision and get them to do them manually, the system glitches otherwise. So there was a manual revision sent through on Monday morning for the eight hundred and whatever pieces they said I made the mistake of ordering by fax. And it came with my name as the sender but it's not my handwriting. But, then the revision got canceled via fax about twenty minutes after the first fax was sent."

“And?”

“And it not only wasn’t my handwriting, this was the Monday after we got married.”

“So we were in Vegas when this happened,” he says.

“Yep. And Tennille gave me a copy of the paper trail. There’s a digital trail at work, I’m sure, but I no longer have access to that.”

“But others will if the whistle gets blown.”

“Exactly. Tennille also told me word on the street is that Shara had a torrid affair with Frank, her boss, for the last month but that it ended recently because Frank’s wife found out and delivered an ultimatum. Frank wouldn’t leave his wife, much to Shara’s chagrin. Rumor has it that Shara has grand plans to be in a position to take Frank’s job from him, then get her ex-fiancé fired after she does her best to make his life miserable. Surprise, surprise, he’s the senior buyer there and the guy you said is the bonehead doing my role that I was initially going to replace. But Shara was overheard by Tara, our receptionist, you met her at McHop’s. Tara heard her saying she’s looking forward to being his boss for long enough to make him hate his life. I found this out because Tara turned up at the restaurant and joined me and Tennille. They planned that ahead of time when they were talking. Tara tells me she thinks I should either sue the company or take my information to Peter, our CEO. She thinks if I take my evidence to Peter, he’ll listen.”

“Wow.”

“There’s more. This is all fascinating stuff. I’m feeling like I’m in the middle of a corporate crime drama and it’s got my heart not only pumping, but I’m feeling kind of powerful. And that’s not a feeling I’m used to, you know?”

“It feels good to take control and line up ducks to fuck someone who fucked you first, doesn’t it, Dimples?”

I laugh nervously. “You’re hilarious. I’m not quite ready to rain hellfire on them, not Killian-Style, but anyway, Shara is

on a power trip and decided she no longer likes me for some reason, probably jealousy because I have a hot as fuck husband and she has a couple exes who are not remotely hot.”

He laughs.

“Anyway, we’re eating lunch and we’ve moved beyond the topic of my job and we’re talking about my pregnancy and guess who walks in and sees me, Tennille, and Tara having lunch? Guess!”

“Shara.”

“Bingo! She gets this panicked look on her face, spins, nearly colliding with the wall and leaves. Like she knows I’m digging in and getting information on her. It was amazing. I looked her right in the face and smiled at her before she fumbled and... I repeat... nearly walked into a wall. Tara knew she was planning to eat lunch there that day with a vendor and told Tennille and staged it all.”

“Good, baby. That’s great. What now?”

“I’m thinking about contacting Peter, the big boss and asking to meet with him. Tara thinks I should. Tara’s even threatening to tell him herself.”

“You thinkin’ of going back?”

“I think that ship has sailed for me. Tennille wants to offer me a job, too at her work, but I like the idea of doing something on my own. Or with you. But I might also want to stay home with our baby the first year. I like that I have choices. For the first time in a long time I feel like I actually have choices. So, I’m gonna think about it.”

“Good plan.”

“Yeah. It’s nice to have options. But I’d love it if my name got cleared and if Shara got what was coming to her.”

“Revenge can be satisfying,” he says.

I snicker. “I never wanted it before. But the way she targeted me, like she just thought she could and that I’d just deal with

it, for that reason, I'm gonna show her I'm not the meek, weak person she thought I was. I think she liked me best when she thought I was no competition for her, one of her minions, you know?"

"I agree. Good, baby. Listen, Craig just came in. I'm gonna have to go here, but I'm proud of you. We'll celebrate tomorrow night. I got tickets to a show for us."

"You did?"

"I did."

"To see what?"

"It's a surprise."

"Oh, okay. Yippee. I love you. Talk to you in a while."

"Love you, baby. So much. Good job. Talk soon."

He ends the call and I turn the ignition and hear Wesley turn his, too. He's behind me. I told him I'd be a minute making a phone call.

But then my phone rings. It's my old office calling.

I answer, then turn my car off, looking over my shoulder, seeing Wes has turned his car off, too.

"Hello?" I answer, thinking it's probably Tara or Cammy.

"Violet Gates?" A man inquires.

"Yes? I mean, Violet Coulter now, but yeah, it's me."

"Apologies Violet. This is Peter Dench at MicroTeknique."

"Oh. Hi Peter." Whoa. My heart is thudding really fast.

"By chance, could you come to the office this afternoon? I'd like a few minutes with you if that's possible."

Tara! Did she go in there and say something? She kept saying she was tempted. I told her to feel free, not sure if she actually would or not.

"Peter, I was on my way to an appointment with a lawyer, actually."

“A lawyer?”

“An employment lawyer about wrongful termination. Sexual discrimination.”

“I see,” he says softly. “That’s what I’d like to see you about. I’m afraid things have been mishandled and I’m incredibly unhappy about it. Tara came into my office five minutes ago with a lot to say. I’d like an opportunity to talk to you if that’s possible.”

“I think I have time before my lawyer’s appointment,” I say, face super-hot.

I have never been a good fibber. I’m certainly having trouble doing it right now. Even though I was planning to go to a lawyer today before the appointment got rescheduled, it still feels like a fib. Or I guess it’s a bluff. A poker bluff isn’t exactly the same as lying and I guess I am playing a little bit of poker here.

“I appreciate that, Violet. How long before you can come in?”

“About fifteen, twenty minutes,” I say.

“See you then. Thanks, Violet.”

“Okay, Peter. See you soon.”

Holy cow!

I send a text to Wes, who is still parked behind me to tell him I need to stop by my old office for a few minutes before heading home.

He replies that it’s fine, he’ll follow.

When I walk in, Tara straightens up and winks, then gets on the phone.

“Shara, there’s a package here for you.”

I want to burst into gales of laughter, but I miraculously hold it in. She wants Shara to see that I’m here.

Tara picks up a FedEx envelope and sets it on the edge of the reception counter with a flourish, then punches buttons on her phone. “Peter? Violet Coulter is here for you. Right. Will do.” She puts the phone down and says, “Follow me, Mrs. Coulter.”

“Never underestimate the receptionist,” I mutter.

“I see all, and I know almost all.” she says, winking, then leads me toward Peter’s office. We see Shara coming toward us. She stumbles, then halts when she sees me. I smile wide and keep my head high as I pass her.

Tara raps on Peter’s door and then opens it to let me in. She winks again, then shuts it behind me.

I’ve always liked Peter. He’s a hands-on CEO and very down-to-earth. And I have the evidence of the paper trail from Tennille for that order with me. I’ve also saved screenshots of the text trail between me and Shara where she regularly commended me on how I do my job and suggested I work from home more than once as well. Out of kindness to her, though she doesn’t deserve it, I’ve blacked out the personal stuff she shared about her ex.

He asks me what happened from my perspective and then I explain, being professional and tactful about it, showing him phone screenshots as well as show the paper trail of that order.

“What are these blacked out areas?” Peter asks, looking at my phone.

“I’m the kind of person who keeps the friendship vault locked tight even if someone intentionally hurts me, Peter. That’s personal stuff Shara shared that’s not relevant here.”

He gives me a smile that reaches his eyes, which says he respects that. He asks if he can have the paper trail about the questionable purchase order. I tell him I haven’t had a chance to make copies and he suggests we do that. We walk to the photocopier together.

There’s a buzz around the office now with people seeing me and Shara’s door is not only closed but her blinds are drawn.

And that's never the case with her office. She likes to have a view of what's going on through the cubicle farm layout.

When we're back in his office, Peter sits down with his copies of the KIT Peripherals order. He sighs as he taps the papers into a tidy stack.

"I'd like you to consider coming back. I'm terminating Shara's employment this afternoon and I'd be prepared to offer you her job on an interim basis, meaning you'd be acting Distribution Director. If it's too much, it'll be temporary until we can find the right fit. If it's not too much, we'll offer it to you."

It takes me a second to reply. And he shows all the patience in the world.

"Um..."

"You've got the qualifications based on your education and with your track record here, I'm convinced you've got it in you."

He smiles kindly and I finally find words.

"Peter, I'm six weeks pregnant and I've been having brutal morning sickness. It could go on for the next six weeks or longer."

"I've had plenty of women work for me, Violet, who've had babies and worked during their pregnancy, even with the problem of morning sickness. My wife: we have six kids, and she had morning sickness five of those times. We'll get through it. You'll do what you can, what you can't, you'll delegate. I'm not opposed to you working from home when you need to as long as the job gets done and you don't mind the occasional call after hours if we need to iron things out for this acquisition as well as another one we've got in the works. And I'm prepared to offer you an extra-long maternity leave if that helps sway you as long as you attend weekly conference calls to make sure you stay in the loop."

I pull my lips tight. "This was a big shock, getting fired the way I did. And it caused me to reflect on what I might want

going forward. I'm not sure I can make a decision on the spot."

"Think about it over the holidays. Get back to me the first week of the new year."

"Thank you for the opportunity. I'll absolutely think on it."

He rises and reaches for my hand. "You've been an asset to the company. We're going into a period of upheaval, and I'll need to retain the right people through that. I'd hate to lose you. You've saved the company money, streamlined processes, and the team as well as your vendors all respect you. I had four calls and two emails since you were let go from people urging me to reconsider. I left it to Frank and Shara to restructure their team, but I see that was a mistake and I'll be talking that over with Frank. I'll have an offer letter drawn up. Tara has your non-MT email address, I take it?"

"She does."

"I'll have it sent to you tomorrow. You'll earn almost double your current salary. Plus performance bonuses. *If* you work out as Director. If we determine it's better for you to return to your old role or something in middle management, you'll get a raise with performance bonuses. Shara should have bumped your pay up annually by at least double the rate she gave you each year. I'm not sure what went wrong there because I already reviewed your performance reviews and there's no reason why she should've held back on that. And I'm willing to give you those raises proactively. And you'll get the full increase for the duration of being acting Director, which I'd say we should try for ninety days as a trial."

Holy shit.

"Thank you for the offer. I'll let you know."

"And you can keep the severance package Frank offered. For the trouble and distress the restructuring caused you if you decide to come back."

I blink twice. A year's salary.

He smiles. “As you can tell, we’d really like to have you back. Especially with this acquisition. You’d have my full support if your pregnancy is a difficult one. I know it’d only be a temporary business disruption. I’m not in the habit of turning my back on my reliable people the moment their lives become difficult.”

“Is this partly because of the lawsuit you could have to deal with if I went to a lawyer?”

He pauses before answering. “It was grossly mishandled, Violet. You would win that lawsuit. I’m sure of it. I’m hoping you’ll give us the chance to treat you better than you’ve been treated by Shara and not file a lawsuit.”

“I’d be happy to consider it, Peter. Thank you. I’ll talk it over with my husband and I’ll think about it. But, whatever decision I make, the way you’ve handled this, there’s no way I’ll sue you.”

“I appreciate that. Happy Holidays, Violet.”

“Same to you, Peter.”

I leave the office trembling.

I’m shook up. Shocked. What a day. What a week. Shit. What a year, even.

I get into the car and head home, Wesley following. He insists on seeing me to the apartment door.

“Merry Christmas, Wesley,” I say, when we get to our floor.

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Mrs. Coulter.” He walks me toward the apartment door.

“Violet,” I correct.

“Violet.” He smiles and waves toward the door.

I unlock the apartment, disarm the alarm, rearm it, wave goodbye to him, then head to the couch and flop.

Wow.

I text Killian.

“More news. Come home early if you can. I want to celebrate. Naked.”

He replies a little while later.

Killian: Things are crazy so not sure I can. Sorry baby. Love you.

Me: No sweat. Don't worry. If I'm sleeping when you get home (which I might be doing NAKED), wake me. Love you.

At five thirty, the lobby phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Susanna Gagne to see you, Mrs. Coulter.”

“Oh. Send her up.”

I open the door to a wide-eyed and open-mouthed Susanna a few minutes later.

“This is a surprise,” I say.

She looks stunned.

“What's up?” I ask.

“Um...” She looks me over. “Change into a pretty frock and let's go.”

“Go where?” I ask.

“I'm taking you to dinner.”

“We didn't have plans.”

“We do now. You've still got most of your makeup on so that's good, but take that ponytail out, fluff those curls up, throw a dress and some heels on and chop, chop.” She punctuates her ‘chop chop’ with two claps. “Bring your lipstick. You can apply it in the car.”

“Dinner would be nice. I've got news to share,” I say.

“Yeah?” she asks.

“Things went crazy today with my lunch with my vendor, Tennille. And not only would my bitchy ex-boss have gotten fired this afternoon, but I got offered a pretty crazy job offer. I’ll fill you in on the way. But, I have to call Wesley, my security. See if he can follow us. Killian has me on strict orders right now to have-”

“I already have Wesley waiting for us downstairs. And I have a bone to pick with you about that, Missy. Why didn’t you say a word about how fucking gorgeous your bodyguard is?”

I laugh.

“Did you see those green eyes? And those biceps, Violet? My God.” She grabs my biceps and gives me a little shake. “Why didn’t you tell me? I met him on the way in, he was in the parking lot, and I could barely talk I was *that* flustered. The man has the most beautiful hands I’ve ever seen. Who pervs on someone’s hands? I do, that’s who.” She points at herself.

“Why is he still here? How do you even know who he is?”

“No time to explain right now. Change your clothes. Hurry. We have reservations. I’ll explain later.”

“Huh?”

“No questions, Missy. Did you not hear me earlier when I ordered-” she claps her hands again, “chop, chop?”

We get into the back of Wesley’s car, which strikes me as strange. She doesn’t want me to drive, and I don’t know why.

“Not like I can get drunk, Suse.”

“Duh. Just trust me,” she says, smiling.

“Wesley, I’m sorry, I don’t know how you got roped into this, whatever this is.”

“Not to worry; it’s cool,” he says, and his eyes are twinkling in the rearview mirror.

Susanna fans herself and goes wide-eyed. I'm not shocked my bestie is crushing on my bodyguard. He's pretty gorgeous.

I fill her in about my day on the way there and am still telling the story when we stop.

We're at Numbers.

"What are we doing here?" I ask.

Suse is doing something on her phone and sitting sideways so I can't see her screen.

"I gotta run in for two seconds and talk to Killian," she says, not looking up while she does. "You might as well come say hi."

"You gotta run in and talk to my husband on the way to take me to dinner? This makes no sense."

"Come on," she says, sliding her phone into her bag and tugging my hand to pull me out the door with mischief shining in her eyes.

We head inside, Wesley following, and then I see Alana. She's also got a big smile on her face.

"Oh, you're working here today?" I ask.

"Not exactly," she replies, and she's not dressed the way she usually is for work. She's got jeans and a nice blouse on instead of one of her power suits and she isn't wearing her eyeglasses. "How are you, Violet?"

"I'm good, thanks. Interesting day."

"Let's go see Killian," Alana says without even asking me why my day was interesting. "He's up in his office. And then let's grab a drink and you can tell me all about how interesting."

I wave to Craig, the manager, who is talking to a server by the bar. He smiles and waves at me. The pretty brunette beside him gives me a snotty look.

He whispers something to her and she straightens up and her expression changes to something else. Something mean, I think. A chill crawls up my spine for some weird reason. I follow Alana and Susanna.

“What’s going on, you guys?”

They both smile at me and it hits me. They’re doing my bridal shower here.

We walk into Killian’s office and not only is Killian there, so are a dozen faces I know who all shout, “Surprise!”

The space is filled with light purple and metallic silver balloons. Small pots filled with violets. And three tables with chairs around them have been brought in fill what’s normally Killian’s very spacious office. It’s now a tight fit with those tables, a buffet table set up by the window that looks down on the club, a selection of drinks, and a round gift table near the bathroom door.

“You guys!” I exclaim.

Killian moves in and kisses me. “I’m outta here. Have fun. I’ll be back in three or four hours, and we’ll go home and you can give me a fashion show.” He wiggles his brows and gets laughter from everyone in the room.

“M’kay,” I say and straighten his tie.

It’s strange being here in this office, the place I paced weeks back worrying Ray was outside with a gun.

“We’re going to have drinks, open gifts, have food, and then head down and play some games. Work for you?” Susanna asks. “I wanted to book a room but it’s busy around here this time of year and this is even better, your man’s cushy office with the private bathroom.”

“You did a great job pulling this together.”

“I had help.” She gestures to Alana, who smiles big.

“Thank you, you guys.”

I get hugs from everyone that's here. Mom, Aunt Sara, cousin Colleen. Patricia. Brit. Susanna's mom, Lorena. Also Cammy, Esther, Tara, Tennille. Debbie. There's also my old high school friends, Kate, Lauren, Leslie, and Michelle. I get a little choked up after hugging everyone and catching a better look at the table filled with gifts.

Susanna gets me a ginger ale and nearly everyone else gets wine or cocktails. Brit questions that choice and I announce that I'm pregnant, which garners more excitement.

And it's a fun evening with lots of food, laughs, and gorgeous lingerie, a beautiful bed-in-a-bag from my mom, as well as a couple gift cards to lingerie stores. And then we head to the arcade floor and play games and several of the girls as well as Mom are kind of tipsy and it's fun to watch them have such a good time.

More than once I catch sight of Killian who has been around but staying out of the way, though his eyes have been on me a few times.

Most everyone has left by shortly after ten o'clock, except me, Susanna, and Brit. And I'm finding I'm wishing Brit would go, too. I enjoyed hanging out with her that other time here, but today she's been getting under my skin. She's acting possessive over Susanna. Like she's jealous of me. Which is annoying. But it's not just that. She's made a couple remarks that made me grit my teeth. An innuendo that I got pregnant to trap my rich and sexy husband. Joking about me not having to work because I get to live a lush life. Asking me about my prenup and then being outlandishly loud when I told her there wasn't one. Drinking too much, ordering top shelf booze since my rich, hot hubby is "footin' the bill", being more than a little crass in front of my mom about the lingerie and what we'll get up to while I wear it while I can because I'll soon be "fat".

When she made the 'fat' comment, she looked to my curvy friend from high school, Laurie, and said, "no offense."

Laurie's face went red.

"Don't be a cunt, Brit," Susanna said. "Laurie's curves are gorgeous and she has a hot hubby who loves them. Sorry, Mrs. Daphne," Susanna added because my mother was in earshot.

Brit laughed it off and downed another shot. And then pretty much everyone left while me, Susanna, and Brit hung out in the karaoke bar because Brit wasn't ready to leave, and I was waiting for Killian to finish up his night.

Killian comes into the bar, which hasn't got karaoke going tonight, just the jukebox, and heads right to me at a pub-height table with Brit and Suse.

"Have a fun night?" He kisses me.

It has been a fun night, except for the Brit factor which was mildly annoying at first but has gotten progressively more irritating as she's gotten sloppy drunk.

"Definitely. Thanks, baby," I say.

He lifts me off the chair by my hips and sets me on my feet. I wrap my arms around his middle and snuggle in.

"You two make me sick," Brit says. "All lovey-dovey. Blah." She opens her mouth wide and sticks her finger in, then downs the rest of her drink. "Susanna, let's go pick up some hot men in the bar. Lookin' at Violet's hot hubby has my undies all wet. Ooh, who is that?"

I feel Killian straighten up and there's surprise on his face at her comment. I'm over it at this point and ready to go. But my eyes swing to the direction Brit and Susanna are looking and I see it's Killian's employee Guy that is getting the attention. As usual, he's dressed in a nice suit and looks good.

"Oh my. I want a piece of that," Brit says not even under her breath with her eyes on Guy.

"Well, hello, Mrs. Coulter. Congratulations on the marriage! I need to steal her for a hug, Kill."

Killian releases me and takes a step back. Guy wraps his arms around me.

“A quick one,” Killian mutters good-naturedly, “And I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Marriage agrees with you,” Guy says and gives me a squeeze.

“Thank you. How come you’re here tonight? Don’t you work at Genesis?”

“I bounce between locations now and knew you two would be here tonight and it’s my last working day until the new year. I’m off on vacation, so made sure I bounced here to drop Kill a little Christmas gift.” He smiles. “Congrats on the wedding. My boss is a lucky man.”

“And you’re a man with great taste in Scotch,” Killian adds, rolling his eyes. “Brings me a gift and bugs me to open it so he can have some.”

“I do have excellent taste. So does Killian,” Guy says, looking at me with his signature flirtatious grin.

I laugh.

“Watch it,” Killian warns, but there’s playfulness there.

“Hey, so didn’t I see you with Heidi the other day at the mall? Are you two an item now?”

Guy frowns. “Heidi? No.” He scratches his temple and shakes his head. “Heidi from Genesis you mean? Wasn’t me.”

“Oh, could’ve sworn that I saw her getting in a car with you. Maybe you have an evil doppelganger.”

“Or a good one,” he adds, “And I’m the evil one.”

I laugh.

“You wanna let go of my wife now, Guy?” Killian says. “If there’s gonna be a Guinness World record broken for the world’s longest hug it is not being broken with you and my woman.”

“Since she’s getting felt up by him, can I feel you up?” Brit asks, getting right in our space and then wraps her arms around Killian and goes for his butt with both hands.

I quickly pull out of Guy’s hold and grab a handful of her hair at the back, hauling her off him.

I hear, “Oh fuck,” from Susanna and then spot Wesley moving in from the corner of my eyes. I didn’t even know Wesley was still here. Brit squeals in pain as I pull her hair down, so we’re face to face. She’s a lot taller than me but we’re eye-level now.

“Listen, bitch,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Whoa, baby,” Killian says and gently detaches my hand from Brit’s hair. “Time to call it a night, I’d say,” Killian says. “Guy can you have a hostess call Susanna and Brit a taxi?”

“I’ll drive ‘em home,” Wesley offers.

“Thanks, man,” Killian says and shakes his head.

Brit’s red-faced. “What is your fucking problem?” She goes to get in my face, and Killian steps between us, facing off with her. “Back off, Brit.”

“C’mon, Brit. Out. Sorry, babes,” Susanna aims an apologetic expression at me.

“Nothin’ for you to be sorry about, Suse. She’s the sorry bitch,” I say. “And if you put your hands on my husband again, you’ll be a bald and choking bitch because I’ll rip all that hair out of your scalp and then I’ll feed it to you.”

Brit gasps in shock, like I’m totally out of line.

“Sorry,” Suse whispers, but her eyes are dancing with mirth.

“I’ll call you after.” She drags her the other way. Wesley follows them.

I turn my back on them and look to Killian at my side. His face is alight with amusement. So is Guy’s.

I blow my hair out of my face. “Can we go home now? And can someone help load my gifts into the car? There’s a whack of lingerie there for you to choose from, Killian.”

His smile widens. “My ride’s already loaded.”

“Good. I’m so glad my mom already left,” I mutter.

“Feisty,” Guy says, eyeballing me with amusement. “You’re a lucky man, Kill.”

“Night, Guy. Thanks again for the bottle. Have a good week off.”

“My pleasure. Thanks for the generous Christmas bonus. Happy Holidays, Vi.” Guy waves.

“Merry Christmas,” I say, avoiding the urge to cringe. Ray is the only male who ever calls me that. Susanna does occasionally and it doesn’t bother me when it’s coming from her, but I don’t like it otherwise. Not anymore, at least.

I’ve just stood up for myself with her kind of floors me. I’ve never reacted that way to anyone. What was that from me? A surge of pregnancy hormones? That

“Let’s get you home, baby,” Killian says softly into my ear. “Fuckin’ wish the doctor’s appointment was today so we could find out if it’s safe to work out this sass you’ve got.”

I lean in. “That’s okay, honey. There’s always butt stuff.”

He does a double take.

I shrug. “That ought to solve the problem.”

Killian tags my purse and coat in one hand, grabs my hand with the other, and is pulling me toward the door.

“Ready to go, I take it?” I ask nonchalantly.

“Fuckin’ checkered flags waving me toward our bed, beautiful.” He looks up at the sky as we head through the parking lot. “Nan, if you’re in control up there, give me all green lights to get us home, then cover your eyes with your wings for the rest of the night.”

I laugh.

He opens the door for me. All my gifts are already loaded into the SUV. Brit gave me a gift card for a lingerie store but based

on how her behavior devolved through the evening, she's getting that back.

My phone pings twice in a row.

I lift it as Killian starts the SUV.

Susanna: I'm so fucking sorry about Brit – she just got dumped and drowned herself in her misery tonight. But holy shit I'm a little in awe of your reaction. So proud of you babe. High five!

Brit: I'm very very sry Violet. I was an asshole tonight. Too much to drink after a bad wk. Susanna said she's apologizing for me but you should hear it from me. Hope you'll forgive me.

I send a heart to Susanna. "Thank you for my shower. You're the best flower girl EVER. She can fuck off for now. I don't know if I like her, Suse. We'll talk later."

She writes back.

Fair enough. TTYL. XO

I'm really not sure if Brit is my cup of tea. Old me would probably accept her apology even if I didn't want to. The way I'm feeling right now? I decide I'll sleep on it and decide whether I want to reply to her tomorrow. Or not.

I tuck my phone into my purse.

"I don't know if that was pregnancy hormones or what. I've never grabbed anyone by the hair before."

Killian laughs. "It was sexy, baby. Made me hard."

"I'd had just about enough of her *before* she put her hands on you. She was horrible all night. Just crass and loud and ugh. I don't think I like her. I can't believe she grabbed your ass."

He laughs.

"Tell me about the rest of your afternoon. You said you had stuff to tell me."

“Oh. Yes!”

I then fill Killian in about my meeting with Peter and tell him that I’m thinking about taking the job, to prove to the company that I absolutely am capable of not only doing Shara’s job but doing it better than she ever did. Without alienating the staff.

And he encourages me to take it and prove it to myself because it’s what I think that matters way more than what other people think.

“Though, it’s good to show ‘em, too. Whatever you want, baby, I’m right here, believing in you.”

That gets me weepy, and he holds my hand all the way home.

Killian

Ten minutes after we get in, I'm freshly showered, ready to go fool around with my gorgeous, confident, feisty wife, but she's asleep. She's asleep in a low cut lacy black nightgown with wine-colored roses outlining the plunging neckline. It was a gift from Susanna and it touches her ankles, but the full skirt is sheer and split up to nearly her hip on one side.

I climb in and pull the blanket over us. She rolls into me and makes a cute little snort-snore as she nuzzles in.

Smirking, I smell her hair while dropping a kiss on her cheekbone. Not getting any ass action tonight, obviously.

I wake no less than five times through the night, taking time to fall back asleep each time I do. Nightmares plague my brain all fucking night long. I'm just grateful Violet's beside me, not somewhere else or I'd probably walk circles in my sleep each time before waking.

"Morning," she says, kissing my jaw. "I fell asleep on you last night." She looks into my eyes. "Sorry about that."

"You did."

"Did you sleep well? You look like you've been up all night." She runs her hand up my chest and wraps it around the side of my neck affectionately.

"Yeah, shitty sleep," I say, rubbing my eyes.

"Because we didn't get to fool around? I'm sorry."

"No, don't feel bad, baby. Just got a lot on my mind."

You should try to catch a few hours before we go to the doctor's."

"I'll catch up tonight," I say and kiss her.

"Ugh." She flops back. "Is the room spinning or is it just me?"

"Want some crackers and tea?"

"Yeah." She closes her eyes and throws her wrist over her forehead.

We leave Violet's doctor's office with good news. Not only will the next appointment give us a chance to hear the baby's heartbeat but also everything appears on target with her hormone levels. And provided there's no further bleeding or other issues cropping up along the way, we've got a green light for as much sex as my wife wants.

And she looks at me as she hears this, dimples on her cheeks with a look in her eyes that tells me she wants a lot of it.

I wiggle my brows at her, hearing her doctor, an older guy that has looked after Violet since she was born, let out an amused chuckle.

She gifts me with a beautiful wide smile all evening because of the event I managed to get us tickets to.

It's the school Christmas pageant for Alana's boys. It's two hours of Christmas songs, bloopers and blunders, and adorable four-to-twelve-year-old kids doing a series of Christmas skits.

We sit with Alana, her mother, and with Patricia and her husband Don. Violet's face has to be hurting from all the smiling, especially when mishaps happen, like the cute little blonde Christmas angel with the ringlets that wouldn't stop picking her nose. How Ash forgot his lines as one of the wisemen in Bethlehem and said, "Oh crap, I forgotted." How another little boy kept spinning when he was supposed to stay still.

Violet's face was lit up like a Christmas tree for the whole thing. Especially the bloopers and blunders.

Alana thought it was strange that I asked for tickets when she told me why she was taking the evening off. But the number of times I've watched Alana smile at Violet tonight, I'm thinking she gets that it was something I knew my wife would enjoy.

Violet

When we get home after the boys' Christmas play, I'm immediately all over my handsome husband. It was so much fun to watch and I can hardly wait for when we get to watch our own children doing the same.

I'm stoked about the notion of volunteering at my kids' school. Helping out with sewing costumes for plays. Being part of the PTA. My mom was very hands-on at my school and I plan to be the same.

Now that we're home, it's only nine o'clock, but my plan is to bed my handsome husband and then let him get some sleep. Given that our sex life has been cramped lately and we got permission to resume activities but haven't yet, I'm hoping he'll get his fill of me and then it'll help him sleep for a solid eight hours. All day he's been looking tired, eyes bloodshot and he asked me to drive home tonight, which tells me he has to be exhausted.

I purposely haven't brought up questions about anything stressful today. I don't even know if anything has been resolved or if there have been any complications. I only know that he looks completely exhausted. But as much as I want Christmas to be stress-free, there are definitely things weighing on me.

Our mouths are attached all the way to our bedroom, initiated by me, with my fingers loosening his tie, undoing his belt, then going for his shirt buttons, undoing them and getting my hands onto his hot, hard chest as we clear the doorway. Then he's got my ass and is lifting me up, wrapping my legs around his waist while he moves toward the bed. My back is then touching our mattress as we're sideways on the bed.

I kick my shoes off.

Killian undresses me slowly. As he does this, his piercing eyes rove my body while he removes my blouse, my long skirt, and my tights, caressing me along the way. He makes the sexiest sounds as he takes me in.

“I can’t wait to be inside you, baby,” he whispers against my skin.

There’s nothing clinical about this, and then the warmth notches up to straight heat when he sees the new, very fancy emerald green lace bra with matching underwear that Aunt Sara and Colleen bought for my shower. Killian devours me with his eyes, which match the shade of my undies just about perfectly.

He’s clean-shaven and smooth and I relish the feel of his soft face in my palm. I love it when he’s scruffy and I love it when he’s clean-shaven, too. He kisses my palm, then his head descends, mouth closing over my nipple before he draws it in with his hot mouth as his thumbs hook into the waistband of my panties at the hips. He shimmies them down and kisses my right hip, then my left one before he backs up and stands at the side of the bed and drops his shirt, pants, kicking off his shoes and pulling socks off. His underwear go last and then he climbs on top of me and lines up. I clasp his jaw with both hands.

“I love you,” I say, feeling a little emotional because it feels like forever since he’s been inside me.

“I love you too, baby. So fucking much.”

He slides into me slowly, face filled with love. “My favorite place,” he murmurs.

I tighten around him and watch more emotion burning in his eyes. “My Violet. All mine,” he says, thumb skating across my bottom lip as he tips my chin up with his index finger and his lips come to mine, tongues touching then tangling up. I rock into him, squeezing around him. His fingers go between us, playing with my clit.

He makes love to me so gently, sweetly, hands and mouth roaming as he gently rocks into me over and over. It doesn't take long before I'm crying into his mouth with my orgasm and he has one, too, burying his face into my throat as he grunts out a husky, "Oh, baby."

I'm coming out of the bathroom after cleaning up while he comes in with a water in one hand, apple juice in the other.

"All good?" he asks, looking a little concerned.

I smile. "All great. Tired?"

"Not too bad. Wanna watch a movie?" he asks.

"Nope. You didn't sleep well last night. We should go to sleep."

"Haven't slept a full night since... you know. I can handle a movie. I might fall asleep during."

"When was the last good sleep you had?"

"Before you drove to Tillamook without me. A couple days before, actually, because I knew the Saturday when you came down in the middle of the night that I'd fucked up, that you had suspicions. I'm so fucking sorry, baby."

I sigh. "It's in the past. I think we've both learned from it."

Pain slashes across his features. "You learned the wrong thing. To be suspicious of me."

"Well, you learned some things, too, I think. That certain things might seem like a good idea in theory but can be pretty harmful. Let's skip the movie. I'm sleepy."

"You still mad at me?"

"No."

"You still hurt?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I want you to get some sleep, okay? We had a good night. I don't want you stressing about stuff."

“You sure you don’t want to watch something? You told me you started your Christmas movie rotation late.”

“We’ll have all day tomorrow to watch movies. I’ll be spending the day cleaning and cooking for company tomorrow night.” I snuggle in.

“Wouldn’t have had to clean if you’d let Patricia come do her job that we pay her to do,” he grumbles.

“She had stuff to do to get ready for Christmas,” I defend. “I hope she likes the present I bought her. A day at the spa.”

“I already gave her a generous Christmas bonus.”

“Well, that’s from you. This is from me.” I stick my tongue out. “I bought one for Alana, too. They can go together, have a sister day.”

“Alana, too? Sheesh. You’re generous.”

I smile. “Well, I got the job offer letter in my email this afternoon from Peter. I can’t believe the money they’re offering me.”

“Yeah? You gonna take it?”

“Yep, I think so. I’m thinking on it until after Christmas.”

“If you do, you’re gonna rock it, baby.”

We snuggle up together and he yawns.

“I had Tony pay a visit to Shara. Warned her not to fuck with you again.”

I stiffen. “You did what?”

“Believe me, we do not need that bitch tryin’ to get back at you. She’s bein’ watched.”

“Killian!”

“Deal with it.” He yawns.

“Are you joking?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

He does not.

I stare in shock. He nods, matter-of-factly.

“I can’t believe you. What did he say? What did she say?”

“Don’t worry about it.” He waves a hand dismissively and kisses my temple.

I blink a couple times and then turn the light off. I almost want to pick a fight with him, but I don’t. It’s my favorite time of year. And I want him to sleep.

Wait. I’m not going to keep pushing my wants and needs aside. That’s what I’ve always done, and I’m gonna stop it.

“I’m not about to pick a fight tonight, it’s been a good day, but do not wade into my career without my permission. I’m telling you this and I mean it.”

He says nothing.

“Killian?”

“You’re heard, baby,” he says gently.

“So, uh…” I draw circles around his shoulder with my index finger.

“So, uh, what?” he prompts after a minute.

“Forget it.”

“Talk to me,” he orders.

And I should. I should talk about what’s bothering me. Not to fight about it but so I can get a good night’s sleep, too.

“When does Ray get picked up to go to that other place?” I ask, thinking I’ll ask this one last thing before I drop it until after it’s over with.

“Day after Christmas,” he says and pulls me closer. “We’re almost through this shit.” He kisses my temple.

I bite my lip. I hope so. But I don’t have a good feeling.

“Still not sittin’ right with you?” he asks.

“I mean, a lot of things happening are less than ideal, but we’re doing what we need to do. And I’m sure he’d prefer being alive versus unalive. Let’s drop the subject so it doesn’t muck with our getting a solid night’s sleep.”

“Mm hm.” He yawns again. “Tomorrow, I want this ass you offered.”

I scoff. “I thought I got away with not having to do that.”

“You were the one that offered it. You wanna renege?”

“I’ve never done that before.” I whisper, trying hard to push away the chill of the unpleasant topic we were just discussing.

“No? So I get to take your ass virginity?”

“That’s right.”

“Mm. I wanna take it now.” He tries to roll me.

“No. No no. You get some sleep. You can have it tomorrow.” I attempt to pin his wrists together. He lets me.

I kiss his nose.

“Fine,” he mutters like he’s annoyed but then he rolls me to my side and spoons me, kissing the back of my neck. “But no renegeing tomorrow.”

“Fine,” I say. “Tomorrow night after we watch *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, you can be the Bookie Who Stole Violet’s Butt Virginity.”

His body shakes with silent laughter and he kisses my shoulder.

Killian

It's closing in on midnight Christmas Eve and the last of our guests have gone. Violet made enough food to feed an army. Appetizers, baked goods, a massive charcuterie board. But she barely ate any of it, not even the gingerbreads today. I'm looking forward to her appetite picking up.

I slept like garbage again last night. Woke up more times than I can count, unable to shake the feeling in my gut that I should be alert. Standing sentry to protect her. I don't know at this stage if it's the fact that I haven't had enough sleep over a number of days or what, but I feel like absolute shit on top of edgy. Like I've had too much coffee.

My brother, Violet's parents, her brother Cody, grandfather, Uncle Hugh, Susanna and her mother Lorena were all over. Alana and the two boys also stopped by for an hour early in the evening and opened gifts Violet bought them, noisy robotic gifts they went gaga over and Alana vowed revenge, joking on how the time when she can sugar up and buy noisy gifts for our baby can't come soon enough.

I'm feeling like I've overdosed on people and there will be an even bigger crowd tomorrow at Violet's parents' place. But Violet looked happy and told me she wanted to host Christmas Eve from now on. And I'm down with anything that makes her smile brightly at me like that, like she's ecstatically happy.

I've booked us a vacation; we leave the day after New Year's Day and that's my surprise for her for Christmas. That and a diamond bracelet.

I could care less what she bought for me; it'll just be cool to open something she chose. See what she gives me, what she thinks I'd want.

Because I feel like I have just about everything I want. Short of Iadanza being at Porto Campo already. But that's all arranged for the day after Christmas. I can only hope it goes smoothly.

I'll watch him get loaded into the cargo plane. He'll get to look at my face one more time. And then... time to turn the page.

"I'm ready for my Christmas present," I tell Violet as I flick the switch to turn the tree off.

She smirks. "You have to wait until tomorrow."

"It's tomorrow in six minutes", I announce, scooping her up into my arms to take her to bed. "So I'm starting this Christmas inside this ass."

She giggles and wraps her arms around my neck.

"How romantic," she rolls her eyes.

"You'd be over my shoulder if you weren't pregnant."

"My sexy caveman."

I set her on the bed and reach under the crushed velvet green dress she's wearing and hook into the waistband of her red tights.

Her eyes are shiny and her chest moves up and down at a pace that I know means she's gonna be wet for me when I get into her panties.

"Do we have any lube?" she asks. "I hear lube is very important for the back door stuff."

"We do," I say and reach into the drawer of the table beside the bed. I bought this today on my way back from the jewelry store.

"Undress me, wife," I order, setting the tube down in reaching distance.

She climbs up to her knees and sinks her teeth into her bottom lip while working my buttons down. I watch with amusement

as she gets the last one undone and then pushes the shirt off my shoulders, letting it drop while her eyes rove my body like she likes what she sees. She goes for my fly and I lean in and nip playfully at her throat. “Faster.”

She bites my shoulder, then kisses it. “Bossy,” she accuses.

“Watch how bossy I’m about to get as I take this luscious ass.” I give it a slap and she looks at me with hunger in her eyes that I like a fuckuva lot.

I drop my pants and underwear as I pull the dress over her head and divest her of her bra and panties. I turn her to her belly and gently dot kisses along her spine as I caress her backside.

My fingers slide between her cheeks to find that her beautiful pussy is slippery, hot, and ready for me.

“Open up, beautiful.”

She parts her legs a little, giving me better access. I start by working her clit with my middle and ring fingers, sliding back and forth over her opening. She squirms, getting into it, getting wetter by the minute. My left hand cups her ass firmly as I continue working her pussy with my right, sliding two fingers inside, pumping them, pressing against her g-spot, before pulling them out to work over her clit a couple times.

Her legs widen a little more and I watch her fists close tighter, gripping the comforter hard as her breathing quickens. My cock hardens even more as she lets out a sweet little needy sound.

“Up on your knees, Violet. Keep your cheek on the bed.”

She does what she’s told, and I’ve got an even better view now.

I move up on my knees behind her, but instead of doing anything with my cock, my fingers keep playing with her. She’s trembling a little when I run my fingers over her seam and then rub her asshole briefly, not breaching, before gliding down to her clit again.

She utters my name, her voice a little raspy. I pump my cock with my left fist a couple times.

“I’m so hard for you right now, Violet.”

“I wanna feel it. I want you,” she whispers.

“You’ve got me. All of me, baby,” I return and slide the tip of my cock through her wetness.

And then I wait. And she makes a sound of need, pushing her ass out. I bend over, and plant a kiss on her right ass cheek before I straighten up and repeat the motion, dipping my cock just barely into her wetness.

“Mm,” she verbalizes and pushes her ass out further.

I slip my cock just an inch into her pussy and she moans so I have no choice, I push in, to the root, my head rolling back at the feel of her around me.

I lift the lube from the table and flip the cap, filling my palm with it before I close it and drop it back on the table.

Sliding in and out gently a few times, I take in her facial expression. She lies with one cheek to the mattress, eyes closed and lips slightly parted. Sliding back in makes her lips form the letter o. I let the lube slide from my palm down to my fingers and then rub her asshole. She jerks, trepidatious.

“I’ll be gentle, baby. Okay?” I ask.

She nods, blowing out a slow breath.

I start with a finger, moving the lube around, using my cock against her clit, working her up, getting her ready, then I guide my cock back and replace the finger with just the very tip. She tenses.

“Relax, Violet. You’re safe with me. Fuck, you’re beautiful.” I move in a little deeper, feeling like her ass is trying to suck the rest of me inside, loving how tight, how hot, but then she cries out, “Ow, ow!” so I pull my hips back and immediately begin working her clit again. In just a moment, I can tell she’s on the verge of coming, so I try again, this time not letting up on her

clit while my cock grazes her asshole. She collapses onto her belly and tightens her ass cheeks, like she's denying me entry.

"Want me to stop?" I ask.

"No. Keep going. Just... slow."

"You got it." I cup her pussy, work her clit with my fingers while I guide the tip into her ass again.

"Relax, baby," I say, leaning forward, my lips almost touching the shell of her ear. "It's okay."

I kiss her neck while working circles around her clit while I push my cock slowly inside. The tight ring of muscle lets me get the head in and once that happens, the rest of me slides in smoothly. I continue working her clit while I do, whispering words of encouragement into her ear while fighting the urge to fuck her hard because this feels really fucking amazing.

"It's okay, Violet. I've got you. I'm in, it's, *fuck* that's nice. You okay, baby?"

"Mm hm." Her voice is muffled with the pillow. I push it out of the way and bend forward, kissing the side of her mouth. She winces.

"You feel so fucking good, my baby. I love you so much. Thank you for gifting this to me." I pull my hips back a little, then slide forward slowly, then pull my hips back again, before I rock into her again, feeling my balls tighten.

The tension on her face melts away and I can see she's enjoying it now.

I pick up the pace on her clit while I keep up the deep, slow strokes that feel so fucking good I'm out in goosebumps from head to toe. And then it gets even better because she starts trembling around me. Her mouth is open and her face is abso-fucking-lutely gorgeous as she cries out, clenching the bedding while convulsing around my cock. Tight, hot, and like heaven. I ram two fingers into her pussy while her ass is full and grind the heel of my hand against her clit to rev it up even more as I finish her off, shooting my release into her ass while I chant,

“Fuck, fuck, fuck yeah, baby,” into her ear as we climax together.

Our bodies melt together as I kiss her over and over on the side of her jaw, on the back of her shoulder.

“Fuck, that was beautiful,” I say, turning her over.

She’s got tears in her eyes.

“Baby?”

She smiles and wraps her arms around me. “That was very, very dirty.”

“Mm. It was.” I breathe out relief.

“Let’s go take a shower,” she whispers.

“You got it, baby.”

“Killian.”

“Yeah?”

“Sleep, baby.”

“Huh?” I ask. It’s about an hour later and I didn’t realize she was still awake.

“You’ve got to get some sleep, honey.”

“That’s what I was tryin’ to do when you started talkin’,” I tease.

“You’ve got to sleep. You need it. Your body needs it. Come here.”

I roll into her and kiss her.

“No. Here,” she corrects and pulls me closer.

I find my head on her chest and then her fingers are woven into my hair. She sifts them through and then she does it again, gently, sweetly. I can hear her heart beating.

Soon, we’ll be able to hear our baby’s heart beating. A smile tugs at my mouth as I imagine a tiny baby with chubby cheeks

and big chocolate brown eyes swimming around in Violet's stomach. I rest my hand on her belly. She plays with my hair some more. She's warm. Her fingers are so soft. She smells amazing. I find my eyes drifting shut as she sifts one of her hands through again, the other landing on my shoulder. She keeps one hand there in my hair, the other on my shoulder, and my eyes droop.

"Good morning," Violet says, her pretty eyes wide with excitement, dimples bracketing her mouth. "Merry Christmas!"

I slept. Thank you, Jesus.

I feel like I could keep sleeping, but it's a start. I look at the clock. Eight o'clock. Almost six hours of sleep. And straight through, too. A huge improvement over the last few weeks.

"Good morning. Merry Christmas," I say, scrubbing my eyes with my palms.

She grabs my right hand.

"Come on! Santa came!" She's bouncing on her feet with excitement, wearing just a red silk nightshirt that comes to mid-thigh. This isn't what she had on last night; I've never seen it before.

"This is sexy," I say, touching the hem of the night shirt.

"Put these on. Christmas pajamas." She passes me a red pair of pajama bottoms that match the shirt she's got on. "Hurry!"

I drag the pants up. "Mind if I take a piss and brush my teeth or will that fuck with your plans?"

"If you hurry!" She claps her hands together. "Quick, quick!"

-When I come out, she's standing in the doorway bouncing on the balls of her feet. Waiting for me.

"Christmas makes you bouncy," I observe.

“I am *so* bouncy. It’s my favorite day of the year. Except for the past two years,” she says not losing a bit of sparkle in her eyes. “And because it’s my first one with you, I’m extra bouncy.” She gets up on her toes and wraps her arms around my neck. “Did you have a good sleep?”

“I did, thanks to you.” I kiss her nose.

“Let’s go see what’s under the tree.” She hops up and I catch her by the ass and wrap her legs around my waist.

“Let’s go, hurry!” She bounces in my arms, kissing my face over and over.

I head out of the bedroom.

And it’s immediately clear she’s been up for more than a while. And been busy, too.

Because the tree had three gifts under it when we went to bed. A small cube wrapped in gold paper with my name on it and a metallic green bow on top. A long, slim black wrapped box with a purple bow on it for her. And another small box held closed with red ribbon with her name on it. I’ve already loaded my SUV with the gifts going to her parents’ place last night.

Not only are there about two dozen gifts under the tree, there are two massive red plush stockings hanging over the doorknob of the patio door with bear faces, one brown with a bow tie and one white with a bow over one ear.

I look around with surprise. The tree lights are on as is the white ceramic Christmas tree. The battery-operated snow-globes are also on with the contents swirling.

“Down, please!” she requests.

I set her on her feet and she continues bouncing up and down excitedly. “Santa came! Have your Christmas coffee. What do you know... there’s coffee made for us, in...” she pauses for effect, “Christmas mugs!”

There are two mugs on the coffee table set up beside the snow globes. One is a Santa head and the other is Mrs. Claus’s head.

“So,” Violet announces, “we’re in Christmas pajamas and about to have coffee in Christmas mugs. Coffee for you, café mocha, light on the café and heavy on the mocha for moi. And after we open presents, we need to decorate our gingerbread house and have breakfast, then we’ll make love in the shower to save on time and go to my parents. Sound good?”

“Sounds fuckin’ great,” I say, amused that she’s got the day scheduled. “What time did you get up? You got a clipboard somewhere with our itinerary?”

“Nope. It’s all up here.” She points to her temple. “And I got up at six thirty. I hate that Will isn’t here. No one should wake up alone on Christmas.” She pouts.

“Christmas hasn’t meant anything to either of us in a long time, baby. Don’t feel bad. He’s working and getting overtime, which is fine by him.”

“That’s sad. And I’m gonna change it.”

“Until now,” I add, getting a smile from her. “You already have for me. And I’ll make sure he’s here next Christmas. Last night he said he’ll wanna be here and see his niece or nephew open gifts.”

She smiles wide at me. “At least he’ll be at Mom and Dad’s later. We have a lot of fun on Christmas. And we all have gifts for him. You Coulter boys are going to see what Christmas *Gates style* is all about. It’s loud, it’s full of gluttony, and lots of laughs.”

“Sounds perfect, Dimples,” I say.

“Okay, present time!”

“Did Santa bring you gifts, too?”

“Santa delivers my gifts to Mom and Dad’s. I’m sure he has some stuff there for you, too.”

“This isn’t fair, baby. There’s two things to open for you. Look at all these gifts.”

“You said you barely got anything as a kid, so I might have written a letter to Santa, and if I did, perhaps he worked extra hard to fix the oversight. This here is about you. It’s a catch-up Christmas for all the times you got stiffed.”

I grin at her.

“If I wrote such a letter, I might have told him I wanted you to experience what it’s like to wake up to lots of surprises under the tree and since he did decide to fix that oversight, there’s a good chance that some of the gifts are probably silly, just fun little things to open.” She shrugs.

“I fucking love you,” I say, deciding that next year, she’s gonna have at least a hundred gifts to open.

“Hurry! Open one!” She bounces on the couch.

“What’s this?” I scoop her onto my lap and point at her toes.

She’s got a pedicure that matches the theme. Last night she wore a green dress and red tights and told me today she’d be wearing a red dress and green tights with holiday-inspired jewelry. I haven’t seen her bare feet in the light the past day or two so don’t know when she did this, but her pedicure has red polish with the tips painted white and her big toes painted red with white snowflakes on them.

“Christmas toes. Okay, I’ll play Santa.” She pulls away from me and heads to the tree. Bending over, she gives me a delicious view of her ass and a peek at the lacy fringe of red panties as she reaches under the tree and fetches the little cube box that I’d seen there last night.

“Nice view,” I remark.

She straightens and before turning around, lifts her nightshirt up high and wiggles her ass, showing me a view of Christmas panties. Red with a candy cane on each butt cheek, in the center in white script, it reads,

Is that a candy cane in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?

I laugh. “Christmas underwear, too? Do I get some of those?”
My wife has a very sexy ass. “Get that sexy ass over here.”

She passes me the box. “Guess you’ll have to open your presents and see. This one first. And the ass needs a little recuperation time so just you never mind.”

“You okay?” I ask, feeling guilty.

“I’m fine. I had a little bit of bleeding there. It scared me a little, thinking it was blood from the uh... other place, but it was... *there*.”

“Fuck, baby. I’m so sorry.”

She waves her hand. “It’s fine. It’s okay now. A little blood is bound to happen losing your butt v-card.”

I exhale hard. “Violet.”

“It’s okay,” she waves her hand. “I kind of should’ve expected it by how – uh – well-endowed my husband is. Open your present.”

I chuckle. “Commenting on how endowed your husband is? That’s kinda a present in itself.”

She beams a smile at me and jerks her chin to the box.

I unwrap the box and there’s with writing on top of the lid.

It reads, *Sorry to inform you, but you’re on the naughty list.*

Laughter bursts from me when I open the box to a black, shiny rock inside that’s inscribed.

“Lump of coal for a very naughty boy!” she announces the inscription.

I lean over and kiss her. “I love it. And I totally deserve it.”

I set the box at the table and I lean over to kiss her. She thrusts a small package at me. “This one.”

I open up a pair of gag Christmas socks with snowmen all over them.

“Warm feet,” she says. “And warmth from the coal. Put them on.”

I pull on the ridiculous-looking thick socks. “Warmth from my beautiful wife. You’re in-fucking-credible, you know that?”

“I know,” she says, nodding with a sage expression. “Another one!”

The next gift is an expensive sweater. After that, a really nice wristwatch. She didn’t just get me gag gifts. She gives me a couple gag gifts and then passes me a nice gift after that. I get Christmas underwear with candy canes all over them that look like hers, though without lettering. There’s also a stress ball that looks like a face. I also open a Baby Yoda Chia Pet that she jokes she’s happy to grow for me and then admits that though it’s for me but she kinda bought it for herself. I laugh as I open a new game for the PlayStation that just got released a few days ago that I’ve actually had my eye on. Not that I’ve had time to play games in ages, but I do have the console under the television with the last game in that series, so it was a good call.

“Some time spent blowing things up and shooting imaginary bad guys. Therapy,” she informs.

“We should be able to write it off as a medical expense, no?”

“We’ll talk to the accountant.”

There’s also a nice bottle of Bourbon, a collector’s edition with a crystal decanter and two matching glasses, and she also got me a pair of winter boots, which she says is for when we go for winter walks at the beach house. And this makes me happy, though I don’t say anything. I’m happy that she’s still open about keeping the place, that I didn’t ruin that.

She bought a set of toolbelts, too, for when we’re doing renovations. In the box is one for her and one for me. Hers is purple suede, mine dark brown leather. She also has me open a set of custom bobbleheads that look like us for my desk. Bobblehead Killian and Violet are hugging one another.

Bobblehead *Killian* is wearing a tuxedo and the *Violet* bobblehead is wearing a burgundy dress.

There are still half a dozen gifts for me to open when it dawns I'm having all the fun. And it is fun. I'm having a blast to the degree my face hurts from all the smiling.

She's about to pass me a big, red box with a silver bow on it when I pause and announce, "Your turn." And I hunt under the tree for the bracelet.

She bounces on the couch clapping her hands as I pass it to her and then rips the paper off with excitement. Her eyes go huge as she carefully opens the velvet box and then her jaw drops.

"Oh my God. This is amazing."

"Like it?"

"Like it? I love it." She wraps her arms around me. "Put it on me. Put it on me. Put it on me!"

I fasten the diamond tennis bracelet around her wrist and kiss her hand.

"Please tell me these aren't real diamonds."

"I thought you wanted no more lies."

"Holy fuck." Her eyes bulge as she tilts her wrist and stares at the sparkling jewelry.

I laugh.

"Another one," I say and pass her the second gift.

She opens it and her mouth drops again. A travel brochure for Tahiti with a black bikini in the box and a pair of swim trunks for me.

She squeals and throws her arms around me. "I can't wait!"

"January second work for you? Two weeks?"

She nods rapidly. "I'll tell them at work that if they really want me, they can wait until the third week of January."

She claps her hands. “Ooh. Look how it sparkles!” She thrusts her wrist out and then tilts it left and right, watching the diamonds shine. “Oh, all day I shall be excessively extra with the hand gestures. Just you watch.” She does a jazz hands gesture, making me laugh.

I sip my coffee, watching her pull the last few boxes over. I work my way through them, having the time of my life. Not only because of what I get, but more because of how excited Violet is with every box that I open.

A pair of gym shoes. A nice bottle of aftershave. A robe, since she claimed mine (but she warns me it’s so soft she might have to claim it too), and the last one she hands me is a small gift bag. I pull out a black apron with embroidery. It says, “My Daddy Makes the Best Pizza in the World.” And there’s even an embroidered pizza slice on it.

“No pineapple on this. See?” I flash it. “That’s why it’s the best pizza.”

She giggles and bops my head with a throw pillow from the couch.

I throw my arms around her. “I love this the most.”

“I love you the most,” she says.

I wrap her up tighter in my arms. “Merry Christmas, baby. Thank you for making this the best one I’ve had. Ever.”

“I have one more gift for you,” she says.

She stands up, facing me.

“Do I get to play with the candy canes?” I reach under her nightshirt and grip her ass with both hands. She smiles and shakes her head. “Nope. Come.” She takes my hand and pulls me to the balcony door.

“It’s snowing. Yay!” Violet exclaims. And then she opens the door.

“What’re you doing?” I ask. “You’ll freeze out there.”

“Just quick. I’ll throw on my new robe. One sec. Oh, I mean *your* new robe.” She throws air quotes over the word *your*.

“Claimed it already? Sheesh. I haven’t even tried it on yet,” I complain.

She shrugs it on. “Ooh, so soft.”

I catch sight of something new on the balcony. A large something with a big red velvet bow on it.

“Is that what I think it is?” I ask.

She passes me the new sweater she bought me, then slips into the slippers I bought her the other day. They’re by the patio doors.

“How’d you get this here? I stepped out here last night.”

“It got delivered yesterday and the guys at the security desk held it for me and then I had one of them quietly bring it through this morning at seven. I gave both guards extra generous tips in their Christmas cards,” she says.

I pull the sweater over my head and follow her out.

I lift the cover off the big, new barbeque. It’s a top-of-the-line grill, dual. One side is gas, the other charcoal. There’s also a smoker in the bottom.

“And that doohickey there,” she points to a lifter hanging from the front, “Is to move the grill up and down when it’s hot.”

I lift the cast iron utensil. “Baby,” I say, “This is fuckin’ phenomenal. I love it. Exactly what I would’ve picked if I’d bought it.” I lift the lids, one after the other, before I squat to check out the smoker. There’s an owner’s manual inside it so I nab it and close it up and then put the cover back over. “Get in, it’s cold out here. I’ll be right in, just gonna cover this up.”

After I hang the lifter and cover the grill, I see through the window that she’s at the kitchen counter with our coffee mugs, a smile on her face as she makes more coffee.

Me out here with a grill, her in there at those pink counters. Life with her feels right. She soothed me to sleep last night.

She feels right in my arms. She looks amazing in that kitchen and I can barely wait until the weather turns nice and I can get out here and grill food while watching her move around in there with a big belly, able to see that she's got my baby growing inside her.

Fuck, but I love her. She makes this place a home.

I dust snowflakes off my shoulders as I head back inside, thinking that maybe she's right – what she said that night after Dario's wedding just before we got swarmed.

Maybe we had to go through a big pile of bullshit and come out the other side to appreciate what we've got with one another. Maybe our story, crazy as it's been, has happened the way it's supposed to. It still shits me that she had to hurt, that we got cheated, that I nearly lost it all after waiting so long to get it, but today, looking at her through the window I know – know down to my marrow the value of what I've got with her, and I also know for a fact I'll do anything in the world to protect it.

Would I have felt as strongly this fast if we'd gotten started the night I first laid eyes on her? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe it would've taken longer to get where I'm at in my head about us or maybe I'd have blown it being too suspicious, not invested enough. But I know what I've got right now, how beautiful life can be, because of her. She's stronger because of me and I'm better because of her.

She's the key to happiness for me and I know down to my soul that I'll protect what we have with my fucking life.

“Stockings!” Violet exclaims as I approach the kitchen, setting the manual for my new grill down on the counter.

And then while we have our second cup of coffee we go through those stockings. They're twenty or thirty pounds each, filled with all sorts of goodies. Candy. Apples and oranges. All my usual toiletries. All her usual ones. Pens. Socks and underwear. Money in every denomination up to one-hundred-

dollar bills. She tells me that it's a family tradition to do giant stockings.

"Aww, baby. You had to fill your own? I'll step up next Christmas," I promise, kissing her hand.

"We'll get them again, similar to these at Mom's. Though we only get coins and a dollar bill, no fives, tens, twenties, or anything higher. I was feeling spendy."

"Merry Christmas, baby," I say, kissing her.

"Merry Christmas, Killian. Let's make our gingerbread house so I can take a picture of it, then as soon as I do that, I'm gonna eat it."

I laugh.

Violet

Christmas Night

Christmas was amazing. I didn't even feel morning sickness once all day, which was a gift in itself.

Killian loved his gifts. I loved watching him open them.

And I loved my gifts, too. From him and from my family.

More than anything, I loved having Christmas and feeling all those magical Christmas feelings because the last few years were so un-festive. And I got to give Killian something he hasn't had before. I might love Christmas now more than I ever did.

And we got some nice presents for and from family members, too. Mom went crazy over her expensive shoes from Milan and wore them all day. We called her Catwalk Momma and they called me Barker's Beauty because I kept flashing my blingy bracelet with exaggerated hand gestures and getting caught looking at it.

Dad got a humidor and expensive cigars from us. We got Cody a fancy chess set and a gift card for a video game store. I bought Will a new juicer he dropped a hint about when he was here overnight last weekend. We ordered a year's worth of outdoor maintenance services for Grampa, so he won't have to worry about shoveling, cutting grass, or doing his gutters. And I bought him a giant Toblerone bar with orders to have only a little piece a day.

The food was amazing, and I pigged out. We played charades after dinner before Mom and Aunt Sara got tipsy and had a Christmas carol singalong at the piano.

Killian even seemed to get a little tipsy and didn't argue when I told him to enjoy himself, that I'd drive us home.

The whole day was absolutely lovely. I haven't had a Christmas like this since before Ray. Yeah, my first year with him was nice when it was the two of us, but he never meshed with my family, never even tried. Killian has no pretense or airs about him with my family. And they love him.

Ray didn't even occur to me once today, not until I got home.

My family didn't ever seem like they were this much at ease on the holidays the past three years probably because of Ray being there. His attitude, his standoffishness with them - it took something away from all of us on any special occasion where he was there. But this year, it was like it used to be. Only better. Because of Killian and Will being there and fitting right in. And everyone was excited that next Christmas we'll not only get to do it all again, but by then we'll have our little baby, too.

Now that we're home, we go straight to getting ready for bed because I want to watch *It's a Wonderful Life* and *A Christmas Carol*.

Halfway through *A Christmas Carol*, Killian falls asleep with my hands in his hair, like he did last night, only I'm the one with my head on his chest this time. I watch the whole thing, and then stay awake and watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, tears in my eyes at the end like always, thinking about how blessed I feel as I cuddle up to my husband who is thankfully sleeping soundly.

I know we've had a bumpy road, that I am now dealing in areas I never thought I'd be okay with. I think back to my time at Dario and Angel's wedding and wondering how those girls lived with knowing their men were dark and dangerous. The words of the song *Midnight Train to Georgia* come to mind about preferring to live in Killian's world instead of living without him in mine.

I carefully pull away from him to go to the bathroom and not only use it but blow my nose from my little sentimental crying jag after the movie is over.

I shiver. Not just because I'm no longer snuggled up with Killian, I know it's also because of where my mind is taking me – to the fact that tomorrow my ex is going to be kidnapped while being transported from one prison to another.

And then, how easy or difficult will it be to put all that behind me? And even more importantly to me, how easy or difficult will it be for Killian to move on?

I feel like I'm healing from not only what Ray put me through, but from what Killian and I went through after I found Ray in his basement. It's been eye-opening, seeing the lengths my husband will go to in order to not only keep me safe, but avenge. And also to see that he's got darkness inside him because of what he's been through. Maybe it's something primitive ingrained in me that makes me sort of grateful now. Not for the torture part. Certainly not the deceit part. And I definitely feel like him having someone visit and threaten Shara was overkill. But I feel like the last several days has me viewing all of it through a new lens. Knowing that he's willing to do whatever needs to be done for us... maybe I've started to come to terms with it and see the benefits. Maybe that's because I've had a chance to reflect, to take in what Killian has said about it. And because I spent three years with someone who was more than happy to let me fix all the problems while still acting like he was an alpha male. He wasn't. Ray had no strength compared to Killian who not only takes care of his family, but has done so since he was a child.

I know his anger at Ray was extreme and also know that a big part of it came from the trauma he suffered.

I love him, but I'm pretty worried about him.

Worried that he still hasn't gotten all that darkness out of his system. Did having Ray to punish work the bulk of the darkness out of his system or did it wake up new dark

tendencies that he's going to have the thirst for even after Ray is totally out of reach?

Killian

I'm standing in a hangar behind the empty cargo plane when the white Sprinter van pulls in. A slow smile spreads across my face as I see the Rossi brothers in the front, looking either like the Men in Black or maybe on account of those hats they've both got on I should say The Blues Brothers. I almost laugh at the sight of them in their dark glasses and dark suits. Two white grins shine at me through the tinted windshield

They get out with matching smiles and I get hugs from them both, Tino first.

"How was Christmas?" Nino asks.

"Incredible," I say. "Best one yet. You? Bianca and Joey?"

"Fantastic. Little Joey had a blast. Got enough Lego to fill this hangar. We spent it with Bee's mom, aunt, and a whack of cousins. How about you? Will said you guys were gonna hang with Violet's family?"

"Yeah, man. Big family thing with Violet's parents. Great day. Still full from all the food."

"Ho, ho, ho. Look what Santie brought 'cha." Tino waves me around back and opens the doors. There's Iadanza with a brown paper bag over his head. Someone drew googly eyes and a stuck out tongue on it before putting it on his head. He's cuffed and ankles shackled, wearing just a white wife beater and prison-issued underwear and canvas sneakers. The boys must've cut the prison jumpsuit off him.

"Gimme a sec, boys?" I request.

"Absolutely," Tino says, and they step outside.

"Merry belated Christmas, Ass-wipe," I say.

I see Raymond's body go lax. Defeated.

“We meet again,” I add and pull the bag off. “I guess it *was* arrivederci last time. Not this time though. This time, I’m pretty sure it’s *bye*.”

His face is a swirl of bruises. His mouth is taped.

“See ya, Ass-wipe. Wouldn’t wanna be ya,” I say. “Say hello to your ma for me. I know how crazy she drives you. I made sure to pay extra so she gets to spend time with you periodically. I figure the two of you will have plenty to talk about.” I laugh and then peel the tape back, letting it hang off the side of his face.

Confusion and shock register on his face, then he spits, “Fuck you, Kill.”

“I’d rather go home and fuck Violet,” I say, leaning in and lowering my voice. “Repeatedly. She gave me her ass for Christmas, you know that? Fuck was that nice. Never let you up there, did she?”

He glares at me, nostrils flaring.

“That’s all right. I’m gonna have the last laugh,” he mutters.

“What’ve you got to laugh about? Where you’re goin’, I don’t think you’ll have much call to laugh.”

“You’ll see,” he says with a shrug, trying to paint on a devious grin, but I see through it. I see that he’s scared shitless. “I’m not the only guy who has a beef with you. So, you got me charged with murder, eh? Know that was down to you. And I’m not the only one who knows. But like I said, I’m not done laughin’ yet.”

“I guess time will tell..”

“It will,” he vows.

“Don’t expect your public defender to do anything about it, though,” I say and watch his expression fall.

And he’s almost getting in my head, but I know better, know he’s looking to bait me figuring he’s about to get dead and hopes I’ll keep him alive a little longer to question him.

Instead of quizzing him, instead of showing any curiosity whatsoever, I lean in.

“She’s more mine than she ever was yours, shit-for-brains. Married me. Took my name. Loves me. Carryin’ my baby. And her family, man? They fuckin’ love me, too.” I smile wide. “Didn’t like her last fella so much. Heard it repeatedly in whispers, especially yesterday. Spent Christmas over there. Even her grandfather loves me. Heard he couldn’t stand the sight of you.”

“She won’t stay,” he spits. “She’ll never forgive you for this. Even though she’s done with me, she hates violence. You’ll lose her just like I did. Soon, you’ll lose it all, man. You’ll see and you’ll know I had a part in it.”

“Wanna elaborate on that?” I ask.

“Only if you’re willing to strike a deal.”

I laugh. “Funny thing, though. She gets it. She’s experienced some growth, too. She’s stronger than she was with you. Because I build her up instead of tearing her down. And she knows she’s got me at her back. She’s becoming pretty fuckin’ fearless in fact. It’s been nice to see.”

He says nothing, but the bitterness rolls off him.

“Curious about where you’re goin’?” I ask.

He looks at me expectantly. And I know he is terrified. And it feels fucking great.

I fix the tape back over his mouth. His eyes get panicked and he tries to talk.

I laugh. “Say hello to your ma for me.” I slam the door.

And I walk away. And I don’t have difficulty doing that, knowing he’s about to be loaded into that plane never to be seen again.

During my last few sleepless nights I’ve had a lot rolling around in my mind and one of those things that has come up a few times is concern I’ll have trouble letting him go. Even had

a momentary thought to send him somewhere else, someplace I can keep going back to.

But no, I don't need to set up my own Porto Campo. What I need to do is find a way to let this go.

I need to do this for Violet.

I also need to do it for me. It felt good at the time, the ability to inflict pain on him for what he did to her, particularly after the second-guessing after I shot Max. But what it became for me wasn't good, wasn't healthy. And I almost lost my beautiful Violet because of it.

I have the girl. The girl loves me. The girl forgave me, thank God. It's time to move forward and put Raymond Iadanza behind us.

But yeah, I'm happy he'll have it rough. Rougher than I expressed to Violet. Porto Campo is a nightmare factory from the little I've heard about it and I'm sure the reality is much, much worse. I'm counting on that.

All Violet needs to know is that he's gone, he's never coming back to bother us, and as requested I did not kill him. And I was truthful about the fact that it's up to Raymond how badly it goes for him there.

No, I didn't kill him, won't get to, but I'll glean some satisfaction from the fact that he'll spend the rest of his existence wishing I did, wishing he'd never fucked me over, wishing he'd never even touched her.

I get a call from Craig, the Numbers manager, as I'm merging with traffic to leave the airport. The alarm system has gone offline at Numbers. He says he's unable to look in on all surveillance systems, but wants to know if I can have someone go there to make sure everything looks good. He says his girlfriend had a death in her family and is upset so if at all possible, he doesn't want to leave her alone.

I tell him I'll head over there, that I'm out on an errand and not far from the club so I'll swing by on my way home.

I watched Craig closely when I was there two days ago. He seems like himself, though distracted, but when all this shit is over, he's getting fired. I can't have someone on my team that I don't trust. That alarm went offline a couple hours ago and it took him this long to notice and call me.

He's lost access to the systems, but I left the notifications on to see how long before he called or whether the place would suddenly get burglarized. Jag's team knew it, too, and have been watching to see if anyone suspicious arrived.

As for Stephanie Whitley, she did a piss-poor job of pretending she wasn't fascinated with watching whatever I was doing to the degree it was like she was my shadow the other day.

And the ugliness that came off her, she's definitely felt like she has an axe to grind. Why? Because I fired Hoffman's girl for stealing from me? Because Hoffman got a visit from Tony after they fucked with my clubs and my brother's house? Because they feel entitled to the fruits of my hard work? Some people are so fucking entitled, so twisted up in their greed. Instead of looking at everything I've got and thinking about the hard work it took to get there and planning their own route to success, they scheme to figure out how to take it off the people who worked for it.

So, Stephanie Whitley got news Felix was found dead at the landfill, so is probably spinning her wheels wondering which of Hoffman's enemies did it. Lowlife drug dealer known for playing in his lab and making bad drugs that make people overdose - I'm guessing he has plenty of them.

But I wouldn't be surprised if she tries to keep his crew involved in ripping me off on New Year's Eve for the sake of Hoffman, as some sort of homage to the punk.

Jag and his team are there making some adjustments to the system and Jag and the cops are ironing out the plan for New

Year's Eve. I haven't let Craig in on anything because he's sleeping with Hoffman's mole and I suspect has no clue what her plans are. But I know better than to assume anything when it comes to money, greed, deceit, and the lengths a man will go to for his woman.

Violet

I'm spending the day after Christmas with Susanna and her mom at their house. It's been a tradition we've had for years, other than the last two years and I've missed it. My first Christmas with Ray when I did it, he sulked and by the following year, had a downright attitude about it so I feigned a headache and canceled.

Today, I told Killian what I was planning to do and he didn't bat an eye about it.

Me, Suse and her mom Lorena pamper ourselves and follow a tradition Susanna's family had for "Boxing Day" of knitting hats, scarves, and mittens for the homeless, which we spend the day doing while alternately snacking and watching movies with some pampering, breaking out the homemade facials and foot spas.

I almost didn't come, thinking it'd be a long day of worry for me, but it's working out to help keep my mind somewhat occupied. Despite the fact that Susanna and Lorena are great company, the jitters chase me all day. And I've got a bit of the nausea back. I threw up first thing this morning, but thankfully it doesn't seem to be an all-day thing so far.

I'm kind of torn, almost wishing I didn't have to be in the know about the Ray move that's happening today, because until I hear from Kill that it's over, that it's done with, I'm going to feel like I have a nest of butterflies in my belly.

More than once, Susanna and her mom get concerned looks on their faces as I get caught not paying attention because I'm so preoccupied. I blame it on the nausea and on trying to count stitches as I knit.

Finally, I hear from Killian via a text message at four o'clock.

Killian: Checking in. All good with you?

Me: All good. All good with you?

Killian: Very good. See you at home. I'm at Numbers working on the security plan for nye. I might be late. Let me know when you're home. I love you.

Me: Ok. Love you.

I exhale relief.

Very good.

Phew.

I want to ask questions, but I know I can't do that via text. I need to wait until we're together later.

I can't help but wonder if it's possible... is it really, truly over?

Will we be able to start the new year with all this behind us?

I feel a spark of hope.

But then something else. Guilt. Knowing Ray isn't with the cops, that he's going to a different sort of prison that he'll never get out of. I push the guilt away.

"Good message?" Lorena asks.

"Yeah," I breathe.

"Now maybe she'll actually be *here* with us instead of just here with us," Susanna mutters.

"Such a poker face on you," Lorena adds.

"Pass me the black yarn?" I request, trying to hide my smile.

"Do you girls want some lasagna?" Lorena asks.

Lasagna? Can I stomach a piece of lasagna? My mind transports me back to the day I found Ray in the basement.

"We haven't stopped noshing all day," Susanna says. "But duh... of course we want some."

I laugh. And shockingly, most likely because of Killian's text message, I am able to eat the lasagna. I even enjoy it.

“We should invite him in for a coffee at least,” Susanna says, looking out through the lace curtains of her mother’s living room. She’s not being very inconspicuous about stalking my bodyguard.

“I’d like to get a look at him,” Lorena puts in, going up to the front door and looking between the blind slats.

“Lorena!” I exclaim, laughing.

“What? I don’t have the right to set eyes on my potential future son-in-law?”

Susanna throws herself to her back on the couch, cackling with glee while kicking her feet and clapping her hands. “That’s what I’m sayin’!”

“Maybe we should offer him a beverage,” Lorena muses.

“After I get this mask off my face,” Susanna adds.

They don’t quite get why I have a bodyguard, even though I’ve explained that Killian has had some security issues and not to worry about it, that it’s just a precaution. Susanna thinks it’s suspect, I can tell. Her mom thinks it’s swoony that my husband is protective but has already warned me about the dangers of possessive men and I’ve tried my best to alleviate her concerns.

“Oh shit, the door is opening,” Lorena says, still peering through her blinds at the front door. “Oh my Lord. Look at that man, Susanna! It’s beyond sexy the way he even folds out of his car.”

“Right?” Susanna throws up a hand.

“He’s gonna give me some handsome, strong grandbabies, isn’t he? I can see his green eyes from here, child!”

Susanna laughs. “I don’t want kids. They’re too needy. But I’d like to practice making them with him.”

“What’s he doing?” I get up and look out the front window over her shoulder and see Wesley stalking up toward the

house, a serious look on his face.

I go for the door, hearing Susanna screech that I can't open it with our faces all covered in (homemade facial) goo.

"Maybe he has to go to the bathroom," I say, pulling the door wide. "Hi Wesley," I smile, knowing how funny I look right now, but his expression hits like a gut punch. Something is wrong.

"Sorry, Violet. We have to go."

"Pardon?"

"I need to drive you to Killian."

"Now?"

"Yes. Now. I sent a text, but you didn't answer."

"Oh, sorry." I rush to the kitchen and grab a white towel from the stack and immediately start wiping the oatmeal, honey, and strawberry mixture away.

"Is something wrong?" Lorena asks.

"Sorry, Ms. Gagne, for the interruption, but I need to drive Violet to her husband."

"Is anyone hurt?" I ask while pulling my socks on. We'd been doing foot baths, too. I get my second sock on and unroll my yoga pants which had been rolled up to my calves.

Wesley grabs my coat and helps me into it while Lorena passes my purse. "I don't have any details, Violet. Sorry."

"Call me as soon as possible, Violet," Susanna says. "You can't tell us what's wrong?" She glares at Wes.

He shakes his head. "I don't have details, just that Killian needs Violet brought to him immediately."

"Love you guys, I'll call you as soon as I know what's what." I quickly get my shoes on and grab my phone from the kitchen where it'd been charging, then follow Wesley out.

“What on earth is going on?” I whisper, getting in his front passenger seat.

He closes the door for me, then rounds the vehicle and as he gets in, he answers, “I don’t know the answer to that. I do know something’s not right. Jagger Carson called me, and Killian was shoutin’ in the background. Jagger only told me to get you over there and make sure I cover you. What that means, I can only guess. Talked to him just briefly when Jagger passed the phone and he was shoutin’ that he needed you, so I’m gettin’ you over there.”

“Okay, can you hurry?” I ask, heart galloping and stomach clenching.

He drives fast, faster than he should, I’m sure, but he does it competently. I shakily call Killian, but there’s no answer so I brace, my heart hammering all the way to Numbers. Just before we pull in, Wes makes a call on speaker.

“Pulling up in two minutes.”

“I’ll be at the door,” the guy on the other end says.

When we get there, Wesley takes me inside and Tony is holding the entrance door open, a phone to his ear. He jerks his chin up in greeting, then leads the way up to Killian’s office, talking on the phone as he leads us up the stairs, telling someone on the other end that we’re heading up.

Numbers is closed today, it’s eerily quiet, and my stomach is in knots. When the door to Killian’s office is opened, my stomach bottoms out at what I see.

There are two other men that I don’t know inside the doorway and not only does Killian’s office look like a cyclone hit it, the giant glass window that overlooks the club is shattered; just a few pieces of jagged, webbed glass remains. Stuff from the desk is all over the floor and his desk chair is on its side. Killian is pacing, running his hands through his hair. He’s disheveled and looks pale and frantic.

He sees me at the same time as I spot Jagger standing there, looking disheveled as well, with a cut on the corner of his

mouth.

Jagger is about to speak when Killian exclaims, “Violet! Thank fuck!” Killian rushes toward me, grabbing me and pulling me tight to his body. His white dress shirt has a blood stain on it, it’s wrinkled, and he’s sweaty.

He frantically examines me, running his hands all over my body. His eyes are wild. Absolutely wild. And he’s trembling.

“Baby,” he whispers into my ear. “Thank fuck. You’re not hurt?”

“I’m fine. What happened?” I ask, hoarsely, taking in the space.

He squeezes me again, plastering me to his body.

“Too tight,” I protest. “Talk to me.”

Jagger steps closer and speaks gently. “We’ve got Willie coming. He should be here any minute. We need him calmed down. We talked about sendin’ him to the hospital, but-”

“Fuck the hospital,” Killian roars, “And fuck you!” Killian lunges for him, and one of the big guys from the door steps in front of Jagger and holds his hand up, saying, “Cover her!”

Killian punches the guy and Wes is immediately pulling me back, blocking me.

There’s a tangle of people partially blocking my view of Killian, but I can see and hear enough to know he’s beating up the big guy who doesn’t hit back, rather seems like he’s trying to contain my husband.

“Let me to my wife. Violet? Where the fuck is she?”

“I’m here, Killian. What’s going on?” I call out, but I don’t think he hears me.

“Violet!” Killian shouts, then headbutts the guy in between him and Jag, sending him back a couple feet. Blood sprays out of the guy’s nose.

Oh shit!

“Killian!” I try to move forward, but Jagger puts his hand on my arm.

Wes steps in front of me.

Jagger says, “Wes. Wanted her here to calm him, but it’s not working; maybe you should move her downstairs for now, so-”

“I’m not going anywhere. What on earth is going on?” I demand.

“We don’t know why, Violet,” Jagger says, wiping his lip with a wad of Kleenex. “But he’s been having a freak-out the past half an hour. It’s like it’s some sort of... psychotic break? I don’t know. He started stressin’, saying shit that sounded like he was spiraling into some sort of anxiety attack and then he just started losin’ it, fired his gun at the window and tried to turn it to me.” He shakes his head and shrugs, gesturing toward the space around us. “Thank God he had a moment of lucidity then because I was able to get the gun. He did all this. It’s been bad.”

“Fuck you!” Killian shouts at the wall. “You don’t fucking touch her again!?” He rushes to his desk and reaches underneath. “Where’s my fuckin’ gun? I know what I fucking saw, Jag,” Killian shouts at Jagger. “Gimme that gun back.” He then looks back toward no one and says, “I’ll put you in the fucking ground myself this time.”

“Baby,” I say, “Sit down and talk to me. Calm down.”

“Thank God you’re here. I thought he got you. He said he got you.” Killian pushes his way past one of the guys who is trying to block him from getting to me.

“Stay behind me,” Wes says, holding a hand out. “Killian, man. Let’s sit down. Can we sit down and you can run through it for us?”

“Move, Wes,” Killian demands. “Do not ever get between me and her. Nobody better fuckin’ ever get between me and my wife or I will fucking gut them.”

“Let me go to him,” I say. “Everyone, let me go to Killian!”

“Let me get to my goddamn wife!” Killian roars. “Or I’ll shoot every fucking one of you. Nobody keeps her from me. No one. You want to go where the last guy that kept her from me went?”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

I shove my way out of Wesley’s hold to get to Killian, who takes me into his arms.

“Thank God, thank God. I thought he got you. I thought he fucking got you and our baby and fuck.”

“Jagger, can you clear everyone out? I don’t want him saying things we can’t take back.”

“Right,” Jagger says. “Everyone out.”

“Not me,” Wes denies, “Goin’ nowhere. I’m here to protect Violet.”

“I protect Violet!” Killian shouts, thumping his chest with his fist. “Me!”

“Bud, you pay me to keep her safe and I know if you were in your right mind right now, you’d want me gettin’ her away from this scene,” Wes says.

“Fuck you,” Killian points at him. “You’re fired.”

“Who? Who do you think got me?” I lower my voice and whisper into his ear, “Ray? Did something go wrong with Ray?” I ask.

“Max,” Killian says, squeezing me tight.

Max?

I frown.

Killian takes my face into both hands, looking right into my eyes.

“Max is running rampant, blowin’ up my clubs, setting our apartment on fire, and he said he hurt you and the baby.”

“Our apartment? Max? What?”

“He blew up Numbers. Genesis is on fire and Exodus melted. Don’t know what he’s doin’ with Law.”

“We’re inside Numbers, baby. It’s not blown up.”

He ignores that. “Thank God you’re here, Violet. I need my gun back, Jag. Gimme my motherfucking gun. Jag doesn’t believe me.” Killian looks into my eyes. “I need to get you safe. And then I need to fucking kill him. How can you be my fuckin’ friend and take my gun, Jag? You saw what he was doin’! Where’s Willie? He threw Willie’s mattress out and Willie can have my bed. I’ll sleep on the goddamn floor. I give no fucks.” Killian lets go of me and grabs Jagger by the throat. “Fuck you. Did he make you some promises? Is that why you’re on his side now?”

Killian is wild-eyed, disheveled. Sweating. Jagger pushes him off and Killian goes for his throat again.

“Killian!” I shout.

“Do something!” I say over my shoulder to Wes, because Killian is forcefully walking Jagger over to the broken window with his hand circling Jagger’s throat.

As Wes rushes toward them, I haul the door open. “Tony! Help!”

Tony charges past the two guys in the hallway and it takes both Wes and Tony to pull Killian off Jagger and just in time because they’re dangerously close to the opening in the window where one or both of them could get cut or even fall.

It takes the three of them to pin him down, they take punches as Killian swings wildly, connecting with all three of them multiple times as they work to subdue him.

Tears are streaming down my cheeks and then I hear,

“Killian!”

It’s Will.

He looks me over and moves toward his brother.

“Willie! Get these fucks off me and gimme my gun. I gotta go save Violet. The fire is blazing out of control and we gotta stop it before it gets to her!”

“Killian, I’m right here. I’m safe,” I call out.

My eyes bounce between Will, Wes, and Jagger. “You guys, we have to calm him down. Has someone called an ambulance?”

“Doc is on his way,” Tony says breathlessly, and he’s got Killian in a headlock. “He’s almost an hour out, though.”

Killian socks him in the stomach. “Let me go, Tone. Fuck off!”

“Killian can’t wait an hour. He’s a mess. And he’s gonna hurt someone, or himself,” I say as Killian punches Tony again, this time in the nuts, making Tony buckle, face going red, but to Tony’s credit, he doesn’t let go. Instead, he falls to the rug, taking Killian with him.

“Maybe it should be the hospital,” Will says.

“No. Kill wouldn’t want that. No way,” Tony argues, wrapping his legs around Killian’s torso in a hold that makes it look like they’re in a wrestling match – except that they’re both in suits.

“Let go of me, Tone, or I’ll kill you,” Killian grinds out, trying to fight his way out of the tangle.

There are holes in the walls. Big ones, little ones. If he shot out the window, he probably shot bullets into the walls, too.

Killian roars out more anger and I see the knuckles on his right hand are bleeding. He manages to pull out of Tony’s hold, rushes to his desk and crawls under it. “I can’t find it. Where’s my fucking gun? Let me at my wife or I will kill every fucking one of you, especially you!” He comes out from under the desk and points at the wall where no one stands.

Wesley gets extra ornery at that point and Jagger orders Will and Tony to basically sit on Kill until Doc gets here. The mystery Doc is going to take too long. I can’t let him endure

this for another hour, so I say, fuck this and then I pull my phone out and dial 9-1-1.

We're on our way to the hospital. Me and Will in Will's car with Wes following. Killian was taken there in an ambulance.

Nobody seemed real happy with me about this. Tony even tried to take my phone from me while I spoke to emergency services, but Wesley and Will got in his way and stopped him from doing that. I lost my shit, shouting that if they didn't let the paramedics in when they got here that I'd be the one to shoot everyone.

I do not care that Tony's angry, because finally, *finally*, Killian isn't suffering. They sedated him before putting him on a gurney to take him to the hospital.

When the two paramedics came in and started crowding Killian, asking questions, trying to contain the situation I guess, because the other guys eased off it went even more amped and Wes got furious because my husband was being so erratic that I got knocked when Killian went from having me in his arms one moment to fighting with an invisible someone the next, meaning I stumbled backwards and banged my lower back on the corner of his desk.

And then there were police and firefighters in the office with us, too.

The paramedics tried to get him talking and he ripped at his shirt and threw it off, sitting on the floor, thrusting his hands through his hair. His shoulders slumped, looking sad and telling them he couldn't find me.

When I pushed my way through the wall of men blocking me to try to comfort him again, first he pulled me close and then he went crazy again, fighting with someone invisible, knocking me sideways again and lunging at nothing before nearly taking a dive toward the broken window, only getting stopped because Jagger moved fast, hooking him around the

waist, taking them both to the floor, and demanding that the paramedics sedate him.

Killian growled loud, “Get the fuck off me!”

“Jab him,” the male paramedic yelled to the female.

She moved forward with a syringe, and I turned into Wesley’s body, squinting my wet eyes shut. He hugged me, patting my back.

“It’s okay. Come on,” he said.

Killian shouted and growled, throwing punches for another moment, but it was as if the strength, like his very essence was slowly seeping out of him until he was just lying there, gesturing in slow motion. This felt like torture to watch. And then his eyes finally closed before they loaded him onto a stretcher to take him to the hospital.

Now that we’re here, questions are being fired at me.

“He hasn’t been sleeping well,” I say, “Other than that, I don’t know. I don’t know what this could be. It’s not him. He’s always in complete control. He’s never acted remotely like this.”

They want to know if he’s got a history of psychiatric problems. Substance abuse problems. He’s unconscious in the hospital bed but they’ve got his wrists restrained, attached to his bed rails. And I hate it with every fiber of my being, but there was no way I could leave him suffering like that for another hour waiting for some guy to come who may or may not have been able to help.

Will and I are sitting here being quizzed by a nurse that’s asking medical history questions.

He has no medical history, according to Will. Never any broken bones, no hospital stays other than when he got jumped. He’s got his tonsils and his appendix, and has hardly been sick a day in his life.

She's asking me about his stress levels, about what he could be stressed about. I tell her he's been sleeping very little, that we've had some marital problems recently but we're working it out. That I've recently found out I'm pregnant. I say nothing else because I don't know what it's safe to say and not say, so I kind of play dumb.

Inside, I'm just reeling because I don't know if it's the lack of sleep, if it's got anything to do with what happened with Ray today, or what it is, but I'm haunted with the images that keep flooding my brain of Killian losing it in his office, of him hurting people. And most of all, of it taking several men to hold him down so that a paramedic could sedate him while he was hallucinating about Max, the man who killed his mother, the man who Killian told me himself that he killed in cold blood at the age of seventeen.

I don't know what went down between the time we parted this morning and this evening, he messaged me a few hours ago seeming like himself. I'm a wreck. And I want to wake up from this nightmare.

The nurse says we should sit tight and wait for a doctor.

A while later, the doctor comes and reads over the chart but then asks us all the same questions the nurse asked and it's exasperating. After he leaves us alone, Will rubs my back.

"What else is going on?" he whispers. "Any idea? Because this isn't him. He's strong. He's the strongest person I know."

Maybe he's had to be too strong for too long. I don't know. I just don't know. I gulp hard. "There's so much happening but I don't know what I should say and not say. I only know that he needed to be sedated and not a moment too soon because he could've said things in front of the police that would not have gone over well."

He gives me a knowing look. "Say nothing more than you've said. You've said nothing you shouldn't. Okay? Leave it at that. We'll see how he is when he wakes up and go from there."

You did the right thing, Violet. Calling 9-1-1 was the right thing.”

I nod, holding in the tears.

“You okay?” Will asks.

I nod again.

But I’m not.

“You did the right thing,” he repeats like I’m doubting that, which I’m not, but I let him talk anyway. “Jag and Tony were tryin’ to do what Kill would want, but I get why you called 9-1-1. Fuckin’ killed me seeing him like that. We could still be there if you hadn’t, he could still be suffering. You did the right thing. You’re okay.”

I choke on a sob, unable to contain it any longer. He puts his arm around me and gives me a hug.

I’m not okay. And I don’t know if I ever will be again.

Because will Killian be okay? Was this the lack of sleep he’s been getting along with all the stress he’s been under that caused a nervous breakdown?

I lived with mood swings with Ray, but I’ve got no experience with anything this extreme.

Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes later, Will’s phone rings and after just a few seconds, his face goes shocked. It takes only a few sentences for me to realize he’s talking to Tony. When Will hangs up, he looks to me.

“Jagger’s on his way in, too. Tony’s bringing him. He’s freaking out. Someone had to have drugged them both. Jag’s just reacting later to it.”

“Oh my God.”

I rush out to find the nurse at the nurse’s station, Will following me.

“Hi. Can you run a tox screen. Someone else from the club my husband was at is having similar symptoms.”

“We’re already doing that. Where’s the other person having the symptoms?”

“He’s on his way here.”

Knowing what might be happening seems to have made it easier on Jagger than Killian, when the symptoms started. Tony came to see us in Killian’s room and said Jagger started acting strange and sweating with heart racing and immediately told Tony to get him to the hospital because it looked like things around him were melting.

By the time they got Jagger to the hospital, he was experiencing sharp hallucinations and paranoia about substances that he was trying to protect people from. Jagger was convinced they’d all melt if they weren’t careful. This time, no one suggested they wait for Doc, who got called off after the ambulance left with Killian. Tony along with two of Jagger’s employees instead brought him right in.

Jagger had already told Tony that when he met with Killian, they had a drink together in his office and that Killian had already had a drink. The hospital staff acted quickly to sedate him and monitor his vitals while getting blood to run some bloodwork as well.

It’s hours later, and Killian is still unconscious. I’m still at his bedside with his brother and we’re waiting to find out what it was that he was given. Wesley went back to the club to grab the bottles of alcohol in Killian’s office, bringing them in to be tested. Jagger’s team are still there working on the security system upgrades.

The police are also here. It started with one officer asking questions and then not long later, two detectives arrived and asked even more questions. I’m wondering if they’re the same police Killian has been talking to about New Year’s Eve.

And I'm wondering if this is connected to that.

I'm angry and scared and also relieved. Because he didn't have a nervous breakdown. He was having an episode of psychosis because of drugs.

I hate that it happened, but I'm also relieved because I thought there for a minute that nothing would ever be the same, that the future Killian told me we'd have would not get to happen.

I can't imagine my life without him. I sat and did that today, imagined raising a baby without him by my side, imagined not having another Christmas like the one we just had – mourning at the thought of what our child would miss out on. I imagined losing out on experiencing the beautiful life he was showing me he was going to give me.

Killian

I'm tasting and smelling chemicals as my eyes open. I see Violet and my brother beside me. It takes a second to realize where I am. A hospital. Confusion frizzles in my brain for a minute and I'm having trouble connecting dots. Dario's wedding. Shadows swarming. Violet screaming.

No. That's not right. No. What the fuck?

Will is staring at his phone, his free arm thrown around the back of Violet's chair. She's got her elbow on the arm of the chair, face leaned against her palm as she stares at nothing, her eyes looking haunted.

I feel like I'm stumbling through pictures, tripping through a backwards reel, past flashes. Moments.

Max Amos, hulking over Violet, kicking her in her very pregnant stomach, his eyes pointed my way as he laughs. She cries and her eyes bleed red tears.

My eyes rove over her. Her stomach isn't big.

Willie, crying in the corner, huddled into a ball, just five or six years old.

No. Willie's an adult.

Nan, smoking one of her cigarettes, blowing the smoke out the open window, gesturing with her hands to my mother, who sits there rolling pennies into brown paper so she can take them to the liquor store.

Blood running out of the taps, overflowing and dripping mixed with grey sludge over the countertops. I'm trapped in a box, a glass box like a fuckin' mime and I can't do anything. My fist aches from trying to punch the glass.

"Gonna puke," I mutter and both Will and Violet straighten up.

I sit up, retching and realize I can't move my arms just as Will holds a trash pail in front of me, just in time for me to hurl the contents of my stomach into it.

It goes on for a few minutes, uncontrollable puking with my arms restrained and I'm aware of people moving into the room with me. I want to stop puking long enough to demand they take these things off my arms, but I keep heaving up liquid. And then air. Air that tastes like dirty bleach.

Finally, it stops and I realize a nurse has taken over holding the trash pail for my brother who now stands back with his arm around Violet. Violet's crying.

A doctor and nurse hover too close, way too close. I'm agitated.

"Let me out of these. Now. Then fuckin' fuck off. Back off, people. I need a goddamn minute. Let me out."

They try to calm me down, saying they need to check my vitals, but why the fuck am I restrained? I'm telling them to get away at the same time as demanding that they release me which makes no fucking sense.

And then things make even less sense as I take in my wife and brother standing back. Because they're doing nothing.

"Will. Violet. The fuck?" I clip. They're both standing back, not telling these fucks to uncuff my arms. Why?

"Killian, let them look after you, okay?" Violet says softly, tears in her eyes.

"Un-cuff me," I growl at a guy in scrubs, a younger black guy who steps in front of Violet.

"Killian, calm down, please. It appears you were drugged. The restraints need to stay until we know all the drugs are out of your system, to protect you. And us."

What?

"Un-fucking cuff me," I repeat, head swimming, heart racing, and then I see Max standing behind Violet, hands on either

side of her neck as he moves in, ready to choke her.

“Willie! He’s behind Violet! Stop him!”

51

Violet

They want us to go, to leave him to sleep. We've been here all night and I don't want to go anywhere, but they say he'll be asleep for at least several more hours with the medication they gave him when he started to lose it again, so finally, Will talks me into going home and trying to sleep for a bit.

As we leave the hospital, I see Jagger's sister Jessa standing outside, smoking a cigarette. Tony stands there with her.

She marches our way.

"Jessa," Will warns.

I brace, wondering what kind of ugliness is about to come at me.

"How is he?" she asks me, ignoring him.

"He's sedated. Again. He woke up but he still wasn't... wasn't right. How is Jagger?" I ask.

She sighs and takes a shaky drag of her cigarette. "He's okay. Sleeping." She blows it out and backs up, wincing. "Oh, sorry."

I shake my head with a shrug, trying to communicate not to worry about it, but I'm relieved she butts her cigarette out as I turn to Tony. "Do we know who did this?"

"We'll find out, don't you worry," he says, eyes cold.

"Isn't there surveillance?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Surveillance systems were offline since Jag was doin' upgrades. Gotta get him to bring 'em back up and see what we can look up. All the booze has been brought in from his office. Seven open bottles and they're all bein' tested."

“We’re going to go get some sleep. We’ll be back in a few hours,” Will says, leading me toward his car.

I wave goodbye.

We’re a few paces away from the car when Will mutters, “Shit, would you look at that?” He’s looking over his shoulder.

I look over my shoulder as well and see Tony holding Jessa and kissing her.

“What’s that about?” Will asks.

I shrug, getting into the car. “Another crazy, long story that I can’t get into.”

Tony is about six feet six, built like Mr. Universe. He has dark hair and dark eyes. Jessa looks tiny in his embrace. I don’t know if she’s still playing him or not, but they look good together. And if she’s not playing him, maybe she’ll finally stop trying to make passes at my husband.

“I’m way outta the loop. Though not surprising with my brother,” Will says.

“Your brother likes to keep people on a need-to-know basis for their safety, I’m figuring out,” I say. “Don’t take it personally.”

“I never do. It’s how he’s always been,” Will says, starting up his car. “Nobody more protective than him.”

His phone rings so he reaches into his pocket and his face changes when he sees the screen. “Gotta take this, sorry, Violet.” He answers, “Dario? Hi.” He gets out of the car and walks a few feet away, then turns and has me in his sights while he talks.

I pull my phone from my bag. It’s dead. I sigh and rub my eyes.

I need to plug this in. The nurse promised to call if Killian woke up before I got back, but was pretty sure I’d be safe to leave for at least five or six hours. Will takes a few minutes with his phone call and it feels too long. I’m exhausted. I want to get home so we can hurry up and get back.

Finally, he's back.

"Sorry. Work stuff. Got a new assignment starting as soon as things are settled. Just getting details."

"Oh, what is it? Something interesting?"

"Hopefully something boring. Personal security for my current boss's sister-in-law. Sounds like it'll be a whole lot less amped than what I've been doin' and that's fine by me. Boring and uneventful sounds like a treat for a change." He clicks his seatbelt on and reverses out of the spot.

"Things have been too eventful lately?" I ask, conversationally.

"To say the least," he mutters. "Sorry, can't talk about it."

"Coulter family trait?" I ask.

He snickers. "Sometimes curiosity kills the cat. And cats should not poke around the Ferrano family. Let me just say that."

"Yikes. And meow, don't I know it," I mutter, thinking back to the ominous feeling I had as I descended the stairs in Killian's house the day I found out about Ray.

He chuckles as we pull out onto the main road.

I still have no idea if that's completely resolved. It sounded like it was over from his last text message to me yesterday, but based on everything that's happened in the past twelve or so hours, I honestly have no idea. And the way I'm feeling, it almost feels like hoping for things to be calm and uneventful is asking too much.

Violet

When Will and I get back to the apartment, I make us grilled cheese sandwiches and warm up a can of soup for something fast before I take a quick shower. We both fall asleep, one on each couch in the living area with the television left on.

I only sleep three and a half hours and when I wake up, he's not on the couch opposite to me, but I can hear him talking, sounding like he's in the hallway by the bedrooms. I spot him in the hall on my way into the master bedroom. He waves while talking on the phone.

I head to the bathroom and use it, then wash my face and brush my teeth. When I come out, he's pulling his shoes on.

"I was just on the phone with Tony. All seven bottles of booze had drugs in them. Not just one thing. A cocktail of shit, apparently. Lots of bad shit. The cops think it was related to a case they're working on where Killian was helping."

"I'm gonna change my clothes and then can we go back?" I ask, "I hate not being there and don't want him alone when he wakes up."

"Yeah. When you're ready. He's already awake."

"Shit. I'll be five minutes," I say and rush to the bedroom so I can change.

When we step into his hospital room, Killian is awake. I rush over to him, feeling relief at seeing he's no longer restrained.

"Hi," I say, leaning in and putting my lips to his. I'm so relieved I could cry. "How are you feeling?"

He looks into my eyes and his nostrils flare. His lip curls and then he swallows, and says nothing.

I wait.

It's an awkward moment of silence, Will hovering near the door.

The doctor comes in.

"Hello, Mrs. Coulter."

"Hi," I say, turning in the doctor's direction and grab for Killian's hand.

His hand is sort of limp so my eyes dart to his face briefly. Maybe he's groggy. I rub my hand over his and look at the doctor expectantly. "Do you need me out of the way?"

It registers that Killian isn't squeezing my hand back. He's not looking at the doctor, either; he's just staring in the other direction at nothing. And his jaw muscles keep bulging, like he's clenching his teeth over and over.

"Nope, you're good. So," the doctor says, "the mix of substances detected in his system was a dangerous combination and he's frankly lucky he didn't go into cardiac arrest or even organ failure. Labs look better right now than they did a few hours ago, but he'll be here until tomorrow. His heart rate is still more erratic than I'd like. And because there could be some residual effects we'll keep a close eye."

"Such as?" Will asks.

"We want to ensure he's not having further hallucinations, for one thing. That can linger. We'll be testing his urine and blood every few hours as well as monitoring his blood pressure, heart rate, and so forth. So, just lots of rest and monitoring, running labs and you can likely take him home tomorrow."

"How's Jagger?" I ask.

The doctor answers, "Similar. I can't speak to non-family about his condition, though since you all went through this together, it's probably safe for me to say that he didn't ingest

as much as your husband by the results, but thankfully got in here quickly as even with less in his system, the levels were still dangerous. I'll be back shortly."

"Thank you," I say to the doctor.

"I'll talk to Tony. Get an update," Will says. "He's a couple doors down with Jag. Don't leave here, okay?"

I'm about to agree when Killian says, "Don't."

Will freezes and looks at us expectantly.

"Don't leave her alone with me," Killian says.

My body locks tight with surprise. Surprise turns to shock and a hollow pit in my stomach when Killian pulls his hand away from mine.

"Take her home."

"Baby?" I say, frowning.

"Go home, Violet. I'll be home tomorrow." He still looks away.

"No," I say. "I wanna stay here with you."

He twists to look into my eyes and the expression on his face chills me to the bone. "Go. Home," he grunts and then he turns his head away again. "Please."

"Can you give us a minute?" I ask Will.

"No," Killian grinds out. "Will, take her the fuck home. Stay there. Send Tony in on your way out."

"Killian," I try.

"Violet, go! Fuckin' please," he bites off, not looking at me.

I back up slowly, bumping into Will.

"Got you. It's okay. Kill, I'll take her home. Anything else?"

"No. Just take her home. Stay there until I call you."

"Right," Will says, grabbing my hand.

He tugs so I follow him out of the hospital room. I look over my shoulder as he does, my heart aching as Killian won't even look at me.

I manage, with some difficulty, to work down a swallow. In the hallway, the doctor I was just talking to touches my arm, so I stop.

"I heard that, Mrs. Coulter, and he's likely afraid of lasting effects and wants to protect you. It's common after drug-induced psychosis and terror like what he endured. Effects can linger. You said you're pregnant; he likely wants to create distance to keep you safe in case he's still having visual disturbances."

I swallow down a lump of pain.

"My suggestion: go home, rest, give him a chance to process what he's been through. It's a lot. We've got a counselor coming to talk to him shortly. Try to rest. You've all been through a lot and you've only been gone a couple hours. I'm sure you could use more sleep, and by the time you get some, chances are he'll feel a little bit more like himself. But don't be surprised if it takes him a bit of time." He gives me a kind smile.

I manage to squeak out a *thank you*, then follow Will down the hall. A few doors away we see Tony and Jessa in that room by Jagger's bedside.

"Kill wants to see you," Will says. "Wants me to take Violet back home."

Jessa and I make eye-contact. She frowns.

Tony gives me a nod and rushes by us to go to Killian's room.

"Doin' okay, Jag?" Will calls out.

Jagger sits there drinking ice water from a bendy straw.

"Yeah. Gettin' there," he says. "Sketchy shit. You all right, Violet?"

A beautiful raven-haired woman rushes past us, to his bed. “Oh my God,” she leans over and he embraces her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m all right.” He hugs her tight and kisses the side of her head, eyes closed like he’s soaking in her presence like it’s an elixir.

And my heart constricts. Because that’s how I would have thought Killian would’ve greeted me.

“We’ll head out,” Will says.

Jagger waves. “I’m working on figuring things out from here, Violet. Talking to Wes. Couple members of my team are on it, too. Don’t worry. We’re on this.”

I nod. “Thanks. I hope you feel better.”

His woman turns and reaches for a Kleenex and then wipes her eyes and gives me a wobbly smile.

“Violet, this is Jemma. Babe, Kill’s wife.”

“Hi,” Jemma says, dabbing her eyes. “Is Killian okay?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “He doesn’t want me here. I think he’s still feeling the drug effects.”

“He was having a drink already when I came in,” Jagger says. “So he ingested more of that drug cocktail than I did.”

Jessa pipes up. “I need a cig. I’ll follow you guys out.” She gathers up her handbag and her jacket.

We walk out and because we’re going past Killian’s room again to get to the elevator, I stop in the doorway, seeing Tony talking to him. I step inside.

“Violet,” Will whispers from behind me, but I ignore him and approach the bed.

Killian’s got murder on his face as he talks in hushed tones to Tony who stands there. Killian points at him, looking like he’s ushering orders and then Killian’s eyes slice to me and he clips, “Where’s my brother?” He does it in a way that feels

like it blows my hair back. Rage in his eyes. Anger. Not a hint of the tenderness I almost always see when those eyes are aimed at me.

Will steps up behind me. “Just on our way out.”

“Go home,” Killian says, adding, “Fuck.”

I frown and don't even try to hide the hurt in my expression before I turn around and hurry out.

I walk out feeling like there's a crushing weight on my chest, mashing my heart.

“I don't know why he seems so angry with me,” I say.

“He's angry with everyone,” Jessa says, pushing the elevator button. “Pissed that it happened. Mad you saw him like that. Angry you called an ambulance and that the cops are involved. Ticked at everyone because it happened at all.”

We get into the elevator. It's just me, Will, and Jessa.

“He talked to you?” I ask, feeling even more hurt.

She shakes her head. “I eavesdropped.”

“Do we know how it happened yet?” I ask.

Jessa's head tips left, then right before she admits, “I overheard a few tidbits.”

“Jessa,” Will mutters with disapproval as the elevator stops, letting someone else in.

“What? She needs information. She's asking. Being with a macho alpha ain't easy, especially when he withholds information. Here's what I know... one sec.”

We get off on the main floor and once we're outside and away from people, she continues, “There was a bridal shower for you in his office at Numbers the other night? He specifically told his manager which employees to have up there for clean-up afterwards. They think the manager disregarded that and that a specific employee got access to his office for the cleanup. That she dosed all the bottles there.”

Felix Hoffman's stepsister.

Jessa continues. "Whoever it was, they've got the Rossi brothers lookin' for her. I feel sorry for that chick when she gets found."

"Who is she?" Will asks.

"No idea," Jessa shrugs. "Maybe she's a disgruntled former fuckbuddy. All the former fuckbuddies would be disgruntled knowing he put a ring on it."

I bristle.

"Killian wouldn't ever shit where he eats," Will says. "Sorry Violet."

I raise my hands. "Don't censor yourself on my account." I look to Jessa. "How disgruntled are you?" I ask.

She leans back. "You did not just ask me that."

"Actually, I did," I say, "Because I don't know you."

She leans forward again. "If I did that and got my brother hurt, I'd kill myself. I wouldn't fucking do that. I'm no longer disgruntled. You don't have to worry about me; I've moved on," Jessa adds. "Killian Coulter and all his darkness are all yours. There was a time I thought he was the only one for me, but I was wrong. And I'm finally in a place where I'm okay with that."

"We better go," Will says, breaking what feels like an awkward silence.

"Sorry," I say to Jessa. "I'm just..."

"I get it," she says. "If it were my man, there'd be hell to pay, too. Believe me, it wasn't me. But it happened to my brother too and I want whoever did it to pay for it."

"Okay," I say.

She reaches into her purse to pull out her cigarettes.

Tony comes out as we leave, moving toward Jessa.

All day, I've been feeling powerless and angry, isolated and shut out, and I hate it. Not only do I hate it, I'm also itching to do something about it.

It's the evening and it's been hours since we got back from the hospital. Tony came over and got two changes of clothes for Killian that I packed up with a few extras, like deodorant, his hairbrush, toothbrush, toothpaste, and bodywash as well as his phone charger and his laptop. That's what he requested. From Tony, not me. Two changes of clothes. One set for wearing in the hospital and one for when he leaves so I packed jeans and a sweater along with a Henley and trackpants as well as socks and underwear, plus sneakers since he was dressed up yesterday.

Tony told me he picked up Killian's phone and wallet from his office to bring to him and Will has been on the phone twice with him that I've noticed since then, though Will doesn't stay in earshot for me to guess what's being discussed.

Have I had a phone call or a text message? No.

I called Alana to fill her in with just the basics, planning to ask if she could make arrangements for the window in Killian's office to be replaced and thinking I'd tell her not to talk to any of the Numbers employees since they're all going to be under suspicion. She told me that Killian had already been in touch and all four of Killian's clubs are closed today.

And that feels shitty, too. He's dealing with business but refusing to deal with me?

Instead, I've taken a long bath and spent some of the day cleaning, the rest of it in bed, flicking the remote aimlessly.

Last night just before my phone died at the hospital, I messaged Susanna and told her that we think someone drugged Killian at his club and that he's in the hospital. I told her she has to keep it on the downlow.

Today, she's texted me a bunch of times for updates and I've been intentionally vague. Just saying he's okay, that I don't

need company, that I'll keep her updated and that he'll likely get to come home tomorrow.

She doesn't like it, argues that she wants to be there for me, but it's easier this way. I mean, I can't exactly get into it for the reasons behind it and I don't even want to. The idea of reliving that scene in his office is not something I want to think on more than I have to, though it's been plaguing me since it happened. And his reaction to me today? It hurts. It hurts a lot.

I spend the evening in bed, knowing Will is in the living room, not knowing if Killian has done his stalker thing and looked in on me or if he's even thinking about me. I turn the lights off at eleven o'clock to try to get some sleep.

There's a knock on the bedroom door, so I drag myself out of bed. It's noon. And I slept like the dead.

"I'm headin' out now," Will says, keys in hand.

"Okay. Any news?"

"He's here. He's gone into the guest room and taking a shower. Didn't wanna wake you. I didn't wanna go without sayin' bye. He wanted me to stick around for a bit, but unfortunately I've gotta go start my new job today."

"Good luck. Hope it's boring," I say with a small smile.

He gives me a smile, too, but there's sadness between us.

"You need anything, call me, all right?"

I nod.

He leans in and hugs me. "Give him time. He's beatin' himself up real bad right now. Tony'll be here any minute. He ran out to grab Kill a prescription and then he's comin' back. Kill didn't want me to leave until Tony got here unless you were still sleeping, but he'll be here in five and I'm runnin' late. I wanted to let you know to call me, day or night. And give him space, okay? Be patient."

“Have a good day.”

“I think he’s afraid of more hallucinations and wants to make sure someone’s here to run interference. Wants you safe.”

I give him a tight smile and wave my hand dismissively. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. I’m tougher than I look.”

I follow him toward the door and see Killian’s laptop bag on the floor by the door.

Will says, “I can set the alarm on the way out, not to worry.”

“Okay,” I say and instead of walking him right to the door, I head over to the fridge and pull out a bottle of water.

I’ve suddenly got the beginnings of a tension headache. I had one last night, too, but didn’t take anything for it, not wanting to take any medication if I don’t have to.

After hearing the alarm system beeps and the door locking, I go into the guest room. The shower is running.

I sit on the edge of the bed and play with the fringe of the pretty quilt that Killian bought for me when he decorated this room, trying to make me comfortable when he saved me from Ray and all his bullshit.

A tear slides down my face, so I dash it off my cheek and continue to wait while thoughts run through my brain about all we’ve been through in such a short time. And then the shower turns off.

I’m facing the door when he comes out.

He stops when he sees me. He’s just in a towel. He sighs like he’s disappointed at the sight of me.

“Hi,” I say anyway.

“I’m gonna try to get a couple hours sleep.” He walks past me and I frown before I get up and follow.

I follow him into our room. He’s gone into the closet. He comes out with a pair of trackpants on. His jaw flexes when he sees me.

“I need you to not be here.”

“Not be here?”

“Violet, I need some sleep. Fuckin’ hospital’s so goddamn noisy. Please. Don’t be here with me. Tony’s on his way. Go out or something. Wes needs to be on you, though.” He gets into the bed.

I climb up onto it on my knees.

“Baby,” he growls, frustrated.

At least I’m getting a ‘baby’ I guess. I don’t know what to think.

“This is so unfair,” I whisper. “Do you hear yourself with me? You’re shutting me out. Do you realize that? Are you really this oblivious or is it that you’re intentionally trying to hurt me here? Because this is really fucking horrible.”

His eyes flash with irritation and I hear his molars squeak, he’s grinding his teeth that hard.

“Killian? You’re shutting me out completely. You’re not talking to me. You’re acting angry, and-”

“Of course I’m fucking angry!” he roars, making me jolt. “First, I get drugged and nearly shoot one of my best friends, trash my office, and think I’m losing my fucking mind, Violet. The shit I saw... you have no fuckin’ clue. It was goddamn terrifying. I was trapped in a nightmare that I thought was really happening, and it lasted hours and hours and I couldn’t escape. I could’ve hurt you. You called the goddamn cops when my men fucking told you they had it under control which opened up a whole other can of bullshit that we could’ve avoided and right now, I just want you away from me, so I know I’m not gonna wig out again and hurt you while I try to sort my fuckin’ fucked up head out. So...” He gestures toward the door.

My mouth drops open as I’m about to defend myself, but he starts talking again, voice even louder.

“I get it. That’s the world you lived in. Something goes wrong and you call the cops. You call 9-1-1. But you don’t live in that world anymore, Violet, so get with the fucking program. If something goes wrong and my men tell you not to fuckin’ do something, don’t do it. And now I don’t fuckin’ know if I can even be around you safely because my head is still fucked and I could hurt you, so baby, either I go somewhere else for a few days or you do that because I can’t take the chance I’ll hurt you.”

He storms past me.

I follow him.

“Don’t, woman. I’m fuckin’ serious. Give me space.”

We’re in the hallway and I’m right behind him.

“So you think you can send me away from the hospital when I’m scared out of my mind and not talk to me at all, come home and then continue to ignore me? Sleep in the guest room? Was that what you were going to do?”

He growls, facing the guest room door. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. Right now I’m tryin’ to fucking digest all that’s happened while I figure out if everything I see is real or not. Leave me alone for a while, for fuck’s sake.”

“So you’re picking a fight with me to make me avoid you? Is that what you’re doing? Hurting me so you can make me upset enough to avoid you so that you won’t hurt me by accident?”

“I don’t even know where to fucking start with you,” he snaps.

“That Doc person was gonna be another hour. There was no way I could watch you like that for another minute. You were in so much turmoil, Killian.”

He spins to face me, and I keep going.

“If I were in medical danger you wouldn’t make me wait an hour to get help, would you? I dealt with that when we had the scare about my pregnancy so I know you wouldn’t. I got you the help you needed immediately because that’s what I needed to do. That Doc guy might not have had what he needed to

help you. The doctor said you could've had a cardiac arrest. What then? Some guy with a first aid kit is going to be able to help with that? He'll know what to do upstairs from a bar, bowling alley, and arcade if you're having organ failure?"

He folds his arms across his chest. Still saying nothing.

"Don't you shut me out like this. Do you realize how awful you're being to me? How this makes me feel to be pushed away from you when you need me?"

I'm sobbing now.

And he looks even angrier when he shouts, "Do you realize how fucking terrifying it is for me to be around you and know I could hurt you? I'm supposed to protect you." Pain slashes across his face. "I woke up with my fuckin' arms restrained!"

I rush to him and throw my arms around him.

"Don't. I need you to back off, baby, because I'm afraid to even touch you. I don't know if..." He doesn't finish because I burrow my face deep into his chest and hold onto his waist tighter.

It takes a second for his arms to finally close around me and when they do, I feel his body jolt and suddenly he's holding me tight. Far too tight, but he's breathing hard and I know down to my soul he needs this. We both do.

"Come on," I whisper and work to maneuver us the rest of the way back to our room. He loosens his hold on me and we move to our bed.

"Come on," I say again and pull him into the bed and pull the covers over us. We're on our sides, face to face. I snuggle in and wrap my arms around his middle.

He sighs heavily and buries his face into my neck.

And his body is trembling.

"It's gonna be okay," I whisper.

"I don't know if it is, Violet."

“It is,” I vow.

“Dunno what’s real around me and what’s not. Shit is still distorted. When you were talkin’ to me just now he was behind you, laughing, and I know he’s not there but I still fuckin’ see him.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s just you and me here, I promise.”

“That other shithead is finally out of our lives and this shit happens,” he mutters.

“I know,” I say with sadness. “Or I guess I know. I didn’t really know what happened, because your text didn’t say much.”

He wraps me up tighter in his arms. “He got on that plane. He’s out of your life. Out of mine.”

I swallow. And then I let out a long breath.

It’s done. The Ray drama is over. Really over.

“I know you’ve been through a meat grinder, Killian, but please don’t ever shut me out like that again. It hurts so much. I’m so fucking mad at you for doing that to me.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I can’t think straight. I’m so fucking angry and I need you safe. I need to know I’m not gonna cause you any harm. Do you have any idea what it was like for a man like me to wake up and not be able to move my arms with that haunted look on your face that I’ll never fuckin’ forget as long as I live?”

“I can only imagine,” I whisper.

“And I’m dealing with the cops and their bullshit and I fuckin’ hate hospitals and hate feeling helpless even more. Fuckin’ restrained while all your nightmares play out in front of your eyes over and over on a goddamn loop only you’re awake and you know you’re awake so you can’t even tell yourself it’ll be over soon like with a nightmare because you’re already awake. That’s fucking with me. All of this is fucking with me.”

“I’m sorry you’re mad at me for calling an ambulance. And that it meant they restrained you. But if you’d seen me going through what I saw you going through, you’d do anything to help. I know you would. Believe me when I say I couldn’t not call. I can’t believe those guys were just trying to pin you down and were gonna wait another whole hour for help. And I couldn’t wait another hour for your doctor friend to come. You really couldn’t either. And if you had, Jagger would’ve started with his reaction too by then and how would that Doc guy and those guys have taken care of both of you?”

He sighs.

“Right?” I ask.

“I know,” he whispers. “And that makes me fucking angry, too.”

I gulp, nuzzling into his warmth.

“So fucking angry right now.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“You’re getting so strong,” he adds.

I look up at his face.

“I’m in awe of you, Violet.”

I swallow down a lump of emotion.

“Hearin’ talk of you screaming in Tony’s face without an ounce of fear about gettin’ me to the hospital. He’s a tough fucker, that’s why he has the job he has with me. Tough and loyal and though people might not think he’s smart because of his size, he is. And he said you were a little scary.”

I laugh a little.

He kisses my forehead gently. “And you went after Jessa?”

“Not exactly,” I say.

“She came into my room after you left and I had no time for her shit, thinkin’ that’s what it’d be, but she came in to tell me

that she likes you. That you've got a backbone. That anyone who's tied to me needs a backbone."

I snicker.

"I don't wanna hurt you. I really need some sleep, so I want you to go and wait until I call you to come back. I'm gonna crash for a couple hours and then I think me and Tony'll go to Tillamook. Make sure this shit is out of my system. He's gonna have the means to sedate me if necessary. I'm still seein' things out of the corner of my eye. The doctor would've had me stay another day if I leveled with him, but I couldn't stand it in there another fuckin' minute. Please tell Susanna you wanna stay there or go stay with your parents. Your Gramps. Something. Just tonight. Tony should be back any minute."

I look into his eyes. "I wanna be here for you."

"I need you to do this for me. Okay? Please? I need space, need time to sort my head out."

"Okay," I say.

"Call Wes. He'll follow you. Go nowhere without him until I get my hands on that..." He growls instead of finishing. "She had to have done it after your shower. Or someone else got hired that's in on it. Got no surveillance so can't be sure. Maybe figuring we'd be up there on New Year's Eve and we'd all OD or something. They'd be able to do whatever to rob us; don't know. Hoffman was a mad scientist in his lab and concocted a bunch of bad shit that was hurting people. I'm having the entire stock of alcohol examined. Can't chance that'll happen with customers. Closed down the other three locations, too. Found out a friend of hers put in a job application at Law and Genesis. Have to do background checks on all newer employees now."

"Why did they target you so venomously? Just because you fired Amber for stealing?"

He snickers. "Funny thing. Carlson MacDonald, the cop that I've been dealing with came to see me this morning.

Remember with you I mused that the cops would think Iadanza and Hoffman could've been connected, coulda been plausible that Raymond offed him. Remember that?"

I nod.

"Cop told me they were acquainted when they came to the hospital. Haven't said Raymond's the suspect but it's obvious they're connecting dots."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. They say they're investigating Hoffman's murder and have gotten surveillance from that bar near your old place of them talkin' one night before he got arrested, while you were here for that first two weeks. Amber Buckley was there. This is that same sports bar where I met up with him that night we came back to your place that first night. That's where Hoffman did most of his dealin' through. This Stephanie chick was caught on tape there too, talkin' to your Ass-wipe ex. And a couple more people cops are trying to ID. Said they got surveillance of them all in a corner chatting a couple weeks before Numbers even opened. No sound, just security camera images from the bar owner. Big, fat coincidence, right? Wrong. Raymond might've been in on the plan to rob me. Hung out at that bar and maybe started talkin' to people he thought could help him fuck me over. Maybe they were all gonna get in on it the night Raymond brought the gun to Numbers. Maybe he tried to coax you out because the big heist was planned for opening night and our stopping him put it on hold."

My mouth drops open.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, isn't it?"

"Wow."

"So, the night I finally met you, he might've approached as part of a plan to fuck me over. Rob me. Tryin' to fuck me over again after the shit he pulled three years ago."

I blink in surprise.

“Cops are askin’ questions about Iadanza and his connection to you. Things are a little sticky.”

“Yikes.”

We’re quiet a minute and still hugging. I look up at him.

“Those drugs could’ve killed you,” I say.

“Or you could’ve gotten hurt. Our baby.”

I’ve got a nasty bruise on my lower back from when I got knocked into his desk. I don’t bother saying that and I’m hoping it fades before he notices. He’s got enough guilt eating him up right now.

He pulls me closer. “Please go out. Until tomorrow morning. Let me sleep. Then come back. I’ll come home when I’m sure I’ve got my head on straight. Okay?”

I nod. “I don’t wanna be away from you, but I get that you need this, so, okay. Don’t stay away from me a second longer than you need to.” I poke him in the chest.

He gives me a sad smile and I know he’s clued into the fact that I used the words as he did when I left him after finding out about Ray.

He touches his lips to my head.

“I love you,” I say.

“Love you, baby. So fuckin’ much,” he whispers gruffly.

“Go,” he adds, slapping my butt.

I kiss him, then roll away.

“Maybe I’ll go visit Grampa, stay at his place. My cousin Wendy arrives today. Maybe I’ll find out where she’ll be. Or if she’s in too late, I’ll stay at Susanna’s. I’ll let you know which. Or spy on me like you do and save me the phone call.”

He smiles. “I spied on you a lot from the hospital. You looked sad.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I sure was. Don’t you dare shut me out again or I will rain down hellfire Violet-style.”

He sighs.

“Call me if you need me and message me when you’re leaving.”

He looks into my eyes. “I will. Fuckin’ love you so much.”

“Not as much as I love you,” I say.

He jolts in surprise and then smiles. “Definitely more.”

I shake my head. “Nuh uh. Go to sleep. Call me later.”

He reaches a hand out toward me. I grab it. He squeezes it and then tugs, making me fall into the bed.

“Do you want me to go or don’t you?”

“I don’t. But you need to.” He kisses my nose and then his hand lands gently on my belly and he rubs back and forth.

“Love you both.”

“We love you, too. Okay, sleep. I’m just gonna hang out out there until Tony gets here.”

“And you’ll call and then wait for Wes.”

“Oh yeah.”

He gives me a dirty look.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be careful.” I kiss him again and then roll away, wishing he’d just let me snuggle up with him and stay.

But I get it.

I gather some clothes and bathroom supplies, then when I get to the kitchen I toss in my bottle of prenatal vitamins and a package of refrigerated gingerbread cookie dough along with an extra bag of the morning sickness suckers my mom bought me.

There’s a knock on the door just as I zip my bag up. I peek out the peephole. Tony.

I disarm the alarm and let him in.

“He gave me the keys, but I didn’t wanna just let myself in,” Tony greets.

“Come on in,” I invite. “Can I get you something? Anything?”

“I’m good. Where’s Killian?” he asks carefully.

“He’s asleep. I’m goin’ to visit some family until tomorrow. Right after I contact Wesley. Hopefully he can get here soon.”

“Wes is in the parking garage right now. Killian called him to be close today.”

“Oh?”

He nods. “Kill’s payin’ a lotta good money to keep you safe. He’s torn up about the other day, Violet. I shouldn’t say that, but I’m gonna say that. If you two aren’t okay, believe me, you will be. He just needs time to come to grips with everything. He’s really shook up, haven’t seen him like this before.”

“What he went through was terrifying, I’m sure,” I say.

“And I apologize to you for what happened when you called the ambulance. I was tryin’ to do what he wanted me to. And he agreed that’s what he’d have wanted.”

I’m about to argue when he shakes his head, halting me.

“But I understand why you wanted to call the ambulance. I hope you’re not angry with me.”

“I’m not,” I say. “Not anymore.”

He cracks a smile. “And just to say, I’m also sorry about the other thing that happened. Last week when I went to the other house and... when you-know-what happened with you-know-who. I wasn’t careful enough and that could’ve been bad for all of us. It won’t happen again. But I’m sorry it did. I’m someone you guys can count on, despite how it looks.”

“I’m sorry you got hurt in the process,” I say. “And that Jessa was so frightened, I’m sure, when I-know-who drove off with her.”

He nods with a grave expression. “Yeah. We’re all ready to get back to calmer times. Go ahead and call Wes to tell him you’re comin’ down. I need to make a couple calls.”

“Okay. Um, see ya. There’s clean towels in the closet in the guest room for tonight. And the bed was just changed so it’s ready for you. And lots of food around. Make yourself at home.”

He smiles. “Thank you, kindly. And can I just say, I’m real glad he’s got you. You’re good for him.”

“Thank you,” I say. “That’s very nice of you to say.”

I move to the counter and grab my phone and call Wes to ask him if he can follow me to my grandfather’s place.

He tells me he’s happy to do that and that I can come down now. He’s already parked beside my Range Rover in the underground.

Killian

The cops are coming by Genesis tomorrow to meet with me and Jagger. They want to go over plans for New Year's Eve with me a little earlier than planned and want to do it somewhere other than Numbers.

My staff, the ones not in on drugging me, don't know why all four locations are closed until New Year's Eve, but the ones not in on trying to fuck me probably don't care since whoever is on schedule will get paid. Have the closures made the people planning to rob me suspicious I'm onto them? I don't know.

I do know this meeting with the cops fucks with my plan to go to Tillamook, but maybe that's a good thing. I haven't decided yet if I'll go there after or just stay at one of my clubs for a couple days. All my offices have couches.

Since I've had flashbacks today about Tillamook that are haunting me a little, it's probably not the healthiest place for me right now. I keep getting flashes of Violet running from me toward the water, but instead of her stopping and crying like she did the day she found out who was downstairs, I get visions of her walking into the ocean and disappearing underwater and not coming back up.

Although I'm still seeing things I know aren't real, it's with less frequency and not as vivid, so while my head is filled with alarming shit, at least now I know what's real and what isn't.

Jag was released from the hospital, too.

He and his woman are staying in a hotel tonight nearby and he'll be there at the meeting with the cops, too. Sounds like he had some hallucinations that are fucking with him, too, but not near as bad as what I've been dealing with.

I've slept for a few hours and eaten some pasta, courtesy of Tony who cooked.

Violet is at her grandfather's house. Her cousin Colleen is there, too, with Violet's other cousin Wendy who I haven't met yet. She arrived this morning from Alaska for a week-long visit and Violet wants me to attend a big family dinner planned at Violet's grandfather's on New Year's Day. I'm hoping that by then, shit will be resolved. All the shit.

They're calling tonight *The Cousin Sleepover Spectacular* and Wes is parked outside with plans to swap with another private eye named Abe for second shift. I'd say I'll sleep better knowing that at no time will Violet's grandfather's house not be watched but I probably won't sleep much tonight anyway.

Not only because I won't have her beside me, but also I'm still sick in my gut about the whole fuckin' thing. One minute, I'm having a drink of some top shelf scotch that I got as a gift from Guy with my old friend Jag, shooting the breeze about Christmas, and the next, reality and a nightmare are melting together in a collage of confusion. My heart raced and first I felt like I was looking down at my life happening inside one of Violet's Christmas snow globes, watching myself, detached, and trapped as I saw the crazy shit I was doing and heard the whacked things I was saying and yet I couldn't stop myself from doing or saying them.

I'm still untangling it all while dealing with the guilt, the anger and then the anger at myself for how I reacted to her when I woke up, when I started to realize all that had happened.

I should've been home that night after the club, feeling good about the future, knowing Iadanza was gone from our lives but that his suffering wouldn't end, knowing we have a solid plan to tackle any security issues on New Year's Eve or at any other time. Looking forward to coming home to my beautiful, pregnant wife and feeling good about the direction we're headed in. Getting excited about our Tahiti trip.

Instead, that nightmare is still swirling around my head with the cops now all up in my grill, poking around, asking

questions and trying to piece shit together about my connection to Iadanza, my relationship with Violet, who they referred to as Iadanza's ex, and that's a phrase that I want out of my head because it makes the old rage about what he did to fuckin' scoop her from me feel too fresh.

The one cop, Carlson MacDonald, I got a look in his eyes that tweaked me as he's informing me Iadanza is missing, asking if I saw the news. I tell him I was busy being dosed with a lethal drug cocktail and he informs me that Raymond was pulled from the prison transport on December 26 by a crew that they're trying to identify. Two corrections officers were injured, though not critically. And Iadanza is in the wind.

And I know MacDonald is looking at the whole picture, at the fact that not only was I involved with the arrest with Raymond after he scammed that old lady for the money, but that now Violet's married me and the same day the shit happens with Iadanza going missing from the transport, me and Jagger are drugged with mystery drug concoctions for which the now dead Hoffman is known to have an affinity for creating. And the fact that Iadanza's gun was used to kill Hoffman. Plus my beef with Hoffman over what happened after I fired Amber has them paying close attention to me.

So now on top of everything, it's become crystal clear to me that all this now means there's a room somewhere inside the police headquarters building with a bulletin board that has all these facts and my and Violet's pictures tacked to it. There's just too many connections for there not to be.

Right now, I'm missing my old mentor Tom Ferrano Sr. Because this is a tangled web that he'd undoubtedly have the connections to untie for me. And I know Dario and Tommy are trying to live cleaner, otherwise I'd have considered calling them for advice. Though, based on a conversation I've had with my brother, they've had their hands more than full getting retribution against Leo Denarda, the shithead behind my swarming after Dario's wedding. And the retribution against him is something Will was a witness to. He's lost some innocence around all that. And this doesn't make me happy

with the Ferrano brothers at all. And I blame myself for hooking Will up with Dario thinking I was helping them both out, that it wouldn't mean my brother has to wade into the sludge of Portland's underbelly.

So, no, I'm not about to pick up the phone and call my old friends about this, but then again I don't ever rely solely on other people to fix my problems. Not ever.

So, I need to figure this shit out, keep my shit tight, make sure I build the connections I need as my business grows because clearly my list of enemies will also grow with that. And above all fucking else, protect Violet.

I sleep like garbage because I don't have her next to me, her fingers in my hair, her body heat close. But at least I know she's safe tonight.

I've been on the phone for an hour with my beautiful Violet. Her voice soothes as she chats happily about her sleepover last night.

"Reminds me of when we were kids and my grandparents would take all the kids for sleepovers. We camped out in the rec room on air mattresses with sleeping bags. Ate junk food and watched movies all night. Colly bought a big jar of the moisturizer Gramma always used and we all put it on and told stories about her while smelling that awesome scent. Grampa even came and told us to go to bed at three in the morning when we were giggling too loud, but he was only fake-mad."

"I bet he loved every minute," I say.

"Yeah," she breathes out. "So, you're not going to the house?"

"Naw," I say. "I have to meet with the cops today, talk about the security plan for New Year's Eve along with some other stuff regarding me and Jag getting drugged. I'm also figuring it might not be the best place for me until my head is sorted."

“Oh. Uh... do you want me to, um, stay here again tonight? Or I could go to the beach house. Wait, maybe I shouldn't; I'm not sure about that.”

“I want you home. Slept like shit last night without you. Plus we've got an alarm system here. Security downstairs. It's better if you're here with this swirling shit storm.”

Good name for it. Yeah, a storm of bullshit is swirling around, orbiting me, and I'm not sure where the tornado will touch down next.

“I miss you, too,” she whispers. “The storm will clear. Eventually.”

Hopefully without blowing the roof off my life.

“Come home. I'll go do my thing at the club and meet you back here.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I need you beside me at night. You wouldn't want me to go wanderin' in my sleep looking for you, would you? Surprised I didn't sleepwalk to your Gramps' place. If Tony wasn't here I might've.”

“Absolutely not, especially not when we live many feet up from the ground. I actually thought about that last night and wished I had the ability to spy on you.”

“I'll hook you up with my spy app.”

“Good.”

I hear the smile in her voice.

“I'll be there when you get home,” she says.

“Good, baby. See you later.”

“Love you, Kill.”

“Love you, Dimples.”

After the meeting at Genesis, I spend some time going through some numbers for the clubs and the online casino. But as I'm wrapping that up, I get a security notification that Craig tried to get into the building at Numbers. He couldn't because we disabled his access. Right after I got the notification, he messaged me asking about it so I replied, asking him to wait for me there, said I'm on my way. I bring a gun with me.

When I get arrive, I notice Scottsdale and MacDonald have followed me. I ask them to wait while I deal with Craig.

"What's up, man?" I greet casually.

"I've been tryin' to get ahold of you. No idea what's happening around here and I'm feelin' a little worried about my job security after Alana's email the other day about everything being shut down right now. No explanation even. And my badge is being wonky." He examines his badge in his hand.

"Come up to my office," I say, "We'll chat."

When we get up there, it all looks good. Like nothing happened. The window has been replaced and the office looks like it usually does.

I invite Craig to sit down. And then I tell him he's fired.

I tell him there's nearly four grand in cash shortages from the week before Christmas from the prize redemptions department (which is where Stephanie worked last week. A lie, an intentional one) and that he's been leaving early and coming in late. And that I've had some mystery shoppers give me negative feedback that has me thinking it's time for a reorganization. I tell him I get that his girlfriend had a death in the family, but I've got a business to run and the shit that's been going wrong predates that.

He acts shocked, asks me to reconsider, to let him look at the books to try to figure out what happened. I tell him I'm having an audit done and will consider a temporary suspension instead while the auditing firm I hired looks at the books. I

also warn him the cops may become involved, depending on what the audit turns up.

He reacts with what looks like genuine shock. I supervise as he cleans out his office and when he leaves, he doesn't know this, but he's being tailed by one of the Rossi brothers who I just texted, because I suspect he could a) lead us to where Stephanie Whitley's hideout is and b) we might get an inkling of whether or not Craig is in on the heist and the doping.

Stephanie is on the schedule New Year's Eve. Hasn't been on the schedule since the day of Violet's bridal shower. There's no missing money, but if he's in on it with her, if he's given her access to shit she shouldn't have access to, since I mentioned it was the department she worked in, I'm thinking he'll be suspicious about the money and it could make shit unravel there. If he's in on the plans for the heist, he'll be distrustful because of the claim of the missing cash. And if anyone has seen any of the cops hanging around and he's in on it, missing money might explain that. If he's not part of the planned heist, I'll figure that out soon enough. Either way, his eye has been off the ball and he won't get his job back. Whether he has to answer for anything else – we'll see.

These cops do not pull any punches. I'm not quite in the hot seat with them but not far off. And I do not fucking like it.

I don't like the hints being dropped. The line of questioning related to Iadanza and Violet. Not at all. Not quite to where I feel like I need to lawyer up, but my teeth are definitely on edge.

When the meeting is done, I walk them to the door.

Ed Scottsdale's phone starts ringing so he waves and walks off and I'm left there with Carlson MacDonald.

"Just to say, Killian," Carlson says, "You're a subject of interest in my department right now."

"Oh really?" I ask.

No shit.

“Really. Lotta connections pointing, leading people to wanna dig into things.”

“Meaning?”

“Ray Iadanza’s escape. What happened to you. The thing that happened to you a coupla months ago when you were jumped outside that hotel. The dosing with the designer drugs that are connected to the dead dealer who’s connected to the potential heist plan for here. All of it. Real interesting. You’ve either done a good job of stayin’ under radar until now or something... trying to suss that out.”

“Meaning?” I repeat.

“All I’m gonna say, you’ve got eyes on you. You seem like a smart guy, so you probably already figure this. And I’m good at reading people and situations, so I’m also gonna go out on a limb here and say you seem like a decent guy. Seems to me you could do with having a friend or two in the department who can keep you in the know about conversations, action plans, that kinda thing.”

“I consider all police officers friends, MacDonald, so I guess that’s a good thing.”

“Yeah,” he snuffles, staring at his shoes. “I get you. I get you. But I’m prepared to be an extra-good friend, if you get me.” He makes deliberate, loaded eye contact.

“Nice of you to offer,” I say, holding his gaze. “Always good to have friends. Good friends especially. Though not if they come at a steep price. I don’t need to buy my friends.”

He shakes his head. “As a family man with kids I worry about the drugs on the street and it’s gonna make me sleep better at night knowin’ that someone like Felix Hoffman is no longer in that lab cookin’ up crazy shit that might make its way onto school grounds, no matter how he happened to find his end. I’m not against vigilantism. Not at all. If I hadn’t gotten this job when I applied, I woulda joined someone like Zack Jacobs

who selectively picks which side of the law he wants to work on depending on the situation.”

Interesting name drop. Makes me think he’s talked to Zack about me. And good to know Zack isn’t just a Fed. That I was right to hire Wes for Violet again and that I maybe don’t need to worry about some of the conversations Wes was privy to in Numbers during my meltdown.

“And Killian, I can absolutely get behind doin’ what you’ve got to do to keep your woman safe. I’d be the same with my wife. I’m not a dirty cop. What I am is an officer who is also a concerned citizen. As a cop, I can’t always handle shit like I’d like to because of the badge, but I like bein’ acquainted with people who don’t wear badges that have the same values I’ve got. You get me?”

We stare for a long minute before I say, “I get you.”

“Anyway,” Carlson continues, “Better head out. Later, Killian.”

“Have a good day. See you later. Too bad we won’t be able to celebrate the end of this year like most folks.”

“Too bad about that. Maybe we can all catch a drink afterwards, you know, celebrate belatedly after we make sure we serve and protect the citizens of Portland and make sure your club doesn’t get robbed while your customers enjoy ringing in the new year.”

“Sounds good to me. You bring the hooch. Seems my hooch has some ill-effects.”

He laughs and waves at me. “Yeah. I’m happy to bring the hooch.”

As I’m making a mental note to look into this guy later, Jag steps outside.

“Oh, hey,” I greet. “Didn’t know you were here, too.”

“Yeah. Quick downstairs meeting with the team in the surveillance room. I’m gonna head out. Pick up Jem and drive home. Be back New Year’s Eve by around noon. Work?”

“That works.”

We bump fists.

“What do you make of Carlson MacDonald?” I ask.

“Good cop. Good guy. From the little I know, MacDonald doesn’t mind playing in the gray to get shit done. Wouldn’t push him too far into the gray, but he’ll dip a toe over the line if it’s warranted.”

“Good to know.”

“Not sure his partner is of the same mind, though so it’s still good to be careful.”

“Agreed. You looked into those two without me asking.”

He gives me a look that says *of course I did*. And I’m glad Jag is back. And on that thought, I’ll need to have a conversation with Zack Jacobs. I want Wes Traynor getting a bonus from me. He went above and beyond with Violet when I had that drug-induced meltdown and I want him to know I appreciate it.

I also think about asking if Carlson MacDonald will get me some footage of what went down at that bar between Iadanza, Hoffman, and Stephanie Whitley. I’d like to clap eyes on the other people they haven’t yet identified from those meetings.

When I get home, the Christmas tree is lit but the apartment is quiet. I know she’s home, as she messaged earlier to say she was, so I head for the bedroom, loosening my tie on my way there.

When I walk in, our bedroom is set with a dozen lit candles and my gorgeous wife is spread out on the bed in a full-length sheer burgundy nightgown with nothing underneath.

My teeth sink into my lower lip as I get to the foot of the bed.

“Are my eyes still deceiving me or are you really here looking at me like this?” I ask.

She moistens her lips with the tip of her tongue and throws her arms over her head.

“Come here and see how real I am.”

Fuck yeah.

“Tonight is a night of self-care. For both of us,” she informs.

“I like your version of self-care, wife. I wanna take a picture and preserve this right here,” I say, lifting both hands, pointing my thumbs and index fingers to draw a frame around her, “but a) I’d hate anybody to set eyes on it and b) I won’t ever forget how unbelievably gorgeous you look right now so there’s a picture right here.” I point to my temple.

She gives me the dimples.

“And the dimples.” I say gruffly, shaking my head slowly.

“You’re everything to me, you know that?”

She nods slowly, eyes filled with emotion. “Ditto.”

She crooks her finger to beckon me closer, so I drop the blazer, kick off the shoes and toe off the black socks before quickly working to divest myself of the rest of my clothes as rapidly as I can. Violet grabs onto the headboard and holds on, looking at me with hungry eyes.

The clothes are gone, so my hands graze from her ankles straight up to her hips, taking the sheer fabric up to her waist.

And then my face descends between her legs.

I smell her body lotion. Her arousal. She’s soft, warm, smooth, and ready for me.

Her left leg goes over my right shoulder, then I hook her right one over my left before dropping a kiss on her inner thigh and then running my nose between her legs, inhaling deep.

And then my fingers tighten on her ass cheeks briefly before I begin to feast on her. I don’t start off slow or gentle, I’m fucking famished for her and she immediately squeaks in surprise at the onslaught of my hunger as I lick, bite, suckle, and taste her.

“Killian,” she moans.

“Yeah, baby. My girl, so fucking delicious.” I slide two fingers into her while suckling her clit, pulling whimpers from her.

Rock hard, I press my pelvis into the bed. I take her to climax fast, lightning fast, and then before she comes down, I’m flipping her to her stomach and ramming my cock into tight, beautiful heat. *Fuck*, she feels good.

I use my chin to sweep her hair over so I can access her throat. When I get there, I suck her earlobe into my mouth and let out a rumbling growl into her ear, saying, “My favorite fucking place in the world.”

She fists the bedding as I rotate my hips and feel her tighten around me. She tightens over and over, in time with my slams and I’m ready to go off like a cannon inside her far too quickly so I pull out and switch positions, rolling to my back and taking her so she’s riding me. I peel the straps down her arms so that I can reach her beautiful tits, then do an ab curl to access the left nipple. She falls forward as she rides me, so my head falls to the pillow and I keep her breast in my mouth while my hand snakes around and finds her ass. Rubbing my thumb up and down the crack of her ass while sucking her tit, I bask in the sensations along with the musical sound of her sweet little whimpers. She does not stop riding me, tightening around me, and then her fingers are in my hair and she’s climaxing a second time, taking herself there by grinding her clit down against my pelvis. I get my free hand there to tweak her clit before she’s done and her whimpers turn louder, almost desperate.

“Too much, too much!” She tries to detach my hand from her clit.

I release her nipple as my thumb slides deeper into her ass.

“More,” I order and rub harder.

This takes her orgasm up a notch and she cries out louder than she ever has, sending incredible sensations straight through my cock, my balls, making me explode into her.

She collapses in my arms and then giggles.

“If I wasn’t already pregnant, that would’ve totally done it.”

I bark out a laugh and roll her.

“Apple juice?”

“Yeah,” she says sweetly. “Make it a double.”

On my way to the kitchen I double-take when I think I’m seeing shadows sprawling over the floor by the stove. I blink it away and it’s gone.

The doctors said it might take a couple days or longer. The sooner this stops, the better.

They suggested counseling, too. So did Jag. Jag’s woman is a big proponent of therapy and I know that’s where the spiel he gave me came from. He knows me, has known me over a decade. Knew me dating back to around the time my mother got killed and apparently some of the shit I said when I was delusional makes him think I’ve got shit to work out.

How do I do that when I can’t talk about the shit I’ve done, how it’s manifested itself into other areas of my life? I can’t talk about the dark shit I had to do for Tom Ferrano at seventeen, eighteen when I stole a woman from the supermarket and delivered her to him, listening to her plead with me that she had to get home to her little girl. I don’t know what happened to her after that but it’s another thing I think of sometimes.

I can’t discuss with someone how I not only shot my mother’s killer in cold blood. Can’t talk about dropping drugs in a customer’s drink at Genesis, knowing they were gonna pass out and get taken to be whacked by Tom’s men. He sometimes had me invite certain people to my poker tables so that he could be there and there were a few times I knew things wouldn’t end well for the guy I’d lured in.

Can’t tell anybody about how I unleashed violence on Raymond Iadanza over a period of several weeks and got off on it. That I still get off on the fact that I know Iadanza will

hurt every day for the rest of his sorry, miserable existence. My only regret right now is not having access to Iadanza whenever Violet experiences some remnant of the damage he did to her.

I get myself a water and pour Violet the last of the jug of juice and head back to bed.

She'll be my therapy. She'll calm me, soothe me. She'll be there for me for the rest of my life. My reward for my patience in waiting for something real. She's worth every red light, every lineup I've endured, all the hardships I've faced. Cold nights. A growling stomach. All the power and money I've earned through my years without her will make sure she never wants for anything.

When I get back, I get to look at her bare ass as she's flopped on her belly, her nightgown riding up around her hips. I rub her bottom and it hikes the nightgown higher. I see a dark purple bruise to the right of her spine.

"What's this?" I ask, rubbing it.

She winces.

"It hurt?"

"It's not bad. Don't worry about it." She turns around and sits up, reaching for her juice. And I can tell by her face I need to ask more questions.

"What's the bruise from?"

She shakes her head.

"Violet," I demand.

"It happened in your office the day after Christmas. You sort of... sent me stumbling when you were in the middle of that uh, episode and I bumped your desk corner."

A growl rumbles up from my gut.

She waves her hand. "It's over, I'm fine."

“You’re fine?” I demand. “How can you be fine? If that’d been your front instead of your back that hit that could’ve hurt the baby. Bad enough I hurt you, I could’ve hurt the both of you? Fuck.”

“I’m okay,” she repeats.

I take a long drink of my water and try to calm my shit.

She leans forward, looking angry. “Stop it. Stop beating yourself up. Wes kept trying to keep me back, but I pushed my way to you. I got there to try to calm you down. Okay? So stop. It’s over. It’s not your fault. It’s the fault of whoever drugged you. Not your fault. Okay?”

“Yeah, it’s their fault. And when I get my fuckin’ hands on them, Violet...” I snarl, “do not ask me to leave violence out of it because *fuck that*.”

She stomps off to the bathroom, slamming the door.

I suck in breath and then let it out slowly through clenched teeth. And then I repeat the motion, trying to settle down.

She comes back, looking sullen. She climbs in on her side of the bed and I grab her, pull her to me, and bury my face in her beautiful curls.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“I know. You didn’t mean it. You were fighting your demons. Anything that you’ve done wrong to me, Killian, has been about fighting your demons. This time it wasn’t your fault that they came out the way they did, but really, I really think it’s a good idea for you to look for some way to fight them proactively. You know?”

I swallow. I know.

“I love you,” she says, “And I hate what happened to you. I really do. I hate what happened when you were a kid and had to fend for yourself. I hate how you had to survive your mother’s poor choices and protect Will as well as yourself. That you had to avenge her. That you’ve had to live with guilt for choices you had to make out of tough times and anger. I

hate that you have demons, but they've all come out lately and I want you to fight them instead of letting them back in. Can you please try, for me, for our baby, to stop them from getting back inside you?"

"Yeah baby. I will. I promise," I say into her hair.

She relaxes in my arms. "You've helped me work on a lot of my issues through your love, support, and strength. And baby, I wanna do the same for you. I'm here if you ever wanna talk about any of it. Okay?"

"Okay, baby," I say.

"Violet?" I ask, an hour later.

She immediately lifts her head. I knew she wasn't sleeping. Seems we're both lying here wrestling with our minds.

"Can you do the thing?"

"The thing?" she asks. "Didn't we just do that?"

I snicker. "Not the squeeze around me thing. The help me fall asleep thing."

"Come here," she says and as I roll closer, her fingers go into my hair.

"This thing?" she asks.

"Yeah baby. This thing."

Violet

December 30th

I'm in the elevator, heading out to meet my mom, aunt, and cousins for an early dinner and some time this evening having a wander at the mall before catching a movie together. Killian is working from home today.

I hesitated to leave him alone, but he encouraged me to go, saying he was feeling 95% normal. I still hesitated because 95% isn't 100%, but he got alpha-bossy with me about going and enjoying time with my family, especially my cousin Wendy who comes to town only once a year, and so I relented.

On the fourth floor, the doors open wide and Heidi, Killian's employee wobbles unsteadily on her high heels, looking surprised, before she joins me in the elevator.

"We meet again," I say. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, hey, Violet. Yeah, I've got a friend in the building. Just stopped by for a visit." She presses the button for the lobby.

"Do you live here?"

"I do," I say.

"Great building," she remarks, face bright pink. "I'm surprised you didn't use your key for the express thingy the penthouses get to use."

"Oh," I shrug. "I always forget about that."

"Great building, though," she repeats. "My friend has a sweet apartment."

"It is," I agree. "How was your Christmas?"

"It was great. Just... great." She smiles. "Big plans for New Year's Eve?"

"I'm not actually sure yet," I say. "How about you?"

“Dunno. Not much of a partier,” she says. “Might hang with some friends. You and Killian going to some fancy ball?”

I shrug. “Not a clue.”

“But it’s tomorrow,” she says, tilting her head curiously. “You don’t know your plans yet?”

“Yeah, things have been busy, so we haven’t figured that out yet. I’m not too worried about it.”

“Ah,” she says as the elevator stops and we’re at the lobby. She steps out and then looks over her shoulder. “You’re not coming?”

“Oh, I’m heading to the underground garage. See you around,” I say.

She sticks her hand in before the door closes. “Do you wanna go for a coffee or are you on your way somewhere?”

“I’ve got plans or I totally would. Some other time?” I ask.

“Sure. Let’s exchange numbers.”

“Absolutely.”

We pull our phones out and put one another’s numbers in our phones, then she waves and leaves.

I go down one more level and see Wesley is parked beside my SUV. When he sees me, he starts up his car.

Dinner is fantastic and the movie is great, as is time with my family. When I get home, Killian is asleep on the couch, television on.

I sit on the edge of the couch and reach out to cup his jaw, but his eyes bolt open and he grabs my wrist just before it reaches the destination.

I cry out in pain and he immediately releases it and grabs me, pulling me close to him.

“Sorry, sorry, baby; fuck, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I say. Ow. That hurt. I downplay it as he looks over my wrist.

He sits up and folds over, sifting his hands through his hair and then staying in that pose. It’s a pose of frustration.

“Having a lot of bad dreams?” I ask.

He blows his hair out of his eyes.

“About what?” I ask.

“You bein’ hurt. Ironic, right?”

“It’s okay. I’m okay,” I say, leaning into him.

He wraps his arm around me, putting his lips to my temple.

“How was your night?”

“It was great,” I say with a smile. “Ate a bucket of popcorn, only left the theater three times during the ninety-minute movie to pee, and had lots of laughs with Mom, Aunt Sara, and my cousins.”

“Good. Glad to hear that.”

“I saw Shara at the mall,” I say.

His eyebrows rise.

“She was with another girl who looked a lot like her, a sister I’m guessing. She got out of line at the theater when she saw me and hurried the other way, pulling her friend or sister or whoever along with her.”

“Good. That’s what she was told to do. If she saw you, to turn tail and skedaddle.”

I roll my eyes. “So, tomorrow?” I say. “New Year’s Eve.”

He leans back on the couch. I lean back with him, kicking my shoes off and tucking my feet under me.

He blows out a breath. “We should be doin’ something amazing together. We should be planning to get dressed to the nines, me gettin’ to watch you dance the night away. But this shit with the club...”

“Yeah,” I mumble. “I know.”

“If it were a normal night, I’d have you there, spend my night watchin’ you cut up the dance floor. You know how I love to watch you dance.”

I smile. “In a couple months it might not be so sexy.”

He puts a hand to my belly. “Or it’ll be extra-sexy.”

I giggle. “Yeah, right.”

“But even with all the security shit, all the cops on hand, I’m not taking a chance. Not at all. Don’t want you anywhere near Numbers.”

“It’s okay.”

“I need to be there, though.”

“I know you do.”

He pulls me close. “Hate that I won’t get to ring in the new year with you. Next year we’ll do it up big.”

“Next year, we’ll have a little baby and we’re not leaving him or her alone, so we’ll do it up big here, maybe. Or small with my family. It’s not that important. One night of the year. No biggie. We’ve got all the New Years’ Eves for the rest of our days.”

“True. I don’t want you home alone for it, Violet.”

“I won’t be. My parents have a card night with their friends, my aunts and uncles, Grampa. I’ll go there and hang with them. You pick me up on your way home from the club when all the ... you know... hubbub is over.”

“Hopefully there won’t be any hubbub. Hopefully the money, time, new technology and manpower I’ve got lined up will mean there’s no hubbub at all and the cops catch the fuckers who are plannin’ to rob me and who dosed me and Jag.”

“Yeah.”

“And then the day after New Year’s Day, we go to Tahiti, all this shit behind us hopefully and come back to no bullshit. Just

moving forward. Growin' our baby, rockin' that job if you decide to take it, and spending weekends fixing up the house and waiting for nicer weather so I can use my new grill."

"I like the sound of that," I say.

"Me too," he whispers. "Let's go to bed."

Killian

New Year's Eve

Carlson MacDonald comes in to set up with me and Jag in my office just before noon at Numbers. I'm not happy he's planning to shadow me all day, but nothing can be done about that. On the plus side, he comes with the video footage from the bar of Iadanza, Hoffman, and Stephanie Whitley. I don't recognize the other people in the video, but he's also brought footage from a few days before as well and my mind is blown when I see it.

Because the date is a few days before I went back with Iadanza to clap eyes on Violet for a second time. And even more so, because sitting at that table with Iadanza in a pair of jeans and a baseball cap, wearing sneakers is Guy Tremblay. My employee.

It takes me a minute before I figure it out because the footage is black and white and it's grainy as fuck. The bar's CCTV equipment is far from top-of-the-line and if I didn't look closely I wouldn't have realized it's Guy. Guy doesn't dress like that. Not even when he started with me working in the kitchen did he present himself with a hoodie and baggy jeans, a thick gold chain, earrings in both ears, a baseball cap, and rings on all his fingers. From day one he dressed more for the job he wanted.

And I'm seething at the notion that I got played by this guy. Because it hits that he's also the reason I got drugged. He brought me an expensive bottle of alcohol the day of Violet's shower and talked me into opening it to have a drink with him. And the fact that it was opened was how it got dosed.

He'd already booked New Year's Eve off, had been off all week and booked it months ago. We do our holiday schedules up early to make sure we've got holiday coverage and I didn't

bat an eye about it because scheduling for that shit is something Alana handles and since I promoted Guy to Wagering Concierge Manager for all four locations a while back, nobody micromanages his schedule. He reports to me directly instead of Alana now. He goes back and forth to all locations with unlimited access to all areas of the clubs other than my offices, which is why he gifted me with that bottle of booze the other day and insisted we have a drink together in my office. I'm sure he knew, *fucking knew* I'd go back to that expensive bottle of booze on New Year's Eve. Me being out of it on New Year's Eve or even dead would clear the way for his plans.

I wouldn't have suspected Guy Tremblay. He's been playing a solid long game.

Betting numbers are looking good for all four locations and so far it has felt like a rock-solid decision to have him lead the team to get them finding ways to get customers to play with more of their money in my clubs.

I'm pissed. Not only does Guy have the ability to charm the pants off the ladies, but he also charmed me into giving him more access than the average person to all my clubs.

And knowing Guy as I'd thought I'd gotten to do, I'm not at all surprised that based on the video footage that doesn't have any sound, but despite that, the lips moving and body language on the tape suggests Guy is the mastermind here.

It looks to me like it wasn't Hoffman in charge. Guy is the one that's running the show. Issuing orders to Stephanie, to Amber, and likely gotten information from Iadanza. Hoffman was just sitting there taking it all in. The date on the footage with Guy shows it was three nights before I ran into Iadanza at that same club. I was at that club because I'd been invited there to take a meeting with a sales rep for a company that Guy himself told me about, someone he knew who runs mystery shopping campaigns. Guy recommended that newer startup company to help me assess how things are going when I'm not around. I

figured the services have been useful, but now I'm guessing that sales rep is connected to all this as well.

And funny, all that put the bug in my ear that made me use mystery shopping as a method to get Iadanza out of town. And he took the bait regardless of the fact that all this was going down in their plans.

"Guy brought me that bottle of expensive scotch the day I was drugged and got me to open it by talkin' me into having a drink with him," I say to Jag.

Jag blows out a breath.

I look to Carlson. "That way it'd be open for Stephanie Whitley to dose it, knowing I'd likely go back to that bottle sooner than later. Probably figuring I'd hit the bottle tonight rather than December 26. Probably not counting on me even bein' here over the holidays until today."

Guy knew nothing about the plan for upgrading the security systems and knew nothing about the tip from the cops on a heist being planned. I'm relieved I haven't let him into shit further than I have. Another year of working for me with the kinds of results I'd been getting from him, he undoubtedly would've worked his way deeper into my inner circle.

"Yep," Jag says, touching his index finger to his nose.

Carlson pipes up. "So, Guy Tremblay got a job and learned all he could about your business over the past year so that he could plan to fuck you over."

"Got into a position of trust with me in my personal life, too," I say, "And got me to pay someone he knew with a mystery shopping company to poke around my business and get information that would give them even more intel about my organization. What this has to do with Hoffman and his stepsister, with Raymond Iadanza, I don't know yet. And I feel like I'm missin' something. I created the concierge management job. Chances of him doing something at Genesis might've made more sense than this."

I ponder all this including wondering what his connection to Iadanza is.

“Give us a couple hours and we’ll try to figure it out,” Carlson says.

“I’m already on it,” Jag replies and moves across the room to do something on his laptop in a position where we can’t see over his shoulder.

Carlson gets an irritated expression but gets on his phone.

“I’ve suddenly got a feeling I need more security at Genesis for that charity poker game tonight, Jag. Call it a hunch, but could this shit here be a diversion? There’s a lot of money in that.”

“Let’s divert a couple resources,” Jag says, continuing to do something on his laptop. “I’ll split things up. Got extra cops here tonight so I’ll move a couple of my guys to work with Tony over there.”

It’s just about opening time. I’m acting as manager tonight without Craig, who, according to Nino, went straight home after I fired him and hasn’t left his house since. No one has come nor gone since then and no sign of Stephanie Whitley so far. No funeral arrangements for Hoffman either where we might catch up with her and the rest of his crew along with no sign of her coming or going from Craig’s place.

She’s scheduled to work tonight, so if she doesn’t show in the next fifteen minutes, it could be that the plan is off. Or that they’re coming at it from a different angle.

Wes Traynor is off tonight, but another employee of Zack Jacobs is following Violet to her parents’ place later.

My brother is working for the Ferrano family doing security for Dario’s sister-in-law. I asked him details about that, but he’s said he’s under an NDA, so I haven’t asked any other questions.

All I know is that I'm looking forward to this shit being over with and for me to go back to business as usual with Jag handling security for all the clubs.

We've got double the security we had opening night as well as half a dozen plain clothes officers blending in with the crowd along with a team in not only the basement monitoring security cameras but also in my office being overseen by Jag.

I'm in the main bar at Numbers, talking to the assistant manager, Jose, who has worked for me for two years, formerly assistant manager at Law, and is now my frontrunner to replace Craig. I've already dropped hints he's in the running for the manager job and he tells me he'll step up any way he can to prove himself.

We'll see how it goes tonight. Nobody that works for me other than Tony and Alana know the security beef-up is about anything other than it being a big night and of course they don't know just how much additional security we've got because much of it includes people looking like customers.

Tony is shadowing Alana at Genesis tonight for our big annual high stakes poker game with all our take going to the children's hospital.

Exodus is a typical night but with ticket holders getting an extra nice dinner and bottle of champagne.

Law is business as usual.

All four locations are closed tomorrow for New Year's Day.

Five minutes until opening and I see Stephanie Whitley stroll in, looking rattled.

"Cuttin' it close?" I ask, towel-drying some glasses from the dishwasher.

"Oh," she smiles brightly. "I know. I'm here and I'm ready for the madness."

"Glad to hear it."

She bites her lip and tucks her dark hair behind her ear as she heads for the back room where the lockers are. She adds an extra sway to her hips as I watch her walk away and looks over her shoulder at me as she turns the corner.

Fucking cunt. I'm looking forward to getting my hands on her later. I'm certain she's behind the dosing.

There are two cops and two of Jag's team who will have eyes on her every move tonight.

My phone beeps with a text alert an hour later.

Jessa: Call your fucking guard dog off me or so help me.

Me: What does that mean?

Jessa: I'm not playing this bullshit macho alpha game. Tony is a jerk. Call him off.

I don't know what's going on with them, but I have no time for this shit, so I don't bother to answer her. Instead, I forward her text to Tony and send a message.

Me: Sort your woman out. Don't let it preoccupy you tonight. I need you focused.

Tony: Believe me, I will. Don't worry.

I tuck my phone away, amused.

A conversation with Jag about this makes it even more fun. He's fully on board with Tony and his sister. Tells me if this were the old days, he'd have happily paid a fat dowry to Tone for taking her off his hands.

It's command central in my office and at a minute before ten thirty, shit starts to hit the fan and as suspected, but only because of how we started to map things out this afternoon, it starts with an armed robbery at Genesis, which we almost weren't prepared for.

But we are prepared.

Two guys wearing balaclavas pushed their way in through the kitchen door, knocking out a dishwasher and headed straight into the private room where the high-roller fifty/fifty charity poker tournament is happening with guns in their hands.

Jag's lead guy called to tell us Tony's taken a bullet to the shoulder and would've taken one to the chest too, but was wearing a vest. Anyone on my team in the know tonight is, including Alana and myself.

Interestingly, reviewing the roster for tonight for all four of my clubs, the Genesis dishwasher rings a bell and it dawns this is the same guy who got injured at Exodus a few months ago by Hoffman's crew. I never did get the chance to promote him because he quit right after that. I didn't realize he re-applied to work at Genesis and tonight is his first shift. I give Jag those details and he orders his guys to watch the dishwasher like a hawk.

Tony is in an ambulance, en route to the hospital and a moment later, Carlson ends a call beside me, telling me the cops stopped three men in a van from taking three hundred grand in cash an intersection away at a red light. And that my dishwasher, the one who got knocked out, is known to associate with one of them. A setup.

Sometimes red lights wind up happening at the right time.

At ten forty, smoke alarms start going nuts here and it doesn't take long for the building to get evacuated because there's a grease fire in the kitchen. It's quickly going out of control. And Stephanie was just in the kitchen a moment earlier.

We wind up having to evacuate and the kitchen manager tells me out front that all the fire extinguishers in the kitchen were empty. Someone emptied them intentionally. In the middle of the mayhem, the cops and guys from Jag's team assigned to watch Stephanie catch her and another employee sneaking out the back door with two backpacks filled with money, a decoy debit machine, and two tablets with stickers that make them

look like they're my branded tablets. It's obvious they've been used tonight to divert more money.

At ten fifty, I get an email notification from my webhost that my online casino has been hacked and redirected. The redirect is to a site with what looks from the landing page like pornography. And not the average kind. The extra-taboo kind.

Not only is someone trying to rob me blind, they're also trying to fuck my reputation.

Jag gets confirmation by ten fifty-two that Guy Tremblay is really named Trey Ricci.

"I know that name," I say, realization dawning, but I'm having trouble matching up faces.

Trey's sister Gina is the girl who helped out with Willie when we were teenagers. The girl whose cherry I took. The girl who took a wrong turn and wound up dead of a drug overdose just a couple years ago.

I hadn't paid attention to her siblings. Trey's between me and Willie in age, closer to Willie. Willie hung out with his younger siblings more than him, but they did hang out. And I kicked Trey in the ass once for dragging his little sister and Will into some mischief shoplifting candy at the local convenience store just before Mom got killed.

When Guy Tremblay came here to work for me, he did not seem remotely familiar.

As a kid, Trey wore glasses. He was overweight. He certainly wasn't looking like he'd grow up to be a lady-killer with swagger. What the fuck kind of grudge does this guy have with me? And where is he right now? I need to get my hands on him.

I grab my phone, wanting to touch base with Violet. I haven't talked to her for hours, since she was getting ready to head to her folks' place. She doesn't answer.

I check her location, a cold rod of anxiety spiking up my spine when the location shows our building. What the fuck?

I login to check the camera view of the apartment. The guest bedroom is the first one on the list. Lights off. My thumb moves to check the kitchen. Lights on. Nobody. I see Violet's bag on the counter.

I scroll to the next on the list. Living room.

Guy Tremblay, scratch that, Trey Ricci on my fucking couch, a gun in his hand, a phone to his ear, rage on his face.

My blood turns to acid.

Violet's sitting on another couch beside Heidi, the chick that works in the office at Genesis. The one who was a fumbling waitress with a photographic memory who we figured might work better with spreadsheets, payroll, and shit. Shit, shit, fuck.

Violet's phone sits in the middle of the coffee table beside her grandmother's snow globes.

I frown as my blood runs cold. *Heidi*.

She saw Heidi at the mall the other day and swore the chick got into a car with a Guy lookalike.

Three times I was ready to fire Heidi, but "Guy" kept talking us into giving her a bit longer, thinking maybe she'd be better in another role beyond server. Got into Alana's ear about it, too, dropping hints about putting her in the office. Alana didn't bite, neither did I. But when Violet also dropped the comment about maybe putting her in the office, it made sense to me and that's why it happened. Photographic memory. Good with numbers. Computer science degree. I'm guessing she's maybe got something to do with the hack to the casino website, too.

In hindsight, she's really fucking knowledgeable about my business for someone who started off as a waitress.

Fuck that, Fuck all of that. I give no shits about the business or the money; I need Violet out of there.

I taste bile in the back of my throat as I call Abe from Zack Jacobs Investigations, who is watching Violet tonight, gesturing for Jag to come over.

Abe says she sent him a text that she's staying in tonight. He's parked in the underground garage.

Carlson is on the phone probably getting updates about the other shit happening. His partner is in the basement security room with the rest of the team.

All this shit is happening at once. Diversions. Money going out the doors. Website redirects. The plan that obviously included me being fucked up on bad drugs but that backfired by happening before today, thank God.

They stopped Stephanie Whitley and the cops have her. The cops have the guys that robbed Genesis. I'm wishing my guys had caught them all instead because then I can get my hands on these fuckers.

My current concern is obviously 100% Violet, about what the fuck the end game could be for Ricci.

Raymond's words in the airplane hangar about having the last laugh rings in my ears.

He was part of this from the start. And that's the reason why Violet and I are married and expecting a baby. Because Raymond Iadanza approached me directly after that set-up mystery shopping meeting.

Violet

The games people play. To get what they want. To deceive others. Greed. Selfishness. Game places have been moving all over the chess board tonight. Some people just don't care who they hurt. They just want what they want, no matter who gets hurt. And some of them have been playing games for a long while.

I'm sitting here hoping Killian gets his hands on these people. I've never thought torture was okay before. But right now?

It's their fault Killian went through that the other day. They're doing bad things right now, though I'm not clear on all the facts.

There's also the not-insignificant fact that they're holding me hostage and have had a gun pointed at me most of the night.

I should be at my mom's, playing Texas Hold 'Em with my family for candy instead of money. I should be stuffing my face with Aunt Sara's famous spinach dip and pumpernickel bread. I should be giggling with my cousins pretending to smoke candy cigarettes and licorice cigars at our poker game while we watch how much Grampa always bluffs and gets away with it. Like we did when we were kids. My cousins were joining in tonight once they found out I was gonna be there. And I'm not there. I'm here. With a gun pointed at me.

I should be talking to Colleen and Wendy about being my bridesmaids when we have our beachside wedding next year, as soon as I can fit back into my dress after this baby is born.

Instead, I'm sitting on the couch beside Heidi, who is nervous. Too nervous. And chatty. And this has Guy agitated. And every time she talks, he gets more agitated. And she talks a

lot! She's even come to the bathroom with me. I'm not even allowed to pee by myself.

I don't like seeing how agitated and angry he is, especially with that gun he's waving around. He's muttered stuff about not hearing from Steph or from someone named Hole either.

"Plans A and B might be out the window, at least there's Plan C," he mutters.

"I don't have a good feeling about this, babe," Heidi says, shaking her head.

"You need to calm your shit," he warns. "And quit yammering. If this one makes it out of this, she doesn't need all our fuckin' details."

She blows out a breath and her knees are jiggling. "I thought she was gonna be a casualty."

"I haven't decided," he says, eyeballing me, "Let's see how this goes."

My blood turns icy again as my cell phone rings.

Killian calling.

My heart lurches and I lean forward.

Finally.

"Don't move," Guy points the gun at me, and I lean back, raising my hands and then sitting on them.

I can't believe what a turn this night has taken. Can't believe Guy of all people is really a bad guy. *The* bad guy by the sounds of it. And Heidi. Sweet, bumbling, verbal-diarrhea-suffering Heidi is actually in on this and the reason I'm a hostage tonight. And she's not actually sweet. I'd label her as a sociopath by the things I've heard her say tonight.

I was all set to go to Mom and Dad's when there was a knock on the door. I opened it when I saw Heidi through the peep hole. She nervously stammered, telling me she was here to visit her friend who lives in the building, that they had plans for a girls' night in for New Year's Eve since she got the night

off work, but her friend was running late, so could she hang with me for an hour and plug her phone in so that she could get a bit of charge into it? She even invited me to join them if Killian was at work and I was stuck alone.

In hindsight, it should've occurred to me as strange that she was able to get into the building if her friend wasn't home. And strange that she came to the door. How did she know our suite number? I later found out through her 'yammering' that she and Guy are renting an apartment on the fourth floor. And that's why they've got access to the building.

It explains her looking freaked for a minute when she saw me in the elevator yesterday, asking why a penthouse person didn't use their express key. Clearly, that was not intentional, and I also missed the strangeness of the question because how would she know we lived in one of the penthouses if she'd just asked me if I lived here? I totally missed that.

She could tell I was on my way out for the evening tonight. I had my coat and shoes on, but I told her to come in, that I could wait for half an hour with her before I left for my parents'.

And I opened my door wider to let her in and that's when Guy waltzed in behind her.

I was thrown at seeing him, but before I could get a word out of my mouth, he pointed a gun at me and shoved me backwards before he locked the door. Heidi demanded my phone. They could see my recent messages, that I'd messaged Abe saying I was on my way downstairs. When quizzed about who Abe is, I let on he's just my driver.

She must have messaged something to him and by the text ping almost straight after, he must have responded. She then must have messaged other people, like Mom because no one seemed to be looking for me. And I'd texted my mom earlier to firm up the plans for tonight so a quick look through my message history would've made it clear where I was going and who needed to be alerted I wasn't actually coming.

Instead of playing candy poker with my family and listening to Motown like they do every New Year's Eve before gathering around the TV to watch the ball drop waiting with pot lids and wooden spoons to go outside and make a racket like we always did, I've been sitting here catching bits and pieces of information that makes it clear Guy is not only not who he says he is, but that he has been planning tonight for a long time and expects to get a huge payday out of it. And he seems especially excited about Killian being fucked over, ruined, and devastated about it.

Word has gotten around that Ray is wanted for the murder of Felix Hoffman and I know this because of the line of questions Guy threw at me about Ray. Has my ex been in touch with me? Do I know anything about his whereabouts since he escaped from prison? Have I met Felix and did Ray ever talk about him?

I maintain that I know nothing and he gets a little scary, getting right in my face and shouting at me, as if that's going to make me spill secrets. Earlier tonight he'd been on the phone three times with 'Steph' which is obviously Felix's stepsister and Ray's name came up on that call as well as something about the cops questioning Felix's father about Ray. But he hasn't heard from her for a while now and is anxious about the fact that she's not answering her cell. I've heard about the 'fire' happening as scheduled. About someone getting shot at Genesis. And he's talked about waiting for the Genesis haul update from Hole.

And I've been waiting half the evening for my husband to finally text or call. It's unlike him to go so many hours without contacting me and I chalked it up to knowing how hectic tonight would be. And it's way more hectic than they thought it'd be. New Year's Eve at his busy club. The police there watching for the potential heist. But now that he has called and I haven't answered, it's just a matter of time before he figures out that there was a second heist that already happened and that something is wrong and finds out where I am.

He'll look for me. He'll use his spy app on his phone to peek in on this room and see me sitting here with a gun being waved at me. He'll either mobilize Abe who is probably still downstairs, call the cops, or come home himself.

My husband's stalkery tendencies will actually pay off tonight in terms of saving me.

And saving him. I hope.

Because by the way Guy has behaved tonight I believe for sure he would hurt Killian if he got the chance. He hates him for some reason. I have no idea why. But it's not just disliking his rich boss. This is personal.

My phone rings again. Guy is on his phone so ignores it and Heidi gets more jittery. It's Killian calling again.

All I can think is *please spy on me*. And I'm so grateful he hasn't taken those cameras out.

Guy passes her the gun.

"Watch her. Keep it pointed at her. Do not hesitate to shoot her if she gets out of line. I need to take a piss and make another call."

Heidi takes the gun, rises, pointing it at me as Guy goes into the powder room. She doesn't look uncomfortable with it.

I shrink back into the couch cushions, but I'm thinking that now would be the time for me to do something. Something outside my comfort zone. Way outside of it.

"Why are you guys doing this? What's gonna happen? Are you asking for ransom, or... because I'm sure my husband would pay it. You don't have to point that thing at me."

She smiles. "We weren't planning on ransom. The take from the night would've set us up, but things don't seem to be going so well with the rest of the plan so ransom might be the answer. Ransom and then revenge from feeding you the same stuff your husband is gonna drink tonight." Her eyes light up. "It'll probably kill the both of you. But maybe I can talk him out of giving it to you if you're helpful."

They're planning to give me the same drugs they gave Killian? They don't know he hasn't taken them yet. If they give me those drugs that can cause cardiac arrest and organ failure? My baby is in trouble!

Horror floods my veins and something else. Anger. There's no way I can let these people hurt our baby.

"Why are you here if you were going to get a big take from tonight? Why be here and hold me like this?" I ask and her babbling shows me that her verbal diarrhea she exhibited the night I first met her wasn't part of her schtick.

"He wants Killian to hurt. He blames him for the loss of his sister. Her life went to shit after your husband dumped her and she's dead because of it. Trey wants him to pay for it and is planning to make a whole lot of money while doling out revenge."

I swallow hard. Trey?

"Are you saying he's gonna hurt me? I've been nice to you both. I haven't done anything to hurt anyone."

She shrugs.

"I'm here for my cut of the money. Then my plan is to bounce. Because he's not right in the head." She points the gun at her own head and then thinks better of it. "But we'll see what happens. Say nothing or I'll blow a hole in you myself."

There's shouting behind the powder room door.

Guy bursts back out.

"The cops got Steph and maybe Hole too. Hole shot Tony Greco, so this is going south. Plan C." He grabs my phone and dials on it on speaker while gesturing to get the gun from her. She passes it over.

Tony. Oh no. Plan C?

"Violet?" That's Kilian's voice.

My heart hammers in my chest, hard.

He points the gun at me and slashes his finger across his throat, warning me.

“I have your wife,” Guy says. “Listen very carefully.”

“Who is this?” Killian asks.

If he doesn't know, I'm sure he will any minute when he peeks in on this location.

Guy laughs and sits down.

“You really have no idea, do you? You know, if I didn't know the truth about you, I would've thought you were actually a decent guy. Moves a guy up from your kitchen to management in a year. You believin' in me was nice. Almost enough that I changed my mind. By the way, I fucked two of the four girls I gave you the *thumbs down* on. Might fuck this one here before the night's out.”

“What the fuck?” Killian snaps. “Where's my wife?”

“She's safe. For now. Listen, asshole, I want five million dollars and I want it in the next hour or your wife is done. No cops. I see cops, you'll get a picture of her with a bullet in her forehead before she suffers a ten-story fall. You get me?”

“What the fuck?” Killian roars.

“You need me to repeat that, or you get me?”

“You expect me to raise five mill on New Year's Eve after the banks are closed?”

“You can transfer it to my account. We know you've got that ability, so don't bullshit. I'll send you a text of the account details now. You have an hour.”

“What the fuck is this? What did I ever do to you?”

“You're the reason my sister's dead, asshole,” he growls into my phone, looking absolutely unhinged.

“Your sister?” Killian asks. “Who's your sister?”

“Gina Ricci,” Guy spits.

“What?” Killian asks.

“Yeah. Listen...” Guy snarls.

There’s a sharp knock at the door and my body tightens.

Guy straightens up, “Watch for my text. The money in an hour or your wife is a memory.”

He pushes my screen and moves to the door and looks out the peephole, his gun pointed at the ceiling while he looks.

When his body visibly relaxes, I don’t know whether to feel relief that he’s not about to start shooting wildly or panic that he looks calm, because what now?

The door is opened, and two guys walk in. They’re twenty-somethings, a tall white guy with green spiky hair and a short black guy with a shaved head. The tall green-haired guy whistles as he takes in the space.

“Noice!” he drawls, while he slaps Guy’s shoulder. “Very!” And then his eyes land on me and he licks his lips.

My stomach churns.

“We gotta talk,” the shorter black guy says. “Private like.”

“Heidi, take her outside,” Guy gestures toward the balcony doors.

I blink hard, wishing they’d take me to my bedroom. My heart races as I consider this. I’ve been trying to think of how to get to my room since this started. Because I’m hoping there’s still a gun there. Two guns. One in the nightstand and one under Killian’s desk.

There’s a door in our bedroom that leads out to the balcony, but I’m sure it’s locked. If Heidi takes me out there, how quickly could I find my way into the master bedroom where I can get to one of Killian’s guns?

Did he put them back there after the drama when Ray escaped from the basement? Will I break in there and risk making my captors angry only to find there’s no guns?

There’s a heavy cast iron lifter hanging from that barbeque outside, under the cover. Could I use that to knock Heidi out

and then break the window before they notice me? I could just make her yell though, not knock her unconscious and then it could go worse. And now there are three men here, not just Guy. What if I push *her* off the balcony? The idea is abhorrent. I can't believe I've even pondered it.

"It's cold out there. Why don't you guys go into one of the other rooms?" Heidi asks.

"Actually," I ask, "Could I possibly go to my room and get my bag? I have my morning sickness suckers in there and I'm feeling like I really need one."

"She's pregnant?" Heidi laughs hard. A little maniacally, too. "You should demand double."

Guy's gaze swings to me, as do the eyes of the other two guys. Shit. I certainly don't want my pregnancy complicating all this further, but I have to find a way to get to the bedroom.

"He made my sister abort his baby and that made her spiral. You're carrying his baby?" Guy asks.

My stomach drops.

He grinds his teeth as he shakes his head, looking like he's even angrier.

Heidi gestures to the counter where my purse sits and moves toward it. "I'll grab your suckers."

"That's my purse. I have an overnight bag in my room that has my suckers and my ginger nausea medication. I'm feeling really nauseous," I tell Heidi.

"Watch her closely," Guy says, "And stay there and I'll tell you when to come out. No fucking around or Heidi will shoot you in the stomach. You hear?"

I rise.

"Eyes on her at all times, Heidi," Guy warns.

Killian

Wes left the party he was at, motoring over to my building in less than ten minutes when he got word of what was going down. He and Abe gained entry into the empty apartment underneath mine so they can scale up to the balcony and take those fuckers out.

I'm wishing the cops weren't with me right now because I could handle these shitheads the way I see fit, but I'll settle for the alternative if it means getting Violet safe.

I nearly lost my shit listening to Heidi talk about giving Violet that drug.

In addition to Carlson and Jagger being in my car with me, there are also cops in an unmarked vehicle getting in through the underground parking garage. Stairwells will be blocked and so will the lobby.

There's no way anyone is getting out of that building without going through the police or one of Jag's men. It's a good thing we've got all this extra manpower with us at Numbers and Genesis because all available resources are being directed to efforts to get Violet safe and catch Ricci.

As I pull out of the Numbers parking lot amid the mayhem, the kitchen fire is out. Cops have Stephanie and her accomplice, a recent hire for the kitchen, with the Numbers money. The cops also have the van that tried to make off with the Genesis money, the dishwasher, and the two masked men, including the one that shot Tony.

I don't have Tony's status. I can't think about that right now. All I can think about is getting to where my wife is before they hurt her. I can't stop until I get to her. There's no way I can allow them to hurt her or give her that drug mixture.

I cruise through all yellow lights all the way there so nothing slows me down, but it feels like a reminder all the way home. Amber lights. Caution. Possible danger.

11:50 PM

I get to the underground garage with Jag, Carlson, Ed, and a handful of other cops. I look at the app to see into my apartment and there's Ricci and the two other guys still in the living room, huddled, arguing about whether to move Violet down to the apartment on the fourth floor because nobody knows about it. They're trying to talk Ricci into upping the ransom amount because Violet's told them she's pregnant.

A text ping comes up on the screen from Wes.

Wesley Traynor, ZJI: Going in. 2 mins.

"Fuck," I growl at the same time as Carlson does, reading over my shoulder.

I've already told him there are two other guys in there now, too.

Wes will have a mind to where she is, I know this, but I don't know this Abe guy and I don't fuckin' like any of it.

Where's Violet? I don't see her there, so I switch the app, Carlson and Jagger looking over my shoulder in time to see Violet and Heidi are in the bedroom by the bed.

"They have to be here somewhere," Violet mutters, flipping through her overnight bag on the end of the bed. Heidi stands there, pointing a gun at her. "Oh. Maybe the housekeeper put them in the desk. She has a spot she puts odds and ends when she tidies." She moves around the corner to the home office, and I have no camera over there to see what the fuck is happening. My heart stammers in my chest because fuck... is she going for the gun?

My brave, strong, beautiful girl.

Heidi moves closer to the office, at Violet's back. I lose sight of her too, but hear her ask, "Okay, forget it. Wait. What are you doing in that drawer?"

"Fuck," I repeat, my heart in my goddamn throat as I stare at the screen, not able to see Violet.

I turn the volume to max in time to barely hear Violet talking.

"Can you just help me with this drawer, it's kinda... um... stuck."

I hear the pop that I know is the gun with the silencer she's pulled from under the drawer.

There is a collective gasp from everyone looking over my shoulder at this happening on my phone in real time.

"Fuck, baby," I whisper.

Violet moves back into view, heading toward the nightstand while sticking the barrel of Heidi's gun into the back of her pants, covering it with her sweater beside the other gun she just used. Like some sort of badass.

"Thank fuck I put a silencer on that thing. Where are Wes and Abe?" It's gotta be less than a minute now. Violet has three fucking guns on her and obviously Heidi is down. She wouldn't even take one from me last week.

I hear a whimper that must be Heidi. She's not dead. Fuck, I hope she doesn't have the strength to follow Violet out or scream.

"Fuck. We need to alert Wes," Jag says. "I'll message him."

But there's probably no time and I'm holding my breath as I watch Violet heading for the door holding the gun from my nightstand in her hand. I quickly switch views to the living room where things happen quickly.

I see Trey Ricci's back and he stumbles as red spreads out at the back of his white hoodie, near his shoulder. Then I see the back of Violet, holding two weapons, one in each hand.

One of my living room windows shatters and then the space fills with smoke and the sound of shots firing.

Everything feels like it crumbles around me as the view goes hazy from the smoke bomb I know Wes has used. Visibility is evaporating on my screen so I can't see much but do spot Violet drifting toward the floor. Is she hurt? Did Wes or Abe's bullet hit her? Trey and the other two guys are also down and Wes and Abe are moving toward them, but now I'm no longer staring at my hazy screen because I'm bolting for the elevator, hearing feet behind me as the others also rush into action.

Both doors are open with cops holding the elevators for us. I jump into one with Jag and Carlson and other cops head into the other one.

My key in the slot in the elevator means an express ride up, but it still feels like it takes a year before we hit my floor and I see nothing on the phone screen but smoke, so I'm running toward the door, phone in my left hand, a gun in my right, and Wes's voice coming from Jag's phone on speaker directly at my back, saying, "All three are down. Smoke bomb launched but'll clear quick."

"Where's Violet?" Jag asks just as I shout, "Coming in," over my shoulder so Wes hears through Jag's phone. I unlock the door and push my way in, not waiting for a reply.

In the kitchen, near the stove, Violet's huddled on the floor. I drop my phone, rushing to her and find that she's there, sitting up, conscious. She's not bleeding. She still has both guns. Wes is squatting in front of her. He rises when he sees me.

"She's not hit," he says. "She's just in shock."

One of the gangbangers in my living room is definitely dead. Gunshot to the head. The other is writhing on the floor crying, bleeding from the chest. Trey Ricci is facedown about four feet away, the majority of the back of his white hoodie stained bright red.

Violet sees me and blinks a couple times. She looks shellshocked. She looks at me, no, through me, as if I'm not

even here. I reach, take the guns out of her hands, whispering, *baby*, but then she quickly reaches behind herself and pulls out the third gun from her waistband, moves it to the left six or so inches, and fires it.

I frown and look over my shoulder in time to see Trey Ricci falling to the floor face-first, a knife clattering to the floor.

He was about to lunge for me. Violet stopped him.

Abe kicks the knife away and uses his foot to flip Trey to his back. The guy looks at us, blood trickling out his mouth before his eyes blank out.

Dead.

Violet chokes out a sob and shakily sets the gun on the floor. I pull her into my arms and hold her tight.

No more than a minute later, there's a burst of noise outside. Outside noises are coming inside because of the lack of window in my living room.

I glance at my wrist. The watch Violet bought me for Christmas reads twelve o'clock. We got to ring in the new year together after all.

"It's midnight. Happy New Year, baby," I say. And then my mouth touches hers.

Violet

January 1

My first thought as I open my eyes is – I killed somebody.

Or kind of, sort of.

Maybe tomorrow, my first thoughts won't be so dire. No angst. No fear. Maybe peace? I can only hope.

The bad 'guy' got hit four times. Twice by me. Once by Wes. Once by Abe. I shot the fourth bullet though, so I kinda think it was me that killed him. Not that he would've likely survived, but if I hadn't fired that gun, he could've stabbed Killian. Or me to make Killian hurt. He could've killed my husband and the father of my baby after already being shot three times. He had that much hate for him.

Hate that was misplaced, apparently, because Killian didn't ruin his sister's life, didn't get her pregnant, and in fact tried to help her.

I've never fired a gun before and yet I pulled the trigger three times tonight and all three bullets hit their targets. Like magic or something because if I had to guess what would happen if I ever fired a gun, I'd have said either I'd miss or wind up with some sort of backfiring fluke and shoot myself.

Killian told me maybe my grandmother and his grandmother were both looking out for us last night from up above.

I shot Heidi, shooting her point blank, I guess it's called.

She's not dead.

Heidi was taken in an ambulance with one of the thugs. The other thug died, hit by either Abe or Wesley. I didn't ask.

Tony has come out of surgery after a bullet wound and his prognosis is good so far.

Killian said that Jessa was there with him, that they'd had some huge argument yesterday and she had tried to break up with him. He refused to allow her to break up with him. And now she's at the hospital with him so maybe she doesn't truly want the breakup.

I got her number from Killian and sent her a message telling her we were sending Tony our best and adding that if she needed anything, to let me know.

Killian thinks I'm crazy for reaching out a hand in friendship to her, but if she's with Tony, since she's Jag's sister, and after how she was with me when Killian got drugged, it feels like the right thing to do.

She answered me to thank me.

Killian filled me in after the police left with all the crazy details. How Guy Tremblay was really someone from his apartment building when he was a kid. How he worked with Amber and her drug dealer boyfriend as well as Ray at some stage on a plot to rob Killian, wanting revenge for the death of his sister, who he blamed Killian for. Killian told me he and the girl were friends, that she'd had a crush but that he didn't lead her on. She helped out with Will sometimes. That they'd gone out on a date and that Killian had taken her virginity. And she turned to drugs later on, which had nothing to do with Killian. That Killian paid for the abortion but that it wasn't his baby. He told me he offered to help her get rehab and she insisted she didn't have a drug problem.

Guy, rather Trey then turned to one of Gina's druggie friends, Felix, to plot out some revenge. And Ray was apparently part of it because Trey knew him from their old building, and they all hung out at the local bar. But things went sideways with Ray because that's what drew Killian's attention to me and that's what changed my life. A guy with a misplaced grudge and some greed got a bunch of people involved in trying to get money and revenge.

They played a game and every one of them lost.

Except me and Killian. Because we found each other and because of all that greed and those schemes, we got our chance. The chance to be something that Ray took away from us because of his own greed, his own desires to win at something.

It's crazy.

The games people play can alter their fate. And it can alter the fate of others, too.

If Ray hadn't been plotting with those guys to steal from and ruin Killian, Killian might not have been sent to a meeting in that bar that night which meant he saw Ray and wanted to come back to my place to see the girl that he lost in a coin toss. A rigged coin toss that got revealed to set Ray's fate in motion.

And if all those things didn't happen, I wouldn't be in his arms right now, carrying his child, and knowing down to my bones that he and I are meant to be together and that yes, sometimes things happen for a reason.

We're lying together in bed in a hotel room after spending the day with my family at Grampa's place. We'll go home in the morning to pack and get ready to go to Tahiti tomorrow night.

It's the perfect time for a getaway. Far away. Paradise. Just us. No problems on the horizon, all the bullshit behind us. Hopefully.

The apartment was no place to sleep after all that, the police presence, bloodstains on the floor and rugs, and the blown-out window. We didn't get back here until almost three in the morning after all the conversations with the police.

There was a dose of powder on Trey Ricci that has also been sent off to be examined to find out exactly what was in the mixture Killian and Jagger took.

There was no way I couldn't try to go for that gun. I was terrified of him giving that drug to me, of the danger to our

baby.

Last night, I cried in Killian's arms until I fell asleep, telling him that he now had my permission to do whatever he had to do to protect us. Shaken to my core after all we've been through, I told him I never liked violence but if it was necessary to protect our family, I'd overlook it. Because fuck them. Fuck Ray. Fuck Guy/Trey. Heidi. Even Shara. Fuck all of them for hurting us.

Killian said he doesn't want me to turn bitter, jaded, and distrustful. He wants me to continue to believe the best in people and let him handle the rest. He promised he will do whatever it takes to keep us safe. And the way he said it, the green fire in his gaze?

I believe him.

Though after everything, I'm certainly going to be unable to help myself from looking at the world through a different lens from now on.

January 2

He stirs and our eyes meet.

"Good morning," he says.

"Good morning," I parrot and snuggle in.

"My first thought this morning? I can't believe it's all over."

"Yeah." He caresses my face. "I hear that."

The revelations are still hitting hard.

Heidi survived getting shot and was spilling the beans to the cops before she got taken into surgery about everything she and Trey did as well as pointing fingers at the other people involved. She might get a slightly reduced sentence for co-operating, but Killian has already told me, not hiding his rage, that she won't have an easy sentence and if he has his way, she won't make it out of jail. Neither will Stephanie who is the person who got into his office to spike his booze. Heidi was

willing to watch me die after I'd been nothing but kind to her, so I say nothing.

"Is it really over? Nobody else in any basements anywhere for you to torture when the mood strikes?"

"Nope. Not today, anyway." He smirks.

"I almost wish... never mind."

"What?" he asks.

"I almost wish I could've brought myself to let you get rid of Ray. I find myself wondering where he is, what he's doing, and whether or not he'll suddenly cause problems for us again."

"He won't."

"Are you sure?" I look into his eyes.

"He won't."

"Well, I'm guessing it's good he's out of reach for you. You can't get to him, right?"

"Nope. Not unless I get a bigger in with the people behind Porto Campo and I have no intention of seeking out that connection."

"Well, let's just say that if for some reason he suddenly seems like he'll be a threat again, you have my permission to eliminate that threat. I don't wanna know about it unless I need to."

"Okay," he whispers and then he puts his mouth to mine.

"Just... don't lie to me and make sure I know about stuff if I need to," I tack on.

"You got it, Dimples. But don't worry about it. Let's put him out of our minds."

"I'll try," I say.

"You'll get there. I'll make it happen."

"I hope so."

“Wanna bet?” he asks.

I smile wide. “You don’t make bets.”

His eyes go haunted for a split second and I regret my statement. But then his expression clears.

“You, last night? I watched until I lost sight of you in the office. Knew you were getting that gun. Shooting two people to make sure they didn’t take you from me and even more, knowing you were protecting our child? At the time, I was a big ball of fuckin’ stress. But hindsight, baby? Badass. You’re so strong now. I’d bet it all on you.”

“Thanks to you I am. And thank you. Thank you for loving me. For trying to protect me. And for not giving up on me.”

“Even if some of that strength came from pain, came from me hurting you, too?”

“I would’ve crawled through fire for him,” I say. “In the beginning.”

His expression drops. I’m sure it’s not easy to hear that I’d have done that for Ray. But I’m being honest.

“That’s how hard I love,” I say.

He swallows.

“I would’ve. I would’ve crawled through fire for either of you. But, Killian, where he’d let me burn, you wouldn’t. You’d burn everything else in order to save me.”

“I would,” he vows, eyes fierce.

I sigh. “I’m finally being loved the way I deserve. But we grow through what we go through.”

“If we’re smart we do,” he says. “And then you saved me from the guy with the knife. You saved *me*, baby.”

“I did, didn’t I?” I’m smiling.

“My kingdom for these dimples.” He pokes one.

“These dimples for your cock,” I return, like a dork.

He laughs and rolls me to my back.

Killian

Tahiti

Violet dips her hands into the ocean and swirls them to and fro for a minute, like she's trying to get something off her skin. She is. She told me to hand her all my demons, all the guilt I'm carrying.

Her wedding and engagement ring catch the sunlight and I'm not sure if it's my eyes playing tricks on me or what, but I see red-tinged ripples float away from her fingers like departing shadows.

"There," she says. "All gone. All the bad dreams, all the guilt over things we can't change. All gone. Washed away."

She rises and flicks her hands away before dipping to grab the hand sanitizer from the towel. I'd wondered why she brought it down here. But she asked me to hand her my burdens. So I did. And then I watched her rinse them into the water.

She holds the bottle out. "Your hands, please."

I hold mine out and she squirts some of the liquid onto my hands. She squirts some on her own hands, too.

"Okay?" she asks.

I nod.

"Come here," I say.

She sits beside me. I dry my hands on my shorts, then I dust sand from her thigh.

"All better?" she asks.

"People look at me and see success. They see drive. They don't see that my life has been plagued with disappointment and red lights, having to wait for things I didn't wanna wait

for, and then dragging out things that have no place in my head.”

“I see *you*,” she says.

“I know you do. And baby, your love fills an emptiness that’s always been there. It’s gone now. More money, more success didn’t fill that gap. Neither did revenge. You did. You do. It kills me that hurt and pain was what brought you to me. That my intention of giving you a pain-free life was a failure because of my demons.”

She shakes her head and puts her hand to my jaw.

“Through pain came strength for me, Killian. Your strength at my back. Your unwillingness to give up on us. And your efforts at making my life easier. You can’t shield me from everything. But knowing you’re my partner in life makes me feel strength – that we can tackle things together. And all the bad stuff is gone. I’m not saying we won’t face anything bad along the way, but we’ll face it with knowing we’ve got one another to lean on. I’m stronger now because of you. So you can lean on me, too. You protect me, I protect you, too.”

“Seeing you grow stronger will help me sleep at night. I thought all I wanted in life was to protect you, but I was wrong. What I needed was for you to feel strong and confident. Even better if part of that confidence comes because you know you’ve got me. The way you handled shit with Ricci and Heidi? How you got in Tony’s face to protect me? How you’ve put your foot down to get what you want over and over the last few weeks? Stood up for yourself with your job? I’m proud of you.”

“I’m proud of me, too. I was worried when I found out about your deceit that staying with you would say that I wasn’t stronger, that I wasn’t any different from the girl that let someone break her down, turn her into a slow-boiled frog. But by you not giving up on me, by you showing you wanted me to grow strong enough to go head-to-head with you if needed, it helped. It helped a lot. And it doesn’t hurt that at the end of

our drama, I didn't need to be rescued. And that I kinda-sorta rescued you from the bad guy with the knife."

"You did, Violet. You saved our family. All of us."

She smiles.

"And as much as you helped me, believe it or not, that spiked scotch helped, too."

"Did it?"

I nod. "Instead of those demons I had hiding in the crevices of my mind like they'd been doing, that forced them out into the open. Under the spotlight of a drug-addled waking nightmare. Maybe that's part of why I feel like I'm in a different place. They're all out there now. I've faced them all."

"That makes sense," she says.

"What do you wanna do today?"

"Besides fuck my husband all day long?" she asks, light in her eyes.

"Besides that."

"I want pizza," she says.

"First pregnancy craving?" I ask. "That isn't gingerbread," I add.

She laughs. "Maybe.

"And this will be an important experiment," I say.

"Oh yeah? How so?"

I kiss her nose. "We're about to find out if this baby likes pineapple on pizza or if he or she has actual taste in pizza and makes you puke it up."

Epilogue

Killian

Almost 8 Months Later

“Fuck, baby, yeah,” I slam my hips forward again, sinking into her tight heat from behind. We’re spooned, one of a select few positions that works for her at this stage of her pregnancy. My hand snakes around her hip so I can press fingers to her clit. I work it in circles as she whimpers.

My wife is sexier than ever with my baby growing inside her. I can barely keep my hands off her and lucky for me, she’s horny as fuck. The morning sickness disappeared at ten weeks, and she’s been healthy, happy, and enjoying the rest of her pregnancy. Except for the past two weeks. She’s ready to be done and meet our child.

We’re fucking not only because of her horniness right now. We’re fucking because she’s a week overdue and she heard sex can help bring on labor.

I’m not about to complain about helping her hurry things up, not when I get to sink inside my favorite place.

We don’t know the sex; we decided to be surprised. We have no boy names picked, deciding we’ll meet the baby first and decide, though Violet jokes that if it’s a girl the name Ginger is the frontrunner. Violet’s hospital bag is by the door, and the cradle is set up and ready for Baby Coulter.

As she rocks into me, panting, grabbing my hand that’s between her legs and holding it in place, she whispers, “Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop.”

“Never,” I vow.

“I love you,” she breathes, “Ah, ah, Killian, yesss!”

“I love you,” I growl and then she convulses around me, crying out my name.

This sets me off, too, and I explode into her.

As I come down from cloud nine, or as Violet says, cloud ninety-nine, I kiss the side of her throat.

“Apple juice,” she requests. “Hurry.”

I chuckle and slide backwards before rolling, looking at how gorgeous she is, wearing nothing, her belly big and round, her curls spread over the pillow like she’s set up for a boudoir shoot.

I hold my hands up in frame shape over her and make a shutter-click sound. “You’re fucking gorgeous, Mrs. Coulter.”

She flashes dimples and blows me a kiss.

I haul my trackpants up my legs and head to the kitchen for a drink for her.

“Killian!” she calls, sounding panicked.

I rush back.

“What?”

She’s got wide eyes and she’s also smiling.

“My water. I think it just broke. It worked!”

I see the dark spot around her on the burgundy sheets.

Yep. Baby Coulter is coming.

Violet

Five Years Later

It's eight years to the day since Killian and I first set eyes on one another, five since the night we officially met.

But today, we're not together to celebrate the milestone because Killian is out of the country on a business trip.

Me? I'm in the wildflower field beside the house in Tillamook. We've made this house ours and we spend a lot of time here. Every room has my stamp on it, and we've made a lot of fantastic memories here. Family sleepovers. A couple months after our first child was born we had our do-over wedding with my grandmother's roses in my hair.

We've come here for Christmases. Birthdays. Lazy days doing nothing. Our second child was conceived in this house.

It's big enough for our family and our extended family. Mom, Dad, Cody and his fiancé come often, sometimes without us. Grampa, who now lives with Mom and Dad loves fishing here, too.

My aunts and uncles come by regularly, as do Susanna and Wes and our other friends. Yes, they wound up together. It took a while and it was kind of dramatic, but it eventually happened. They have a six-month-old set of twin girls. Suse said she never wanted kids, but clearly changed her mind when she fell for a man who couldn't wait to have them.

Our four-year-old son Chance is sitting on a blanket, blowing wishes with a handful of dandelions gone to seed that he just plucked. He's making his toddler brother Gabriel clap with glee as the wishes float around them.

"I made a wish on a wish, Mommy," Chance tells me as I dust dandelion seeds off his brother's curly dark head.

"Don't tell me what you wished for, sweetie. It's more likely to come true if you keep it to yourself."

“But I didn’t wish a wish for me. I wished a wish that Daddy’s wishes come true. Because you always say all your wishes already did.”

“That’s great, baby boy. I love that.” I lean over and kiss his forehead.

“When does he come home from Torchugal?”

“Portugal,” I correct. “In three more sleeps.”

“Can I talk to him so I can tell him I made a wish for him to get his wishes?”

“He’ll call us at breakfast time tomorrow, sweet pea. You can tell him.” I ruffle his hair. His hair is like mine. His green eyes, just like his daddy’s, sparkle with happiness.

Our baby Gabriel has my eyes and my hair.

Both boys inherited my dimples, which I inherited from my grandmother.

Chance has my taste in pizza. We eat from the pineapple side and Killian and Gabe eat from the non-pineapple side.

Chance and Gabriel are thick as thieves together. And I wonder what they’ll be like when their sister comes along. Baby Ginger is due in a little more than five months. I found out a week ago that we’re getting our girl and booked my tubal ligation to be done right after she’s born. Three babies in five years? I’m very done. Though Killian jokes that we should keep going. Then again, he loves me pregnant. I’d go as far as saying he has a pregnant belly fetish. Our sex life has been very active with all three pregnancies. I was lucky enough that with this one, there’s been no morning sickness. Ironically, we’re still planning to name her Ginger, even though ginger hasn’t been as much of a staple for me this time around. It was a lifesaver the last two times for sure.

Killian might love me barefoot and pregnant, but he’s not the one with all the stretchmarks. My man does a good job of taking care of me when I’m not feeling well. Then again, he’s good at a lot of things, including being the best daddy ever.

And in five years with two babies and another one coming, I'm afraid I have a bit of a mom-bod but he's got nothing remotely resembling a dad-bod. Yet.

"Mommy, can we try to find frogs?" Chance asks.

"Sure, sweet pea. Just no keeping them today. Okay?"

His chin wobbles briefly and I know he's feeling bad about last time we were here and he forgot about the frog he caught while fishing with Grampa and my dad. He left it in a jar in the sun and the frog didn't fare too well. At all.

We had to have a frog funeral and Chance felt so bad about it, he wrote an apology note that was buried with the poor departed amphibian.

He nods, then clears his expression before he takes his brother's hand and they run toward the shoreline together. I follow, startling as our baby girl does what feels like a full somersault in my tummy.

I'm woken when I feel the blankets move. Chance is climbing in with me. Gabriel is already here. Both my babies love sleeping with me and with Killian away, I don't mind at all.

I snuggle him into my left side. I've got Gabe on my right. And their sister picks that moment in my belly to move around, too.

I'm looking forward to Killian being back home. This business trip came out of the blue and while I've tried not to let myself overthink it, the fact that he was restless for a few days before he left did nag at me. I have a feeling it's one of those gray areas Killian occasionally has to delve into that I don't ask questions about.

I don't need to ask. I trust him wholeheartedly and know that if he's dabbling with darkness, it's a necessity.

Killian

I'm sitting in the back seat of a cab, stopped at yet another red light. I'm trying to show patience to get where I'm going, but anxious, nonetheless. Me and red lights. They still do their best to remind me that patience can pay off. And sometimes it does.

It's been five years with Violet now. Five beautiful years of living life, growing my family, expanding my business even more, and giving my beautiful wife every indication that she and our boys are my reason for living. They are. And in a few short months, we'll have our daughter come along, too. Our family will be complete until our kids grow and add to it.

The fact that we've now got a daughter on the way – that's why old shit has been niggling at me. Weighing on my heart. Threatening to mess with my sleep. The idea of having a beautiful little girl on this planet that will someday fall in love, most likely put her trust in a man to love her, look after her heart, look after her wellbeing? That's why I feel like I need to do what I'm doing today.

Before she's born, before she takes her first breath, I want this done.

Yeah, five long years I've tried to do my best to put all the old shit out of my head.

It cost a pretty penny to make today's arrangements. And I might have to pay some favors back in the future. But it feels like it's a necessity to do this.

The light turns green and we finally move. Forward motion. That's what I need. I need this over and then I'll close the book.

No, what I'm about to do won't guarantee my daughter's safety from evil, but it's something I can do to make sure the world is a little better of a place before she's born into it.

Five minutes later, the cab pulls up to the gates and I pay the driver and get out, asking him to wait, keep the meter on, and say I'll be no more than an hour.

I have no luggage with me. I'll go back to the hotel when this is done, in time to say good morning to Violet and my boys.

Thirty Minutes Later

I'm led down a stone corridor in a building that has to be five hundred years old, or older. A combination of mustiness and the aroma of loam hang in the air. The ceilings are low down here. It's dim. And there's an ominous presence here, too. I feel it, can nearly taste it. It's something dark. Danger floats in the atmosphere. Maybe that's just my old demons coming back out to play.

The old jailhouse has been turned into a museum, most of the time. But today it's closed to the public. It's open for me though. The caretaker turns the old key in the keyhole of the very weathered door and slides the lock over to open it.

I've already given him the password.

Campo one one.

Fitting. One one. Snake eyes.

"Thirty minutes?" he asks. "One hour?"

I shake my head. "Just five minutes."

"You're sure? I don't want to hear anything, so I don't want to be back too soon."

Thirty minutes would wake the old monster that wants to keep inflicting pain. Five minutes or less and I know I've got to get it done and over with and I can move forward knowing it's over before my daughter is born.

"Just five. I'm sure."

He hands me the gun and gestures for me to enter the dim space.

In the corner sits Raymond Iadanza. He's the same age as me, but he looks like he's pushing fifty instead of in his early thirties. He squints.

“Figured this was coming,” he says, voice raspy. “Wasn’t sure you were still around until I got moved.”

I point the gun at him.

He smiles. He’s now got even fewer teeth in his mouth.

“Obviously, Ricci didn’t succeed. You kill him? You send him somewhere like where you sent me?”

I snicker. “Actually, Violet shot him.”

He looks surprised.

“You ready?” I ask.

“It’s about time. I’m ready. This is a gift. Thank you.”

He spreads his arms wide, ready to embrace death, a smile on his face. And wherever this reaction comes from – whether it’s being tired of his shitty existence or an attempt to mindfuck me by making me rethink giving him death because he’s asking for it, I’m ready to end this game.

No more words are necessary. I have nothing to say to him. No need to taunt him. He gets nothing from me about my life with her. Not ever again. That’s not why I’m here. I’m not here to play. Not here to taunt. I’m here to end it. Is five years of living in pain, being tortured and worked half to death enough retribution for what he took from me, what he did to my beautiful girl? No. Not even close. But this needs to be over.

I flex my finger and it’s done. The bullet rips through his throat and his body jerks before he slumps, red trickling down the front of him.

I stand there, waiting for the caretaker to return. And it’s a long few minutes of eyeballing my dead nemesis. Being locked in here with him. The piece of shit that hurt her, that tried to not only do that but also to plot to take from me? He’s done. Finally.

If he hadn’t tried to fuck me over five years ago, I’d never have found out what he did eight years ago. And if he didn’t try to fuck me a second time five years ago, I might not have her.

For taking his life, I feel no remorse.

Violet doesn't talk about him. Hasn't mentioned him in years. Doesn't claw at her throat when she's anxious anymore. She's beautiful, confident, sexy, and not remotely timid. She's feisty when it comes to her children and her love for me.

She went back to her old company and rocked that director job until she gave birth to our first born, Chance, after which she decided she couldn't bear to leave him with a nanny or send him to a daycare.

She helps me with the businesses when she has time. She mothers our kids. She takes care of me. She has fun with her friends, her family, and she also started and chairs a non-profit that helps domestic violence victims. Her charity helps them reestablish themselves, gives them a safe haven while they do that. I'm very fucking proud of her.

Does she know what I came to do today?

No.

Will I tell her?

Not unless she asks. She hasn't even brought him up since we were in Tahiti and she caught me looking off into space and knew the shit that had gone down was fucking with me, particularly the shit I dealt with when I got dosed with those drugs.

She asked me to hand her that burden. The burden of stress from worrying as she was held captive. The burden of the nightmares. The burden of guilt from taking a life at seventeen even though I don't feel like I have guilt, she thought different.

I handed her the burden and she rinsed it away into the ocean before walking me back to our vacation rental where we fucked under the stars. And it worked. Better sleep, no more nightmares. And Raymond Iadanza's name has not come from her lips since.

She told me if I ever felt a threat to our family again, I had permission to do what I felt was necessary. I figured I'd leave

Iadanza at Campo. I figured I was good with that.

But I tossed and turned most of the night when I found out we're having a girl. Maybe it's because of what my buddy Dario told me recently about how not long after he got married, he helped take down another dark corner of the underworld and the surviving prisoners there were successfully integrated back into society. They were mostly girls who'd been forced into sexual slavery.

No, it wasn't the same sort of place as Porto Campo, it was a different kind of hell, but the idea of someone getting bold enough to work at liberating the prisoners there? That, coupled with the news I would have a daughter in a few months is why I reached out and made some calls, knowing I needed to do this.

No loose ends.

Sandra Iadanza is gone. Apparently Raymond strangled her to death a few months after I sent him to Campo. I only know this because Hennessy Baxter, who as a favor to me served as her Porto Campo patron, got word. I was told I'd only ever get word about my own sponsee if he ceased to breathe.

Will I sleep better at night knowing the man that stole three years from us is dead after enduring years of torture on my orders, especially knowing that five years ago she gave me permission to do it if I felt it needed to be done?

Abso-fucking-lutely.

The End

End of Book Notes

Phew.

That was quite a journey.

I first thought about the premise for Kill Game when I was writing The Dominator Series. I envisioned a cross between Truth or Dare and the movie *Honeymoon in Vegas*. When I finally embarked on Kill Game, I had no idea it would get so big and go where it went. I had no idea, too, that some of the scenes would be pulled from dark depths that weren't easy to visit.

When I started plotting, I imagined an 80,000-word story with a little darkness, some healing, surprises, revenge, and some sexy sex. Instead of sticking with the plan I let the muse run wild and wound up with a duet of over 300,000 words. And I still hate that it ended. I could've kept going with these two.

As usual, we got to meet some intriguing side characters, too, or learn more about some that we've heard of in other books in this 'world' from my Dominator series. I'd love to know what happened with some of the other characters in this story, too.

The now infamous JC who we've met before but never knew who he was. Jessa and Tony were a surprise. I anticipated Jessa being a villain but my imagination had other ideas. I'm kind of leaning in the direction of telling their story, though no promises. That's why I left things the way I did with them. Bratty beautiful woman plays a game with a dangerous man and then has to let him cash the check she wrote? YUM! Well-endowed protective alpha who she then tries to break up and he won't allow it? Squee.

What sort of journey to love did Wes and Susanna have? I don't know. We'll see if they talk to me. I've been intrigued about Wes since I wrote him into Saved so I have a feeling we're not done hearing about him yet.

What kind of craziness happens at Porto Campo? Are there people there that shouldn't be? People who need rescuing? What if someone high-up there falls for a prisoner? Ooh-eee... the possibilities there!

Will any of those stories happen? I don't really know. I'd definitely need a clone of myself if I tried to embark on writing every single idea that comes into my head, every character I meet. First world author problems – my ideas breed like bunnies. I think it's safe to say I probably won't ever run out of story ideas.

I do know that while I didn't want this story to end and it very nearly became a trilogy (I fought that, Peggy M. But you knew deep down it was a possibility!) we do know these two are okay. Because Killian will make it so that they are – no matter what he has to do.

Violet found strength in the loving embrace of Killian who was willing to do whatever it took to give her the sweet life she deserved.

She helped Killian slay his demons.

She got stronger than she knew she was capable of.

She escaped a situation that felt like it was impossible. She learned not only to dig deep into her own abilities but also to trust that she had a support system in place and didn't have to feel totally alone.

She believed in Killian even though he hurt her unintentionally and they both grew from that, meaning that love prevailed.

Things people did set things in motion that could've been horrible, but turned out to bring these two their happily-ever-after.

<Happy sigh>

Huge thanks to those who supported me through this journey. Extra thanks goes to Haelah, my designer goddess, my friend, and one of my alpha readers who was there for me in a big way when Kill Game released.

And Peggy - a huge help with all my books the past few years and a big help with Dirty Stack as my alpha reader. HUGE thanks to Liz C as well for the excitement about this story as well as tackling it as soon as it hit your inbox.

Big thanks to all my chickadees, my itty-bitty street team, my Beta and ARC readers, and to YOU for reading this.

If you're new to my work, there are LOTS of stories to sink your teeth into. Dirty Stack is my 22nd published novel and I write in multiple romance genres. Sometimes dark. Sometimes darker. Sometimes hilarious. ALWAYS with sexy scenes and a happy ending.

XOXO

DD Prince

Readers:

If you loved this book, check out The Dominator Series, where you'll meet Tommy Ferrano, Killian's buddy Dario Ferrano, and the women they will do anything to keep. The series is dark mafia romance and there are trigger warnings – Tommy is an extreme antihero - but it's my most popular. Saved is a *very* dark spin-off with Alessandro, who might be my ultimate antihero. Wes and Will turn up in that story, too.

I've also got The Nectar Trilogy, a dark and taboo vampire romance with an intensely possessive alpha vampire and a symbiotic connection that means everything.

I'm also the author of The Beautiful Biker Series, which has four books out so far at the time of publishing this with many more to come. This series is my second most popular series and explores friendship, brotherhood, and extended family while you watch the love story of a biker and his chosen woman unfold. Each story is about a different couple and there are all kinds of feel-good moments as well as laughs, tears, feels, and a lotta lotta sexy time.

I've also got Alphahole, my enemies-to-lovers roommate romance with all sorts of steam and laughs, and Good Girl about Aiden's brother plus Bad Girl about Ally Kingston, the pink-haired extrovert with SECRETS.

If you love sexy wolf shifters, there's also Wild – a super duper sexy shifter romance with **biting and knotting**, and I've even written some sassy and fun lighter stories about a space matchmaking project in my series, Hot Alpha Alien Husbands.

Like twisted and dark fairytale retellings? Check out The Hollow Duet about a monster getting his happy ending. Oh yes, this goes *there*.

I hope you'll check out more of my books. If you've already read some or all, thank you so much.

Feel free to join my reader group on Facebook, follow me on Instagram or Twitter, and / or sign up for my free newsletter to get news on upcoming releases, book signings, etc.

Thanks so much for helping me live my dream by buying my books or subscribing to read them through subscription programs.

If you enjoy them, I'd love it if you'd write a review – even a short one helps so much.

Much love,

DD Prince

DD Prince's Books:

This list may have been updated since publishing, so check ddprince.com or Amazon for a full list of DD Prince's books.

Some DD Prince books are Amazon exclusives and others are widely sold.

Dark Mafia Romance: dark romance with a debt flesh payment plot.

The Dominator (Tommy and Tia)

Arranged marriage. Mafia. Kidnapping.

The Dominator 2; Truth or Dare (Dario and Angel)

Sex slave rescue romance with dark themes.

The Dominator 3; Unbound

More Tommy, More Dare; absolute domination!

Also available:

Saved (Alessandro and Holly)

A spin off story best experienced after Unbound. (Saved might be DD's darkest romance book yet). Lex isn't the hero in this story. Holly is. (Will Coulter is Holly's bodyguard and Wes Traynor is Alessandro's childhood best friend.)

Contemporary/ enemies-to lovers:

Alphahole, (Aiden and Carly)

Good Girl, (Austin and Jada)

Bad Girl (Jude and Ally)

enemies-to-lovers contemporary and roommates romances

MC Romance:

Biker romance - romantic suspense with comedy, angst, steamy scenes, and a little bit of gritty darkness.

Books in series so far at the time of publishing this include:

Detour (Deacon and Ella)

Joyride (Rider and Jenna)

Scenic Route (Spencer and Pippa)

Crossroads (Fork and Jojo)

Jaded (ETA late 2021 or early 2022) (Jesse and Gianna)

Several more books also planned for this series.

Dark Paranormal Romance: Vampire dark romance / kidnapping. Capture romance with dark and taboo elements.

Nectar Trilogy (Tristan and Kyla)

(Includes Nectar, Ambrosia, and Essence)

The Hollow Duet

Includes novellas - Hollow and Holden

A dark and twisted erotic thriller. This is a retelling of the Headless Horseman legend with O-so-many twists and turns. The horseman hunts for a woman this year. And yes, this story goes THERE.

Dirty / fun / almost insta-love alien romance

Hot Alpha Alien Husbands: Book 1 – Daxx and Jetta

Hot Alpha Alien Husbands: Book 2 – Zane and Tanya

Book 3 has an ETA of sometime in 2022.

Sexy werewolf romance

Wild (Tyson and Ivy)

(super-sexy with biting and knotting!)

More shifter books are planned!

This list may have been updated since this book was published so please check out DD Prince's website for a full list of available books.

Follow DD Prince:

[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Website](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Amazon](#)

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed The Devious Games Duet and Violet and Killian's story.

If you love my stories, a review where you purchased the book is a HUGE help to me.

Contents

1

[Killian](#)

2

[Killian](#)

3

[Violet](#)

4

[Killian](#)

5

[Violet](#)

6

[Killian](#)

7

[Violet](#)

8

[Killian](#)

9

[Violet](#)

10

[Killian](#)

11

[Violet](#)

12

[Killian](#)

13

[Violet](#)

14

[Killian](#)

15

[Violet](#)

16

[Killian](#)

17

[Killian](#)

18

Violet

19

Killian

20

Violet

21

Killian

22

Violet

23

Killian

24

Violet

25

Killian

26

Violet

27

Killian

28

Violet

29

Killian

30

Violet

31

Killian

32

Violet

33

Killian

34

Violet

35

Killian

[36](#)

[Violet](#)

[37](#)

[Killian](#)

[38](#)

[Violet](#)

[39](#)

[Killian](#)

[40](#)

[Killian](#)

[41](#)

[Violet](#)

[42](#)

[Killian](#)

[43](#)

[Violet](#)

[44](#)

[Killian](#)

[45](#)

[Violet](#)

[46](#)

[Killian](#)

[47](#)

[Violet](#)

[48](#)

[Killian](#)

[49](#)

[Violet](#)

[50](#)

[Killian](#)

[51](#)

[Violet](#)

[52](#)

[Violet](#)

[53](#)

[Killian](#)

[54](#)

[Violet](#)

[55](#)

[Killian](#)

[56](#)

[Violet](#)

[57](#)

[Killian](#)

[58](#)

[Violet](#)

[59](#)

[Killian](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[End of Book Notes](#)

[DD Prince's Books:](#)